



BRILL

HOBBS STUDIES 33 (2020) 1-27

Hobbes
STUDIES

brill.com/hobs

How Far Can a “radical” Philosopher Go? Thomas Hobbes’s Paradox of Gender Relations, and One Possible Solution

Gianni Paganini

Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale Amedeo Avogadro,
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Vercelli, Italy

gianenrico.paganini@uniupo.it



Abstract

This article challenges the idea that Hobbes presents a negative anthropology and shows, to the contrary, that there is a thick web of social relations in his state of nature and laws of nature. It considers the contradiction between human natural equality claimed by Hobbes, and female subjection that de facto characterizes most of his passages on gender relations. The key to this puzzle is found in comparison of the notions of conquest and consent, and of acquisition and institution, comparisons that establish a similarity between paternal authority and despotic dominion. A step towards the solution is provided by the hypothesis that the divide between “vainglorious” and “moderate” is gendered, with women more disposed to moderation than men. This can be explained by the idea that, “for society’s sake,” women in the state of nature appreciate more the advantages of long-term cooperation, even at the price of some subordination.

Keywords

Thomas Hobbes – gender relations – equality – feminist interpretations – family – paternal dominion

1 Hobbes as a Progressive Thinker

By moving the chronological and geographical boundaries of the so-called

Radical Enlightenment to start in the mid-seventeenth-century Netherlands,¹ and include as a key reference and main engine of the cultural shift Spinoza and Spinozism, Jonathan Israel's classic trilogy raised a multiplicity of problems and caused many critiques. One of these criticisms regards the exclusion of Thomas Hobbes from the notion of early modern "radicalism." The reasons why Israel excluded Thomas Hobbes from his own category of radicalism are quite clearly enunciated and can be quickly summarized thus: Hobbes supported a concept of absolutist sovereignty; showed coldness towards democracy (although it is not to be excluded in principle since, from the point of view of sovereignty, democracy must be as "absolute" as monarchy and aristocracy); stressed a "negative" idea of freedom, consisting not in participating in political life, but in being preserved from the interference of the Commonwealth; recovered political theology to support of authority; had a very narrow idea of religious tolerance; and instead promoted the new alliance between civil and spiritual power. In the eyes of Israel, all this made Hobbes, via Locke, the ancestor of what he has called the English "moderate" Enlightenment.

On the other hand, one could object that Hobbes sustained many of the radical theses on which a substantial part of the Radical Enlightenment was built. With his open materialism, Hobbes was arguably even more "monist" than Spinoza, who distinguished the attributes of matter and thought in the unique substance. He stated the natural equality of all human beings; he brought the origins of the political government back to the voluntary and rational consent of citizens, and to this end, he used the egalitarian instrument par excellence: the covenant. Furthermore, Hobbes put forth the idea of a progressive enlightenment by means of rational argumentation and education,² a "cultural transformation," "not utopianism but enlightenment," for the entire people and not only for the learned or the ruling class. From this particular angle, Noel Malcolm has challenged Israel's ideas that Hobbes must be included in the group of the "moderate" and that he had no

¹ Margaret Candee Jacob previously coined the label "Radical Enlightenment," with different connotations.

² On this aspect, see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 520–522 [175–176], where Hobbes declares that it is "against the Duty" of the Sovereign "to let the people be ignorant, or mis-informed of the grounds, and Reasons of those his essential Rights" and recommends that "the grounds of these Rights have the rather need to be diligently, and truly taught," even if, Hobbes immediately adds, the main reason is to avoid people being "seduced" to rebellion by being imbued with false doctrines.



significant influence on the vanguard of radical early modern thinking.³

The issue of gender relations – especially the extension of egalitarianism to women, with the affirmation of mother-right against any form of patriarchy – are not especially taken into consideration in this debate over the “radicalism” or “moderation” of Thomas Hobbes. In reality, from the side of the conception of woman and gender relations, Hobbes certainly featured radical traits, despite revealing some ambivalence (as we shall see in the subsequent sections). He was the only early modern philosopher to affirm that in the state of nature parental power initially belongs to mothers and not fathers, thus laying the foundations for an original matriarchy, and undermining one of the main pillars of patriarchy. Yet, at the same time, he took for granted that in the civil state and in most families, even before the political covenant, parental power commonly passed to fathers, with a few exceptions, notably that of Amazons, but only as far as female offspring were concerned.⁴ To paraphrase Rousseau (“man is born free, and could be said to be in chains everywhere”), one might state that for Hobbes all human beings were born free and equal, including women, but afterwards the latter were almost everywhere subjected to males, with very rare exceptions (Amazons). This is one of the most striking paradoxes connected to Hobbes’s thought.

