

THE PROBLEM OF ORDER

WHAT UNITES AND DIVIDES SOCIETY

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CHAPTER TWO

THE PROBLEM OF ORDER FROM HOBBS TO THE PRESENT



Thomas Hobbes's description of the "state of nature" as a human condition in which life is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short" is perhaps the most frequently quoted passage in the entire corpus of Western social and political theory. Writing during Cromwell's Protectorate after the English Civil War of the 1640s and in response to those climactic events that had forced him into French exile, Hobbes was describing the dire prospect he thought both had preceded the creation of any political authority and would be restored if existing authority were destroyed. Human beings, however, are capable of avoiding such disasters because they differ from animals in possessing, according to Hobbes, the faculty of reason, which entails the capacity to foresee the consequences of their own actions. This capacity enables them to think themselves, as it were, out of the perilous situation of never-ending conflict that the state of nature involves. They do this by coming together and contracting to renounce the freedom to use violence and deception in their relations with one another. Yet they recognize that a mere collective resolution to forego force and fraud will not eliminate individual temptations to resort to these often effective expedients and the at least occasional giving-in to temptation. "Covenants without the Sword are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all."¹ The social contract, therefore, also includes vesting in one person or group the exclusive authority to use coercion to main-

tain the peace by restraining wayward individuals from resorting to force on their own initiative in pursuit of their ends. Thus Leviathan or the state comes into being, possessing, in Max Weber's well-known formulation of nearly three centuries later, a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force.

The first adjective in Hobbes's description of the state of nature is "solitary," which makes plain that he conceives of it as a presocial state in which "men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company,"² as he remarked a few paragraphs earlier in the famous Chapter 13 of *Leviathan* that contains his account of the state of nature. The vivid adjectival passage, moreover, comes as a conclusion to an immediately preceding enumeration of human activities and achievements that are lacking when an established, or "civil," society is absent:

In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society. . .

This list of human practices and their products missing in the state of nature bears considerable resemblance to E. B. Tylor's famous "portmanteau" definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."³ Culture, to Hobbes, clearly presupposes the prior existence of society, just as it does for contemporary social scientists.

Later social and political thinkers criticized Hobbes on a variety of grounds. Locke wondered why rational men would willingly submit to the absolute power of a sovereign merely to gain protection from the much more limited powers with which each of them was capable of harassing one another. Vico thought that only men who had already learned to reason in a highly developed society could be capable of formulating Hobbes's covenant. critics

Montesquieu contended that a presocial state of nature could never have existed, for men had always lived in societies and were social by nature. Rousseau, on the other hand, did not doubt that men had once lived in a presocial state of nature, but he argued that Hobbes had wrongly endowed them with evil and vicious qualities that they could only have acquired from living in society.

Hobbes's belief that society and culture could only flourish after the creation of a political authority or state which liberated men from the anarchic state of nature is the exact inverse of the sociological outlook formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From its perspective, the state is an outgrowth of a preexisting society and reflects the continuous operation of deeper, autonomous "social forces" at work in that society, whether these forces are conceived of as spiritual or material. Hobbes's state of nature or "natural condition of mankind" is the most famous image of what human life might be like in the absence of a stable and organized society. The Hobbesian "war of all against all" is the total contradiction of what we mean by "society," that is, cooperative relations among individuals and their common observance of rules governing their conduct toward one another. Hobbes saw the war as a hypothetical construct rather than as a condition that had at one time generally existed in human history but had been overcome by the implementation of a social contract.⁴ True, he referred to accounts of the lives of primitive peoples, notably the Indians of North America, as suggesting that the war of all against all, or at least of small families against one another, had once been widely prevalent. He also noted the pervasive mistrust among men in established societies, the occurrence of rebellions and civil wars, and the ubiquity of international conflicts as evidence for the state of nature even under conditions of civilized life. But his view of these as usually no more than tendencies or latent possibilities, and his recognition that most states had been created "by acquisition" through conquest, rather than "by institution" as the result of a founding social contract, indicate that he fundamentally conceived of both the state of nature and the social contract as theoretical "models" or Weberian "ideal types"; at most, the war of all against all repre-

sented a limiting condition toward which all societies tended in times of weakened political authority and internal conflict.

Hobbes's model of the state of nature and the social contract that overcomes it has been described as a "a Galilean experiment of an imaginary sort."⁵ The most direct suggestion of his analytical model-building rationale has often been noticed and quoted despite its being a more or less incidental comment in a late chapter of *De Cive* (a shorter work written some years before *Leviathan*) on the specific subject of the obligations of servants to masters: "Let us return again to the state of nature, and consider men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly (like mushrooms) come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other."⁶ A contemporary reader is instantly reminded of John Rawls's "original position" and "veil of ignorance." Like Hobbes, Locke also cited reports of the behavior of primitive men to support his different conception of the state of nature, although he too was clearly less concerned with accurate empirical description than with abstracting from reality in order to justify his normative principles about the proper role of government.