This paradox, that has all the appearances of a contradiction, resulted in various ambiguities that feminist readings of Hobbes have driven in different and sometimes opposite directions. In the first place, I shall challenge the objection concerning the negative and violent anthropology that has been said to characterize Hobbes’s philosophy, trying to show that it is only a partial and misleading representation of his thought (section 2). Afterwards, I shall come back to the paradox or the contradiction between human natural equality and feminine subjection (section 3), and review the main interpretations that have been given of this crucial transition (section 4). The broader framework of a possible solution to the puzzle can be found in comparison of the Hobbesian notions of conquest and consent and of acquisition and institution, which establish a clear similarity between

³ For these two very different views on Hobbes’s contribution to early modernity, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), where Hobbes is excluded from the genealogy of modern “radicalism,” and, on the other hand, Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), esp. 535–537 and 544–545, where Hobbes’s program is considered as a form of “enlightenment” and “a project of liberation.”

⁴ *Leviathan*, p. 308 [103].

paternal authority and despotical dominion (section 5). A key step towards the solution of the paradox is provided by the hypothesis that the divide between “vainglorious” and “moderate” is gendered, with women more bent to moderation (section 6). This can be explained by the idea that, “for society’s sake,” women in the state of nature appreciate more than men the advantages of a long-term cooperation, even at the price of some subordination (section 7). In conclusion, Hobbes will be appreciated as a “radical” philosopher who reveals the mechanisms of dominion instead of concealing them behind a curtain of justifications that would be inconsistent with the rest of the theory. The price to be paid can be some contradiction between principles and facts, yet the former are not given up for the latter (section 8).

2 Hobbes’s Negative Anthropology and His Supposed “maleness”



It is noteworthy that some feminist critiques have pointed out the peculiar “maleness” of Hobbes’s representation of the human being, especially in the state of nature. Even if the word “man” is not openly gendered in Hobbes’s texts, authors like Christine Di Stefano have written about Hobbes’s “distinctively modern masculinist orientation to the realm of social life.”⁵ Carole Pateman has emphasized the radical individualism of Hobbes’s approach to the state of nature,⁶ which leaves out “all the social and intersubjective understandings fundamental to human social life,” including the relations between men and women and their associations first in unions and then in families.⁷ Therefore, Hobbes is presented by Pateman as “the most radical of all the theorists of an original contract,” and as a representative of “radical individualism” on the verge of “libertarianism.”⁸

I cannot deal here with the major dilemma raised by Pateman: whether

⁵ Christine Di Stefano, *Configurations of Masculinity. A Feminist Perspective on Modern Political Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 70. See also Geneviève Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1984), who, however, does not deal specifically with Hobbes.

⁶ Nancy J. Hirschmann and Joanne H. Wright, “Hobbes, History, Politics, and Gender: A Conversation with Carole Pateman and Quentin Skinner,” *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Hirschmann and Wright (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 23.

⁷ Hirschmann and Wright, “Conversation with Pateman and Skinner,” 33.

⁸ Hirschmann and Wright, “Conversation with Pateman and Skinner,” 42.

the sequence of events in the state of nature as it is described by Hobbes is a real and historical reality, or rather a logical and strategical reconstruction.⁹ Instead, it can be stated here that defining the Hobbesian man as a “radical individualist” needs at least a limitation: it is not absolutely true, but it can be so or not depending on the contexts and situations. According to the philosopher’s main doctrine, the original covenant can be made only by free and equal individuals who apparently lack pre-existing social connections. As a matter of principle, this is true. However, the context from which the political covenant springs is more complex, even from Hobbes’s point of view. If we look at chapter 15 of *Leviathan* in which the laws of nature are stated and we consider in particular the third law onwards, it appears that, in prescribing obligations and depicting the corresponding virtues, Hobbes uncovers a dense relational framework in which these prescriptions are embedded, and therefore a certain disposition to sociality that the laws of nature are supposed to favor. To appreciate the thickness of these social relations, it is enough to enunciate the virtues that support them: not only justice and respect for covenants, but also gratitude, reciprocal availability or complacency, ease in forgiving, corrective rather than punitive use of revenge, avoidance of offenses, outrages and attitudes of superiority, refusal of pride and denial of arrogance, recognition of equality, and so on.¹⁰ Hobbes criticised the “writers of moral philosophy” not so much for mistaking the content of virtues as for a failure in moral epistemology: such an error led Aristotle, for instance, to identify virtue with some kind of “mediocrity,” or middle point between two opposite excesses. On the contrary, the “scientific” criterion of morality should be located not in the “place” but in the “cause” of the virtues, i.e., their functionality to peace.¹¹ In addition, it must be stressed that the basic foundations of Hobbes’s morals rest on a principle of reciprocity that is not far from some form of sympathy, albeit a dry and rational one. The fundamental rule that, according to the philosopher, allows us to quickly recognize the specific laws of nature is a very old principle

⁹ The disjunction between the logical and historical aspects of Hobbes’s political theories has been stressed also by Gordon J. Schochet, “Thomas Hobbes on the Family and the State of Nature (1967),” reprinted in Hirschmann and Wright, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, 106–124.

¹⁰ As is known, for Hobbes morality is entirely contained in respect for the laws of nature. In fact, at the end of the chapter he enunciates the corresponding virtues: “Justice, Gratitude, Modesty, Equity, Mercy” (*Leviathan*, p. 242 [79]); see also Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Law: Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies [London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1889], 1.17.14, p. 90).

¹¹ *Leviathan*, p. 242 [79].

coming down to the “golden rule,” contained in the Gospel of Matthew, though expressed by Hobbes in a rather more negative form – “*Do not that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thy selfe*” – than the original affirmative form.¹² This formulation may be considered too formal and even blunt. However, the same rule is presented in the *Elements of Law* in a different and more interesting way, as a kind of empathy or sympathy that drives one to identify himself with the other: “*That a man imagine himself in the place of the party with whom he hath to do, and reciprocally him in his.*”¹³

It is true that the laws of nature, including this golden rule, obligate only in the internal forum, binding the conscience to be willing to do, and not simply to do. However, the whole issue of Hobbes’s individualism can be seen in a different light when one shifts from interrogation of the “nature” itself of humanity, specifically from the supposed “negative” anthropology, to the question of the external conditions in which this nature develops. In place of the usual dichotomies individualism/sociability and pessimism/optimism, we should point at a different couple of factors: security/insecurity. Instead of saying that man is wicked, unsociable, and thus intrinsically aggressive in the state of nature to become afterwards “good” and sociable in the civil state, we rather must state that it is insecurity, and especially a condition of radical insecurity, which compels man to be individualistic, even radically individualistic, and therefore wary, treacherous, and aggressive to the point of launching a preemptive attack.

The so-called negative anthropology with which most scholars have identified Hobbes – as many feminist interpretations still do – is not the result of the very human nature, as it is considered by the philosopher, but rather the effect of an external condition of extreme insecurity. This kind of misunderstanding started immediately in Hobbes’s times. Replying to those who had accused him of making man “wicked by nature” (*a natura malus*), starting with Descartes, Hobbes, in the preface to the second edition of the *De Cive*, rejected this blame and clarified that men are not wicked, but only prudent and wise, when they close house doors or surround cities by walls.¹⁴

¹² *Leviathan*, p. 240 [78]. The “golden rule” in its positive formulation is quoted in *Leviathan*, p. 254 [85]: “*doing to others, as we would be done to.*”

¹³ *Elements*, 1.17.9, p. 92.

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, “Praefatio ad Lectores” [added to 1646 edition], *De Cive: Latin Version*, ed. Howard Warrender (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 80–81. On this point see Gianni Paganini, “*Passionate Thought: reason and the passion of curiosity in Thomas Hobbes,*” in *Emotional Minds. The passions and the limits of pure inquiry in early modern philosophy*, ed.

Individualism and sociability are not absolute but relative attributes, depending on the condition in which one lives.