Problem: social evolution

HOBBS AND ROUSSEAU

In contrast to Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau thought of the state of nature as a real historical—or, rather, prehistorical—condition that had once prevailed at the very beginning of the long and painful process of development toward civilization that men had followed. In the *Discourse on Inequality* Rousseau drew on comparative anatomy, medical knowledge, naturalists' descriptions of animal behavior and early anthropological accounts of primitive peoples to support his inferences about the state of nature.⁷ "Rousseau is the first great exponent of social evolution," Bertrand de Jouvenel observes. "His was the first attempt to depict systematically the historical progress of human society: here he precedes Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte, Marx-Engels and all those who sought to systematize views of social evolution."⁸

Rousseau, to be sure, regarded the transition from the state of

nature to an inegalitarian social order upheld by a despotic ruler as moral decline or degeneration rather than as progress. Yet his sequence of stages through which mankind had passed, reflecting improvements in technology and the more complex division of labor that resulted, bears considerable resemblance to those of Marx and Engels and of many post-Darwinian "materialistic" reconstructions of social development.⁹ Nor is it markedly inferior, though antedating them by a century or more. Rousseau clearly displays the historical consciousness that distinguishes social thought in the modern epoch. In this respect, he differs strikingly from such seventeenth-century thinkers as Hobbes and Locke. If Rousseau anticipates nineteenth-century social evolutionism, Hobbes and Locke, paradoxically, strike an even more "modern" note in their anticipation of theoretical model-building. They were reflecting the influence of classical mechanics and, particularly in Hobbes's case, the paradigmatic example of geometrical reasoning. One could argue that Hobbes's and, more doubtfully, Locke's conceptions of the state of nature and the social contract are less open to objection than Rousseau's because they were not thought of as recording actual conditions or events in the history of real human societies.

Yet Rousseau's argument that Hobbes's war of all against all necessarily implies the prior existence of society rather than a nonsocial state of nature is well taken. Hobbes's state of nature is the negative mirror image of social order. It is intended to depict *disorder* as the opposite of order: conflict rather than cooperation, individual goals at odds with one another rather than converging or aggregating to become common or collectively shared goals, fear and distrust among men rather than solidarity and sociability. To buttress his overall case against the corruption he saw as endemic to civilized societies, Rousseau wanted to show that the vicious features of Hobbes's state of nature could only have originated within a fully developed society. He was right in seeing—like Sumner, Simmel, Weber, Park, and many later sociologists—that conflict is a social relation just as much as cooperation; also, in understanding that the motivations for engaging in it, especially the wish to excel in the eyes of others, could only arise in a social context.

If Hobbes's state of nature is the contrary of social order, Rousseau's state of nature is the total negation of society, the complete absence of all social ties and of all motivations directed toward others, even those of a negative or "antisocial" character. Hobbes still followed Aristotle in assuming the existence of the family as part of a natural and "private" realm in contrast to the "artificial"—today we would say "socially constructed"—and "public" realm of the political community or polis. Rousseau, on the other hand, eliminated even the family from his state of nature, reducing social contacts to the absolute minimum necessary for mating and the maternal care of very young children. Rousseau's state of nature is a fully nonsocial mode of existence in which the lives of men are truly solitary if by no means poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Hobbes's inconsistencies and ambiguities about the state of nature may well have resulted from the fact that his primary interest in it was always as a state toward which men tended in times of civil war and the collapse of political authority rather than, as for Rousseau, a pristine original condition at the beginning of history. Despite familiar clichés about Rousseau's supposed glorification of the Noble Savage, he did not believe a return to the animal-like existence of man in the state of nature to be even conceivable, let alone desirable. His ideal was, rather, what he called "nascent society," an early stage of social development in which men lived in families that provided equally for their own needs with simple tools, maintaining wider social ties but without either government or the dependent relations produced by the division of labor. Rousseau's concrete exemplar was the farming communities of the Swiss canton of Vaud; his ideal influenced Jefferson's preference for a republic of independent yeoman farmers, free from the inevitable corruptions of city life.

For Hobbes, the solitariness of the state of nature was overcome only after the creation of a political sovereign permitting men to live thereafter at peace in society. For Rousseau, too, the state of nature was both presocial and prepolitical, but the social contract that established the state was entered into *after* men had adopted a thoroughly social way of life that had already gone through several stages of development. The last prepolitical stage

Commodification?

was marked by internecine conflict resulting from social inequality that, in Rousseau's view, Hobbes had mistakenly attributed to the presocial state of nature. Rousseau clearly stands closer than Hobbes to the views of later sociologists and of Marxists in seeing society as preceding political institutions, which constitute an effort to overcome the conflict resulting from the division of labor and the antagonistic classes it brings into being.