3 The Paradox: *de iure* Equality, *de facto* Inequality

Paradoxically, the recognition of some “natural” and pre-political sociability renders the puzzle of how free women came to be subordinated to men not easier, but harder to solve. If human association relies on some bases of spontaneous sociability, like reciprocity and even a kind of empathy, why does every union of man and woman end by the constant subordination of the latter? To quote S.A. Lloyd: “how is that women are systematically, institutionally, subordinated in most societies?”¹⁵ The paradox is connected to a whole cluster of contrasts and disjunctions in Hobbes’s texts, on which the more recent, and especially feminist, literature has focused. In this section, I shall try to summarize briefly some of the most striking discrepancies that can be found in Hobbes’s philosophy on these topics.

Despite the “radical” thesis of equality between men and women and notwithstanding the affirmation of maternal power over children in the state of nature,¹⁶ the family definitions given by *De cive* and *Leviathan* simply do not mention women, which is astonishing.¹⁷ Only the definition contained in the *Elements of Law* mentions women as part of a family.¹⁸

At times, Hobbes belies his own equality principle and says that *de facto* males enjoy a greater endowment of “wisdom and courage,”¹⁹ and are better equipped for “labour and danger,”²⁰ so that in general they have a superior ability for government than women and are “fitter for the administration of greater matters, but specially of wars.”²¹

Sabrina Ebbesmeyer (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2012), 227–256.

¹⁵ S.A. Lloyd, “Power and Sexual Subordination in Hobbes’s Political Theory,” in Hirschmann and Wright, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, 47–62; here, 48.

¹⁶ See Hirschmann and Wright, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes* and *De cive* 9.3, p. 165.

¹⁷ *Leviathan*, p. 314 [104]; *De Cive* 9.10, p. 168.

¹⁸ *Elements*, II.4.10, p. 135. This point has been made by Nancy J. Hirschmann, “Gordon Schochet on Hobbes, Gratitude, and Women,” in Hirschmann and Wright, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, 130–131.

¹⁹ *Elements*, II.4.14, p. 136.

²⁰ *Leviathan*, p. 302 [99].

²¹ *De Cive*, 9.16, p. 168 (as translated in *De Cive: English Version*, ed. Howard Warrender [Oxford:

While recognizing that in some societies the parental power could be assigned to women, as happened with the Amazons for their female offspring, or in the case of the children of queens, Hobbes claims that in the great majority of cases paternal power is exercised by fathers and not by mothers. In principle, Hobbes acknowledges the equal right of the parents over children but, since “no man can obey two Masters,”²² the dominion must be assigned to only one of the parents. That it usually comes to the fathers is explicit in the title of chapter 20 of *Leviathan* (“*Of Dominion PATERNALL, and DESPOTICALL*”) and implicit in its consequence, i.e. that “for the most part Commonwealths have been erected by the Fathers, not by the Mothers of families.”²³



Despite his realistic definition of equality, which will be discussed shortly, it seems doubtful, according to Hobbes, that women could gain enduring dominion over men and consequently maintain parental authority in the family.²⁴ Three specific sections of *De Cive*²⁵ review all the cases in which the “*Dominion* passes from the *Mother* to others,” to conclude that in a civil government, when there is “a contract of marriage between a *man* and a *woman*,” the children are of the father, “because in all Cities, *viz.* constituted of *Fathers*, not *Mothers* governing their families, the domestical command belongs to the man.”²⁶ Instead of denying this paradigm, the cases of queens, albeit well represented in British history, serve as an exception that confirms the general rule of men’s dominion.²⁷

With all these disjunctions, an acknowledgement of *de facto* inequality is set against a formal claim of *de iure* equality.²⁸ In order to evaluate this blatant contradiction, it is worth bearing in mind that in Hobbes’s political

Clarendon Press, 1983], p. 128).

²² *Leviathan*, p. 308 [102].

²³ *Leviathan*, p. 308 [102–103].

²⁴ *De Cive*, 9.5, pp. 165–166.

²⁵ *De Cive*, 9.4–6, pp. 165–166.

²⁶ *De Cive*, 9.6, p. 166 (trans. *English Version*, pp. 123–14).

²⁷ Hirschmann, “Gordon Schochet on Hobbes,” 130, aptly remarked that in principle the dominion over children can belong to the father or to the mother. See *De Cive* 9.5, p. 166.

²⁸ *Leviathan*, p. 234 [77]: “If Nature ... have made men equall...” and “therefore for the ninth law of Nature I put this: *That every man acknowledge other for his Equall by Nature.*” See also p. 336 [111]: “all men equally, are by Nature Free.” Compare: *Elements*, 1.14.14, p. 74; *De Cive* 1.11, p. 96, and 1.15, p. 97; *Leviathan*, p. 210 [68]. For an accurate study which, however, does not consider programmatically the issue of gender inequality, see Kinch Hoekstra, “Hobbesian Equality,” in *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, ed. S.A. Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 76–112.

philosophy there are at least three different conceptions of equality. They largely overlap in their effects, but for the purposes of our analysis it is better to keep them distinct. **First**, real or actual equality is revealed by the equal vulnerability of all human beings (men as well as women) to the “worst enemy of nature,” i.e., violent death at the hands of another man or woman. This is what Hoekstra calls “effective” or “natural” equality.²⁹ This blunt and basic notion of equality is compatible with the greatest differences in personal endowments and therefore cannot be belied by the common wisdom, sometimes shared by Hobbes, according to which males have more courage, strength, or skills in governance than women. According to this first definition of equality, however strong, cunning or intelligent one may be, these qualities cannot protect you from the possible aggression of the weaker or the less intelligent, or from a confederation of others.³⁰ This is why in the state of nature we all share this sort of common equality in the face of the danger of violent death.³¹ This basic idea of equality has a direct implication for the equality of sexes: even if males and females differ in their abilities, this need not determine which sex dominates the other. As Hobbes puts it: “For there is not always that difference of strength, or prudence between the man and the woman, as that the right can be determined without War.”³²

The **second** notion of equality means equality of rights, that is equal respect and equal treatment especially when entering the main political agreement, namely the act of covenanting. This second notion also takes the form of a counterfactual. As the author of *Leviathan* remarks, this principle holds even in the case of inequalities *de facto*: “If Nature therefore have made men equall, that equalitie is to be acknowledged: or if Nature have made men unequall; yet because men that think themselves equall, will not enter into conditions of Peace, but upon Equall termes, such equalitie must be admitted.”³³ What we stress here as a counterfactual other scholars have called otherwise, saying that “the imperative grounds the indicative,” or that the normative prevails over the ontology of equality: you *ought* to treat as

²⁹ Hoekstra, “Hobbesian Equality,” 82–90.

³⁰ See *Elements*, 1.14.2, p. 70; *De Cive*, 1.3, p. 93.

³¹ Hobbes writes of the sexes that “the inequality of their naturall forces is not so great, that the *man* could get the Dominion over the *woman* without warre” (*De Cive* 9.3, p. 165 [trans. *English Version*, p. 122]).

³² *Leviathan*, p. 308 [99]. Compare: *Elements*, 11.4.2, p. 132; *De Cive*, 9.3, p. 165.

³³ *Leviathan*, p. 234 [77]. For a passage on this point, where the purpose of peace is put to the foreground, see *De Cive* 1.11, p. 96 and 1.15, p. 97.

equal even those (in this case men and women) that *are* actually different as a matter of fact.³⁴ I prefer to keep Hobbes's original conditional and counterfactual phrase quoted above (“*if* Nature therefore have made men equall ... or *if* nature have made men unequall...”).

The **third** notion of equality means formal equality, or absence of status and established ranks in the condition of pure nature. While differences in body and intelligence may depend on individual constitution, which is mostly the result of natural temper, differences in status are not natural but are the consequences, Hobbes says, of “civil laws” and ultimately the product of “human consensus.” This is because no one would accept subordination or inferiority of status except by consensual and voluntary agreement, as expressed in a contract, be it explicit or – as we shall see later on – implicit. In the *Elements of Law* Hobbes speaks as if only differences of gender were pertinent to the state of nature. People are “in the state of nature, without covenants or subjection one to another, as if they were but even now all at once created male and female.”³⁵ Yet an even more extreme, gender-neutral representation of humans in the state of nature, “without all kind of engagement to each other,” is contained in the famous mushroom-image (“men as if but even now sprung out of the earth ... *like* Mushromes”).³⁶

All these concepts of equality apply equally to men and women and this is why Hobbes presents a view of women that is radically different from most of his contemporaries, such as Filmer. Like men, women are born perfectly free and equal in the state of nature. For Hobbes, it is matriarchy and not patriarchy that came first, because, “If there is no Contract, the Dominion [over the child] is in the Mother,” who is the only one who knows who is the father **an**d is the first to take care of the child rather than “exposing” it.³⁷ Hobbes's stance on female equality and their priority in parental power was absolutely exceptional for the time.³⁸

Furthermore, all the above concepts of equality defeat the inequalities *de facto* to which Hobbes at times subscribed. The first notion, being strongly realistic and based on the constant possibility of vulnerability, is not influenced by any uneven distribution of physical or intellectual

³⁴ See Hoekstra, “Hobbesian Equality,” 108–112.