Rousseau's conception of the original state of nature was, as he fully recognized, purely speculative. Since he thought of it as a condition that might have actually existed in the distant past, he is more vulnerable to empirical objections to its very possibility than is Hobbes, whose parallel conception was framed in a more hypothetical mode patterned after the physicist's idea of a vacuum or the geometer's of a perfect figure.¹⁰ Even the limited mental, moral, and tool-making capacities with which Rousseau endowed human beings in the state of nature could not have existed in the absence of regular social life. Rousseau's view of original human nature is more radically "undersocialized" than Hobbes's, given the latter's traditional assumption that the family was a universal natural association. Rousseau did impute to human beings in the state of nature one "natural virtue" involving a minimal social bond that he accused Hobbes of overlooking: compassion or a sense of pity when confronted with the suffering of one's fellows. However, he thought this trait was also possessed by lower animals, including horses and cattle. From a latter-day social psychological standpoint, it is hard to see how or why such sympathetic identification with others could have come into existence among creatures whose contacts with one another were as few and ephemeral as those of Rousseau's savages in the state of nature. Perhaps it might be accounted for by the genetic selection of altruistic behavior toward kin postulated by contemporary sociobiologists, but Rousseau could hardly have had recourse to an explanation in such terms.

THE HISTORICAL RELATIVIZATION OF HOBBS

The essence of the sociological perspective as it developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries amounted to a

denial of two of Hobbes's basic assumptions: first, that individuals with the attributes he ascribed to them could possibly exist outside of a preexisting society that had powerfully formed their natures; and second, that society depended upon the prior establishment of the coercive political authority of the state. The "revolt against individualism" and the assertion of the priority of society over the state are hallmarks of "the sociological tradition,"¹¹ surviving even today as central tenets of most academic sociology. The concepts of state of nature and social contract, though endowed with different contents by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, provided foils for both conservative and socialist forerunners and founders of sociology, even before the influence of Malthus and especially Darwin revived in biologicistic rather than utilitarian terms the conception of society as a mere aggregate of competing individuals.

Malthus's theory of a continual struggle for subsistence resulting in permanently high death rates first suggested to Darwin the idea of natural selection, so the link between classical economics, and Darwinism was a direct one. Hobbes and Locke have long been regarded as precursors of classical economics and even as preindustrial prophets of the rise of capitalist market society. Hobbes's depiction of autonomous individuals relentlessly pursuing their own interests at odds with one another is readily seen as a theoretical reflection of the erosion of medieval and feudal ties and the rise in the numbers of "masterless men" (his phrase) in the post-Renaissance and post-Reformation world of emerging bourgeois society.

The most impressive recent reinterpretation of Hobbes (and Locke) as early anatomists of bourgeois society is that of C. B. Macpherson.¹² Hobbes, he argued, described the "possessive individualism" of the new bourgeoisie in the emerging capitalist economic order of seventeenth-century England. Far from picturing human nature *in vacuo* as it might manifest itself in a hypothetical presocial state of nature, Hobbes was an accurate observer of his own time. Macpherson convincingly shows that many of Hobbes's inferences about human nature are drawn from life in established and orderly civil society *after* the transcendence of the state of nature as a result of the social contract. The most striking

instance of this is the passage immediately following Hobbes's famous characterization of life in the state of nature in which he suggests that the doubting reader simply look around him if he seeks confirmation of Hobbes's less-than-exalted view of mankind:

Let him therefore consider with himself, when taking journey, he armes himself, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his dores; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there bee Lawes, and publike officers, armed to revenge all injuries shall bee done him; what opinion he has of his fellow subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow citizens, when he locks his dores; and of his children, and servants, when he locks his chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words?¹³

Obviously, Hobbes's suggested observational test is based on the evidence of everyday conduct in a society that has long benefited from the creation of Leviathan, the coercive power of the state that keeps men in peace and order by suppressing the war of all against all. (As I have occasionally remarked in the classroom, he sounds as if he might be describing certain neighborhoods in New York City!)

Macpherson is unquestionably right in insisting that Hobbes's argument rests on observation of men in civil society rather than on abstract deductions or speculations about a putative presocial state of nature. Accordingly, Macpherson defends Hobbes against the frequent and often patronizing view of such a presocial condition as a foil to a sociological view of human nature as fundamentally socialized and of society as the medium in which men live just as "naturally" as fish live in water. But Macpherson's claim that Hobbes was describing early capitalism rather than, at the very least, a still earlier condition of England or, at most, tendencies present in all societies, remains open to question. Critics of Macpherson have pointed out that Hobbes's beliefs and values on a variety of matters were more aristocratic or traditional than bourgeois,¹⁴ and that the social and economic life of England in the middle of the seventeenth century was still far more tradition-

alist and medieval than capitalist or market-centered.¹⁵ Moreover, in imputing to Hobbes a vision of a world dominated by the values of possessive individualism, Macpherson places disproportionate emphasis on Hobbes's occasional references to "commodious living"—material comforts augmented by technical progress—as a gain secured by subjection to a sovereign political authority.¹⁶ Security of possessions and opportunities to increase them play a considerably lesser part in Hobbes's argument than his repeated insistence on the need to safeguard life itself through avoidance of violent death at the hands of others. The suspicious, fearful, and malevolent men who confront one another in the state of nature do not bear much resemblance to the sober, prudential, acquisitive bourgeois economic man calculating his gains and losses in the marketplace.¹⁷ Indeed, as Albert O. Hirschmann has shown, an increase in material acquisitiveness through trade and commerce was widely regarded in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a pacifying and even "sweetening" influence, tempering the passions for war and armed conflict that had previously been so prominent.¹⁸ Hobbes's view of human nature unmistakably gives priority to the passions conducive to violence rather than to the interests encouraging peaceful commerce.

Macpherson's argument nevertheless is textually well-founded and attests to the iron consistency of Hobbes's "geometrical method" in deriving his entire theory from a few simple premises about human nature. Yet, despite his formal deductive rigor, Hobbes's constant stress on vainglory, pride, and striving for recognized preeminence strongly implies that men are often as much concerned with what others think of them as with the physical—and, for that matter, economic—security that he postulates as their overriding interest. Hobbes repeatedly notes that the intensity of the desire for glory varies among men, inducing some of them to seek even more power than their security requires. All men are compelled to seek power to obtain the means of life under conditions of scarcity and also for defensive reasons, but an additional source of conflict among them is created by the desire of some of them for the greater glory to be attained by besting others. Men, in short, are often "antagonistic cooperators" (in William Graham Sumner's phrase) rather than purely

solitary beings. If power and glory are both originally sought as a means to preserve life, they are surely capable of coming to be desired for their own sakes even at a risk to life itself.¹⁹

If Hobbes failed to develop this point explicitly, it is also, however, a criticism of Macpherson, for men who "use Violence. . .for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other signe of undervalue, either direct in their Persons or by reflexion in their Kindred, their Friends, their Nation, their Profession, or their Name"²⁰ are not accurately described as possessive individualists protectively hoarding the wealth they are constantly engaged in accumulating by exploiting the labor of others. In addition, whatever importance Hobbes accorded to fame as the spur goading at least *some* men, he regarded *all* men as driven to seek power, and eventually to agree to subordinate themselves to a common power, neither for glory nor to increase their opportunities for economic exploitation but rather for security against the depredations of others.²¹ A life free from the fear of death by violence is a more elemental and universal desideratum than either gain or glory in Hobbes's conception of human motivation.

Regardless of whether Hobbes's view of human nature was aristocratic or bourgeois, his stark picture of human relations dominated by distrust and envy may have applied with particular force to the lower classes in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, even in their most intimate personal relations. Lawrence Stone writes of this period:

The extraordinary amount of casual interpersonal physical and verbal violence, as recorded in legal and other records, shows clearly that at all levels men and women were extremely short-tempered. The most trivial disagreements tended to lead rapidly to blows, and most people carried a potential weapon, if only a knife to cut their meat. As a result, the courts were clogged with cases of assault and battery. . . . The Elizabethan village was a place filled with malice and hatred, its only unifying bond being the occasional episode of mass hysteria, which temporarily bound together the majority in order to persecute and harry the local witch.²²

Stone concludes:

What is being postulated for the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is a society in which a majority of the individuals that composed it found it very difficult to establish close emotional ties to any other person. Children were neglected, brutally treated, and even killed; adults treated each other with suspicion and hostility; affect was low, and hard to find. To an anthropologist, there would be nothing very surprising about such a society, which closely resembles the Mundugumor in New Guinea in the twentieth century as described by Margaret Mead.²³

Alan Macfarlane, himself an anthropologist, vehemently challenges Stone's assertion that an anthropologist would find "nothing very surprising" about a society like that of the Mundugumor; he insists that anthropologists were very surprised by Mead's account, finding her description strikingly deviant from most reports on primitive societies.²⁴ Stone's statement is undoubtedly an exaggeration, but there are other examples in the anthropological literature of "Hobbesian" societies, granting that they deviate from the norm for most primitive societies. Perhaps the best-known case is that of the Dobu of Melanesia "to whom all existence appears. . .as a cut-throat struggle" studied by Reo F. Fortune,²⁵ whose account was summarized in Ruth Benedict's famous *Patterns of Culture*.²⁶ A more recent and even more extreme example of a society rent by mutual enmity is Colin Turnbull's account of the Ik tribe of Uganda in *The Mountain People*.²⁷ The Ik, however, are not as pure a case as the Mundugumor or the Dobu, because their Hobbesian condition resulted from the loss of their traditional hunting grounds to a national park. There are also the people of Alor in the South Pacific studied by Cora Du Bois,²⁸ of whose society Abram Kardiner observed: "It is not even anarchic, because to be anarchic strong destructive forces must be unleashed which have a firm psychic underpinning. While everyone is against everyone else, this attitude cannot be implemented by enough organized aggression to do any real damage."²⁹