³⁵ *Elements*, II.3.2, p. 127.

³⁶ *De Cive* 8.1, p. 160 (trans. *English Version*, p. 117).

³⁷ *Leviathan*, p. 310 [103].

³⁸ See Nancy J. Hirschmann, *Gender, Class, and Freedom in Modern Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 46–49.

endowments; the second notion, being conditional and counterfactual, overcomes any factual difference; the third notion, stressing the artificiality of any particular status, prevents inequality from being rooted in the nature of things.

The final result, however, is that the initial problem becomes even more difficult to resolve: if men and women are in the state of nature equal in respect to all three notions of equality, why does Hobbes accept that in the marital state men are constantly or most often in a dominant position and women instead in a subordinate position? The general argument of the political covenant is obviously not sufficient to give an answer. It is true that everyone, following the covenant that establishes the Commonwealth, is in a position of awe: *pactum unionis* is simultaneously *pactum subiectionis*. Women, however, besides submitting to the sovereign, suffer an additional subjection to their husbands. Returning to the second definition of equality, one would say that women must have agreed to enter the *Commonwealth* on "uneven" conditions, but this is contrary to the ninth law of nature that establishes "*That every man acknowledge other for his Equall by Nature.*"³⁹ This law is supplemented by the "*tenth, against Arrogance,*" the formula of which says: *That at the entrance into conditions of Peace, no man require to reserve to himselfe any Right, which he is not content should be reserved to every one of the rest.*"⁴⁰ The voluntary acceptance of disadvantageous conditions is counterintuitive and problematic.

4 The Crucial Transition: Some Important Interpretations

The transition from natural equality to female subordination is at the heart of Hobbes's feminist readings. Before advancing one possible explanation, I shall briefly review the main interpretations.

Carole Pateman, one of the first and most authoritative feminist scholars to engage this issue, hypothesized that there must have been a "sexual contract" prior to the social one. Speaking in general of contractarianism and not specifically of Hobbes, she argued that these theorists tacitly assumed that before the political covenant, men had entered into a sexual contract

³⁹ *Leviathan*, p. 234 [77].

⁴⁰ *Leviathan*, p. 234 [77].

with each other to arrange their collective domination over women.⁴¹ In this way, they would have replaced the original matriarchy with patriarchy.

Gordon Schochet, in contrast, asserted that “historically” (if one can consider history the somewhat fragmentary reconstruction delineated by Hobbes) the original contract was stipulated not by individuals but by the fathers of families, i.e., male householders, on behalf of the members of their family, meaning by family the complex of husband, wife, sons and daughters, plus servants.⁴² In this stipulation, the family is considered as a union because it is personated by a representative who is the father. This process of personation is similar to that which creates the Commonwealth.

Another account of female subordination has been given by Nancy Hirschmann.⁴³ In the first place, she contested the thesis that the weakness of women would be due to motherhood, and that this could explain the overthrow of the original mother-right. On the contrary, according to her, domination over children gives women power, being some sort of “confederacy,” i.e., the first source of aid in war. Men constantly try to vanquish that power by subjugating women and thus gain dominion over this little mother-child association. Secondly, and contrary to Pateman, Hirschmann claimed that family would not precede the social contract. Third, as a possible explanation for female subordination, Hirschmann examined the role of the fourth law of nature, i.e., gratitude.⁴⁴

However, against the explanation based on the fourth law of nature, Hirschmann raised strong and multiple objections. First of all, she noted the fragility of keeping natural laws in the state of nature, which extends also to the law of gratitude that obliges only in the internal forum. Therefore, the ensuing submission could always be reversed when circumstances permitted. Nothing, not even the fourth law, can guarantee against a reversal of the relation of dominion established between men and women. That relation of submission could not but be precarious and unstable. Secondly, resorting to gratitude presupposes that women must always lose in any contrast or war with men, contrary to the assumption of factual equality regarding all human beings, males and females, in the face of the danger of

⁴¹ This is the central thesis of the famous and innovative book: Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁴² Schochet, “Thomas Hobbes on the Family,” 117.