Hobbes's political writings were composed shortly after the

end of the period when, according to Stone, hostility dominated personal relations—from roughly 1450 to 1630—when Hobbes was already middle-aged, but Stone's own citations suggest that many of the period's features survived into the eighteenth century. After 1640, however, Stone discerns a tempering of the hostile tone of personal relations, especially within the nuclear family, with the rise of what he calls "affective individualism." Whatever questions may be raised about Stone's periodization,³⁰ it is surely the case that his earlier period, which Hobbes's views seem to reflect, is unlikely to have been *more* capitalist and expressive of a bourgeois outlook or pervaded by the competitiveness of a market society than the later period after the Whig compromise of 1688. Stone, in fact, asserts a correlation between the growth of affective individualism and the spread of market relations, including the market for labor on which Macpherson places special stress;³¹ he even uses Macpherson's term "possessive individualism" in this connection.³² Individualism in both its intrafamilial affective aspects and its possessive market-oriented manifestations may be viewed as the expression of a distinctive and essentially bourgeois ethos. But the period before the middle of the seventeenth century has usually been considered less individualistic. If life, even for people in the higher ranks, was rather more poor, nasty, brutish, and short than at a later date, it was by no means solitary. Individual interests, according to Stone, were subordinated to the extended kinship group and to clientage, although these ties were based on convenience and mutual dependence rather than on personal feelings. Even the word "friends" implied "advisors, associates, and backers" rather than people with whom one sustained personal affectional bonds.³³

Alan Macfarlane has challenged the widely accepted view that England underwent a great transformation in the seventeenth century from a traditionalist, kin-centered peasant society toward a greater individualism identified with the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, a view held by thinkers and scholars ranging from Macauley, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, to contemporary British historians of late medieval England.³⁴ Macfarlane's primary thesis, based chiefly on records indicating highly individualistic property rights, especially in land, is that as early as the thir-

teenth century England already had many of the attributes of what came to be called "bourgeois society": a market economy, wage labor, high population mobility, a relatively autonomous nuclear family, and even considerable legal equality between the sexes. Nor does he picture this society in Hobbesian terms: In his critical review of Stone, he cites, *inter alia*, the very same two passages I have quoted and specifically rejects their conclusions about the pervasive hostility of the time.³⁵

Macfarlane's bold claims for a far-reaching English exceptionalism have, as one would expect, been cautiously received by those whose assumptions he has criticized.³⁶ However, should his revised view of English social and economic history ultimately supplant the idea of an epochal transition at the end of the Middle Ages, one might still conclude that Hobbes was essentially describing, if in exaggeratedly negative terms, the society in which he lived, as Macpherson has argued. But if this society was one that had not significantly changed for several centuries, Macpherson's insistence that Hobbes was the first to see the outlines of a rising capitalism would have to be rejected.

It is difficult therefore to accept Macpherson's claim that Hobbes's theory of human nature reflected "the behavior of men toward each other in a specific kind of society," namely, "a possessive market society. . . similar to the concepts of bourgeois or capitalist society used by Marx, Weber, Sombart, and others who have made the existence of a market in labor a criterion of capitalism."³⁷ Hobbes certainly drew on the life of seventeenth-century England to support his description of human nature, but he clearly regarded his account as of universal applicability to all men in all societies. Nor have sociologists been mistaken in treating the problem of order as a transhistorical problem inherent in the very existence of human societies. William Letwin's conclusion can scarcely be improved upon:

Hobbes may have drawn upon his own immediate experience; he could not have helped doing that; but he knew enough about other times and places—a knowledge of which was and is available in any society which remembers some history and meets some foreigners—to draw on their experience as well. His premises, in

short, are universal statements about the nature of man. Insofar as they are true at all, they are more or less equally true of all men at all times.³⁸

SOCIAL DARWINISM REVIVES THE HOBBSIAN PROBLEM

If Rousseau was a precursor of later theories of social evolution, Hobbes's war of all against all resembled the struggle for survival among individual members of animal species that Darwin identified as the mechanism setting in motion biological evolution. The Darwinian vision of the "struggle for survival" and "nature red in tooth and claw" revived and gave new relevance to the Hobbesian problem of how asocial, self-preserving human beings manage to create and maintain cooperative and rule-governed social relations at all. If one may doubt that Hobbes's state of nature was actually a description or even a prescient anticipation of a new bourgeois society dominated by capitalist economic relations, there can be little doubt that the Social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century both legitimated and partially mirrored such a society and thus appealed to businessmen and their supporters in late Victorian England and America.³⁹ Marx and Engels themselves saw this with utter clarity at the time.⁴⁰ The obsessive search by social evolutionists for "social origins" was also reminiscent of Hobbes's hypothesis of a transition from the state of nature to civil society by means of a social contract, although the evolutionists, anticipated as we have seen by Rousseau, sought to discover or imagine a real if remote historical or prehistorical past rather than an imagined contract intended to disclose the true nature of political authority. There is also a striking similarity between Hobbes's emphasis on security or self-preservation as the dominant human motive and the Darwinian stress on survival as the sole measure of value in the world of living organisms.⁴¹ Yet whatever the line of intellectual descent from Hobbes and Locke through Adam Smith, Malthus, and the Utilitarians to the Social Darwinists, it needs to be emphasized that to Hobbes—and in a different way to Locke—the state of nature was a condition to be overcome or escaped from rather

Hobbes: social from ps natural
Darwinists: natural is what we are stuck with

than, as it was to the Social Darwinists, a struggle for survival dictated by ineluctable laws of nature to which mankind had no choice but to conform. As Talcott Parsons has pointed out, Social Darwinism dissolved the tension between the state of nature and its transcendence through the exercise of man's reason that was central to Hobbes by making reason itself merely an instrument in the insurmountable struggle for existence. More recent interpreters of Hobbes have noted the fundamental ambiguity in his conception of "natural law," which left an opening for the biological reductionism of Social Darwinism as an apparent resolution of the tension between nature and reason that is still visible and even salient in Hobbes's thought.⁴² The ambiguity essentially lies in Hobbes's conflation of *causes* and normative *reasons* in human action, in, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, his "transference of juridical categories to nature as a whole," leading him to "demand of the causal order in the state of nature those norms he required for the foundation of his civil state."⁴³

Parsons is certainly correct in arguing that with the "disappearance of the normative aspects of the utilitarian system, ends and rationality" in Social Darwinism, "the problem of order . . . evaporates." But this is true only at the formal theoretical level: The Darwinian emphasis on intraspecific competition and conflict posed even more sharply the problem of the origins and nature of ethical and political restraints on human self-seeking, even to those like Walter Bagehot who identified themselves as thoroughgoing Social Darwinists. Gertrude Himmelfarb argues that "Bagehot's work comes close to being a travesty of Darwinism,"⁴⁴ because, although she does not refer to Hobbes in pointing this out, he presents in effect a Hobbesian account of the origin of society rather than one stemming from natural selection. Bagehot insisted on the necessity of a single absolute and binding authority serving to create a "cake of custom" that held in check the competition that would otherwise threaten the survival of society. There have, of course, been many efforts to resolve the problem of order itself in biologicistic terms: the treatment of groups or societies as unitary organisms with individuals as their "cells," the stress on "mutual aid" as a factor in evolutionary survival and progress, the numerous social psychologies

that have postulated “gregarious instincts” or innate sentiments of “sympathy” or “consciousness of kind” as the source of the social bond.⁴⁵ Rousseau’s natural sense of pity was the ancestor of these psychological conceptions. The interest shown by contemporary sociobiologists in the “altruistic gene” is a latter-day version.

The attempt to develop less deterministic and conflict-ridden versions of evolution and natural selection in the realm of human society and history was a major theme of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American social thought, usually in the form of a dialogue with Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, the two leading sociological Social Darwinists. With the exception of Sumner, all of the early American sociologists were centrally concerned with advancing a more cooperative, benign, and goal-directed view of social evolution and the relation of the individual to society than that presented by Social Darwinism and by the defenders of laissez-faire capitalism who made heavy ideological use of Social Darwinist arguments.⁴⁶ By the end of the 1930s the largely successful discrediting of biologism and evolutionism in the social sciences—greatly aided, of course, by the reaction against Nazi racialism—made it possible for Thomas Hobbes to be rediscovered as a more “modern” and conceptually sophisticated thinker than the Social Darwinists who had overgeneralized Darwin’s biological theories. Yet the Darwinian focus on the individual as the unit of the species had also brought renewed attention to the problem of how these units succeeded in subordinating their own strivings to a shared set of rules, the question first raised by Hobbes with such rigor and clarity in the seventeenth century.

It is worth noting that American popular speech has long been full of phrases and maxims suggesting a Hobbesian or Social Darwinist view of human existence: characterizations of the social world as a “jungle,” a “rat race,” a “dog-eat-dog” struggle; expressions of “pavement cynicism” to the effect that everyone is “out for himself,” seeking the “main chance,” “looking out for number one,” concerned only with “getting ahead” at the expense of others or “chasing the almighty dollar.”⁴⁷ These views are the underside of the “Horatio Alger myth,” which has long

been seen as definitive of the American ethos. They can obviously be understood as a veiled, un sentimentally fatalistic legitimation of the realities of the competitive individualism of capitalist society, yet at the same time as a protest, if often a wistful and despairing one, against those realities.

No doubt these maxims owe something to affirmations of “rugged individualism” often upheld through the 1920s in Social Darwinist accents. And the note of protest they sometimes articulate echoes the countervalues of the Progressives, the early socialist movement, and the New Deal, in which many sociologists, including prominent ones, participated. The identification of sociology with an emphasis on the values of cooperation as opposed to competition, collectivism as opposed to individualism, and community as opposed to privatism is not peculiar to Europe but has long been present in America as well. Note the following dialogue in a popular novel of more than fifty years ago, whose title entered the language as an idiomatic phrase, Budd Schulberg’s *What Makes Sammy Run?*:

So I switched to my sociological approach. “Sammy,” I began wisely, “society isn’t just a bunch of individuals living alongside of each other. As a member of society, man is interdependent. Not independent, Sammy, interdependent. Life is too complex for there to be any truth in the old slogan of every man for himself. We share the benefits of social institutions, like take hospitals, the cops and garbage collection. Why, the art of conversation itself is a social invention. We can’t live in this world like a lot of cannibals trying to swallow each other. Learn to give the other fellow a break and we’ll *all* live longer.”⁴⁸