⁴³ Hirschmann, “Gordon Schochet on Hobbes,” 125–145.


⁴⁴ See *Leviathan*, p. 230 [75]. According to this explanation, gratitude seals the subordination of women when they agree with men to exchange obedience for protection.

violent death. Third, even if gratitude worked, "it should lead to matriarchy rather than patriarchy," as it is first the mother that obligates the offspring to gratitude when she decides not to expose but to nurture it. At the end of a very valuable and accurate analysis of all the possible factors at stake, Hirschmann's final statement is, however, inconclusive: "The puzzle concerning Hobbes on women and the family thus – perhaps fortuitously – remains to feminists to debate."⁴⁵

The approach recently proposed by S.A. Lloyd has the merit of emphasizing the normative framework and at the same time stressing the positive potential of Hobbes's philosophy for this particular issue. According to her, there is no sexism in Hobbes's anthropology. Equality and the most basic norm of morality, that is the requirement of reciprocity, preclude, at least in principle, affording women fewer rights than men. Lloyd has aptly remarked that Hobbes's political theory functions irrespective of the fact that in the state of nature either patriarchy, or matriarchy, or radical individualism prevail. Even in the civil state, the restrictions introduced by the sovereign should not be in principle sex-discriminatory. Lloyd's conclusion is that Hobbes's formal theory neither assumes nor entails the subordination of women. The best explanation of the paradoxical transition from theoretical equality to practical inequality, is to be found, according to her, in the notion of "power" underlying Hobbes's social philosophy and consequently in a factual dynamic: the accumulation of power, both "natural" and "instrumental," which starts from small differences and is magnified by human competitive relations, leads, like a "snowball" effect, to greater and greater inequalities, until domination is established. Instead of the traumatic event resulting in the conquest of women by men hypothesized by Schochet or in the place of the pre-political sexual contract conjectured by Pateman, Lloyd resorts to a gradual evolution of power relations in order to account for the general submission of women, despite their initial natural equality with men. According to Lloyd, this kind of evolution was the "road taken" by Hobbes, while the "road not taken," albeit consistent with his theory of the original mother-right and with "[t]he power Hobbes assigns to the caregiving parent outside of civil society," could have been another story: "A mixed-gender but matriarchal society would, in fact, be the more natural story for Hobbes to have told."⁴⁶ The reconstruction


⁴⁵ Hirschmann, "Gordon Schochet on Hobbes," 143.

⁴⁶ S. A. Lloyd, "Power and Sexual Subordination in Hobbes's Political Theory", 58.

made by Lloyd of Hobbes's formal argument and its potential result (matriarchy instead of patriarchy) is particularly **convincing**, even though it risks emphasizing the disjunction between the factual outcome ("the road taken") and the formal possibility ("the road not taken") and so reopening the issue at stake. 

In fact, all the explanations I have examined so far try to fill the gap between the statements of principle (Hobbes's radical thesis about equality) and his claims that male dominion in the family is the most common outcome. It is true that the Commonwealth or *Leviathan* is not gendered, being an artificial person made of men and women, nobles and bourgeois, soldiers and traders, etc. Moreover, its representative can be, as a natural person, indifferently male or female, king or queen. Nevertheless, the fact still remains that in Hobbes's work the displacement of power always follows a unidirectional vector, from women to men. Summing up and simplifying a little the principal interpretations of this displacement, we can notice that these accounts can be grouped along three lines, depending on whether the transition is conceived to be gradual (Lloyd) or quick (almost all the other interpreters), to happen by conquest (Schochet) or by consent (Pateman's pre-political and sexual contract), before (Pateman) or after the establishment of the state (Hirschmann).⁴⁷ According to Lloyd, however, both the state of nature and the civil state must or, at least, should be neutral to sexual discrimination, when considered from the standpoint of the formal theory.

5 Conquest and Consent, Acquisition and Institution, Paternal Authority and Despotical Dominion

Before suggesting another type of explanation, which I shall do in the next section, let me clarify first that the basic alternative of conquest versus consent, on which especially Schochet's and Pateman's interpretations dwell, is not a real alternative in Hobbes's political theory. Both "institution" and "acquisition" require some form of agreement, explicitly or **as** implicitly expressed by the contracting and the losing party. This point of Hobbes's 

⁴⁷ This point has been stressed by Nancy J. Hirschmann, "Hobbes on the Family," in *Oxford Handbook of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. A. P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 257–258.

political philosophy requires some clarification.