What Makes Sammy Run? was first published in 1941, four years after *The Structure of Social Action* in which Talcott Parsons named the “problem of order” as the fundamental theoretical problem of sociology, identified Hobbes as the first thinker to formulate it explicitly, and proposed his own “voluntaristic theory of action” with its stress on autonomous normative values restraining egoism as a solution to it. Conceivably Schulberg,

who graduated from Dartmouth in 1936, had been exposed to some of Parsons's ideas in undergraduate sociology courses taught by former students or colleagues of Parsons who had heard them from him before the publication of his first and still most influential book.⁴⁹ It seems, to put it mildly, a bit unlikely that the book was widely read in Hollywood, where Schulberg worked as a scriptwriter after his graduation—not the sort of reading matter likely to be found gracing Beverly Hills coffee tables. More probably, Schulberg's identification of the "sociological approach" with the assertion of a common interest in rules restraining individual selfishness was already general intellectual currency long before Parsons. One recalls that Schulberg was for a few years a member of the Communist Party, which was influential in the movie colony during this period, and Marxism, of course, is a kind of sociology and a notoriously anti-individualistic one.

So is classical conservatism. The first two books to be published in the United States with the word "sociology" in their titles were written in the decade before the Civil War by Southern defenders of slavery and drew heavily on the anti-individualist and anticapitalist thought of the French Counter-Enlightenment.⁵⁰ The author of one of them, Henry Hughes, had on a visit to France met Auguste Comte himself,⁵¹ whose debt to the reactionaries de Bonald and de Maistre he always acknowledged, although he did not share their passionate longing for a restoration of the *ancien régime*. Hughes's better-known contemporary, George Fitzhugh, defended the doomed institutions of the Old South against the dehumanizing rapacity of expanding Northern and world capitalism.⁵²

If defenders of slavery against free labor like Fitzhugh often seemed to speak in Marxist accents,⁵³ contemporary "Western" Marxists frequently sound like classical conservatives when they deplore the erosion of community, the destruction of nature, and the nihilism of the "instrumental rationality" they attribute to capitalism.⁵⁴ A disposition to regard capitalist market relations and bourgeois individualism as historical aberrations is shared by traditionalist conservatives and Marxists, the former viewing them as transitory departures from the stable hierarchical soci-

eties of the past, the latter as a stage to be superseded by the socialist and ultimately communist social order of the future. The historical relativization of the problem of order is congruent with both conservative and Marxist sentiments: The problem of order is essentially the problem of a competitive liberal market society; it reflects the inclinations of "bourgeois man" rather than of human nature in general. Macpherson's Marxist interpretation of Hobbes is, in fact, a development of Leo Strauss's earlier thesis that *Leviathan* is essentially an attempt to provide grounding for a new bourgeois moral philosophy.⁵⁵ Strauss, far from being a Marxist, was a natural law conservative, finding the greatest wisdom in the ancients and highly critical of all modern political creeds whether bourgeois or nonbourgeois. In Strauss's later work on natural right, he treated Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau as the major figures in the liberal tradition of absolutizing the rights of the individual over and against the claims of the "public" realm.⁵⁶ Hannah Arendt, who resembled Strauss in her veneration for classical thinkers and her antimodernism, described Hobbes as "the only great philosopher to whom the bourgeoisie can rightly and exclusively lay claim."⁵⁷

THE NORMATIVE SOLUTION

Once belief in a preestablished harmony among individuals, whether grounded in divine commandment, natural law, or innate biological disposition, lost all credibility, the problem of order inevitably became at least an implicit issue in social theory. To Parsons, Hobbes's war of all against all is defined by the absence of common ends combined with the freedom of individuals to use any and all means in pursuit of their separate—"discrete and unrelated"—ends; since power over others achieved through the use of force or fraud is "the most immediately efficient means," continual conflict is inescapable. Parsons acknowledged that Locke's version of the state of nature characterized by a "natural identity of interests," in Élie Halévy's choice phrase, was "factually the more nearly right" compared to Hobbes's version. However, Locke was "right but gave wrong reasons"⁵⁸ in failing to articulate "his implicit normative assumptions," where-

as Hobbes's rigorous consistency enabled him to demonstrate not only that a society without common norms and values was impossible, even a contradiction in terms, but that such a condition would inevitably lead to every man's hand being raised against his neighbor. Parsons does not mention at all Rousseau's nonsocial but pacific conception of the state of nature. The problem of order is totally identified with the avoidance of a war of all against all.

Since Parsons named the Hobbesian problem of order, it often seems to be inseparably linked to his normative solution to it: the institutionalization of a common value-system proscribing resort to force and fraud and creating ultimate ends held in common. Parsons gave short shrift to Hobbes's own solution, the enforcement of order by a sovereign state monopolizing the use of force, without actually denying that it might make some contribution to order. A standard criticism of Parsons has, of course, charged him with unduly minimizing the role of force in society. Parsons also criticized at greater length the Lockean solution to the problem of order, the emergence of mutually beneficial exchange relations among individuals, in striving to differentiate the conceptual focus of sociology from that of classical economics. Parsons, in contrast to the writers who relativize the problem of order by treating it as a reflection or anticipation of bourgeois society, not only saw the problem as universal but insisted that his normative solution was also necessarily universal because it was by far the primary, if not the only, solution possible. If he was right to regard the problem as universal, it does not follow that different, historically variable, combinations of the Hobbesian stress on force, the Lockean assumption of complementary individual interests, and the Durkheim-Parsons emphasis on common values might not succeed in maintaining social order.⁵⁹

If the problem of order arises out of the necessity of taming or eliminating motivations and actions that lead to conflict, it represents at least a special case of the larger "age-old question" or "classic debate" about the relation of "the" individual and society.⁶⁰ How are individuals shaped and controlled to avoid destructive conflict? How and to what degree are individuals socialized, in the language of contemporary sociologists? More

broadly, the physical and mental discreteness of individuals, their separability as distinct entities in both reality and thought, makes the question of how they succeed in combining and coordinating their activities to maintain enduring common enterprises inherently problematic. But this also applies to species of social insects, as Hobbes himself fully recognized. He argued that bees and ants differ from human beings in that the absence among them of conflict is "Naturall," whereas the suppression of conflict among men "is by Covenant only, which is Artificiall."⁶¹ Hobbes's frequent insistence on the "artificiality" of the obligations of men toward one another can be read as a recognition that human society is largely a product of what we today call "culture" rather than of nature.

That human nature, whether innate or acquired, contains impulses and passions that lead to conflict among individuals, often with deadly results, was, of course, recognized long before the beginnings of modern social theory. The conflict between man's disposition to original sin and his responsiveness to divine command was central to Christianity. Some recent interpreters of Hobbes have argued that he was restating in nontheological language an essentially Christian view of natural law governing man's conduct in society, but Quentin Skinner has shown that such an interpretation is utterly discrepant with how Hobbes's contemporaries understood him.⁶² There is in any case nothing peculiarly Christian or even Western in the idea that humans have a general inclination both to oppose and to cooperate with their fellows and to feel both love and hate toward them. Note the Islamic saying that seems to echo Hobbes himself: "Sixty years of tyranny are better than one hour of civil strife."⁶³ If divine commandment, Aristotelian entelechy or telos, natural law or innate biological disposition have often been invoked to account for the palpable fact that men do establish secure and highly valued social bonds, the existence of a "negative element"⁶⁴ offering resistance to the stability and continuity of society is at least tacitly acknowledged when actual or potential conflict between individual impulses and social imperatives has been treated as rooted in human nature as such.

Hobbes elevated this negative element to a position of equality

goal toward

with the forces conducive to the formation of social attachments. It has long been argued that he attributed primacy rather than equality to man's hostile and antisocial tendencies, thus making it less than credible that men constituted as Hobbes described them could ever through their own efforts have escaped from a state of nature in which a war of all against all prevailed. Hobbes can indeed be considered as having held an undersocialized conception of human nature. Yet his view anticipates in several respects Freud's more complex theory of nearly three centuries later and, in contrast to vulgar Darwinists and Nietzscheans, his combination of the socializing and antisocial elements of human nature gives weight to both elements and to their interaction in the creation and maintenance of human society.⁶⁵

In addition, Hobbes's emphasis on scarcity as a constant in the human situation makes him more than simply an anatomist of human nature. J. L. Mackie, one of the most recent contributors to the analysis of ethical reasoning as developed by British analytic philosophers, has contended that morality itself must be seen as an attempt to solve the problem of "limited resources and limited sympathies [which] together generate both competition leading to conflict and an absence of what would be mutually beneficial cooperation."⁶⁶ Mackie sees Hobbes as a major forerunner of this view, which locates in the human condition the necessity of "inventing right and wrong," the subtitle of Mackie's book. The problem of order arises out of the dual circumstance that human beings have limited (though not nonexistent) capacities for sympathy with their fellows and that they inhabit an environment that fails to provide them with sufficient resources to satisfy fully the needs of all of them. The problem of order is therefore a genuinely transhistorical problem rooted in inescapable conflict between the interests and desires of individuals and the requirements of society: to wit, the pacification of violent strife among men and the secure establishment of cooperative social relations making possible the pursuit of collective goals.

ORDER AS REGULARITY AND AS RULE



The "problem of order" has come to be widely recognized as a major, often as *the* major, perennial issue of social theory. The phrase has become commonplace to such an extent that its meaning is often blurred and broadened to the point of vacuity. Frequently, it is used so generally that it effaces the difference between the social and natural sciences, both of which presuppose a world of orderliness or uniformity as a necessary condition for the acquisition of reliable and useful knowledge. "Order" means regularity, predictability, and system as opposed to randomness, chance, and chaos. All science, even all intellectual inquiry, both implies belief in orderliness and seeks to establish its specific forms in different object domains. The social sciences are in no way distinctive in this respect. It is otiose therefore to identify the problem of order in human society with the search for regularities and recurrences, for at this general level the problem applies to the study of stars, atoms, chemical compounds, or organisms as much as to the understanding of human beings and the groups, societies, and cultures they create. The claim is often made that the social sciences find it harder to discover regularities because their subject matter is vastly more complex and open to the influence of many more "variables" than the subject matter of the natural sciences. But if this is true, the problem of order then differs only in degree, in its greater magnitude, in the social sciences as compared to the natural sciences. Greater complexity does not imply anything qualitatively peculiar to human societies as such.