Given an initial condition of full equality (in all the meanings mentioned above), the relationship between men and women can become *conflictual* due to the causes of quarrel and contest that loom over the state of nature; therefore, its legal resolution can be only *contractual*. Accordingly, since political obligations are artificial, and not natural relationships, any change of dominion must pass by a contract. Then, the question is: what kind of contract and consequently dominion can put an end to the conflict subsisting between genders in a pre-political situation, i.e., before the Commonwealth covenant and the institution of the sovereign power?

Hobbes deals with these issues in *Leviathan* chapter 20: "*Of Dominion PATERNALL, and DESPOTICALL.*" This is also the famous chapter in which the mother's original right concerning the offspring is stated: "If there be no Contract, the Dominion is in the Mother,"⁴⁸ This is not by virtue of generation but of conservation, i.e., if the mother decides not to expose or to abandon the child but to protect and keep it alive. However, maternal right, like any right, can be transferred by contract and thus passed on to the father.

In another substantial part of the same chapter, Hobbes deals with dominion acquired by conquest or victory in war, that is, "despotic dominion" over the vanquished to whom life is left in exchange for submission. The vanquished thus becomes a "servant." Owing to the tight contiguity of these two topics in the body of the same chapter, it seems natural and logical to establish a double comparison: first, between "parental"⁴⁹ and "despotic" dominion; second, between domination over offspring and male domination over women.

The first comparison (parental – despotic dominion) is grounded on their common basis. Both the parental dominion, which quickly becomes paternal in Hobbes's text, and the dominion over the vanquished that becomes a servant, rest on the fact that to the subordinates (be they either generated children or enemies vanquished in war) life is left. They could have been stripped of it – if the former (children) were abandoned or the latter (vanquished) killed. In both cases, says Hobbes, the outcome is that rulers have total control over their subordinates, to do with as they please. This is a situation of full authority without conditions except the basic one,

⁴⁸ *Leviathan*, p. 310 [103].

⁴⁹ Hobbes often insensitively shifts from "parent" to "paternal": see e.g. *Leviathan*, p. 308 [103].

the obedience-protection exchange. It is remarkable that, according to *Leviathan*, both kinds of dominion are not based on mere force but on the acknowledgment of subordination, namely on an agreement or contract. The vanquished commits himself to obedience and therefore he is not put in chains, like a slave, but remains obliged to serve.⁵⁰ This agreement is the substantial difference between a “servant” that belongs to the family, on the one hand, and a slave being held captive, on the other. A similar “voluntary” commitment to obedience holds also in the case of children, as they are supposed to express their agreement on paternal authority. Again, the same “legal” framework can be extended to the subordination of women when they submit themselves after a conflict (“warre”) that they have lost.⁵¹ The logical result is that the paternal dominion should be framed into the category of dominions by “acquisition” or “despotical” and not of those “by institution.”

One important difference, however, must be remarked, which has not been stressed in feminist critiques of Hobbes: while the dominion by institution arises “for fear of one another,” i.e., from a mutual fear driving people to institute a sovereign that can protect them from the danger of aggression, in the case of dominion by acquisition it is straight fear of the conqueror that establishes the relation of power. Owing to the parallelism that underlies this chapter of *Leviathan*, in the case of the family fear of the conqueror must be replaced by fear of the father or husband. Hobbes repeatedly claims that in both situations (paternal and despotical dominion) the rights are exactly the same as those of the sovereign by institution and for the same reasons.⁵² Hobbes gives the example of a king who is “Monarch of diverse Nations,” one by institution and the other by conquest: “the Sovereign is absolute over both alike.”⁵³ The title of the subsequent section promises to explain the “*Difference between a Family and a Kingdom.*” Yet, in accord with the above parallelism, Hobbes does not place this “difference” in different rights, but only in the scale of the dominion. In fact, the beginning of the section emphasizes much more the similarities than the differences between the two dominions, so that a “great Family if it be not part of some Commonwealth, is of it selfe, as to the Rights of Sovereignty, a little

⁵⁰ *Leviathan*, p. 312 [104].

⁵¹ A similar conclusion is reached ‘by default’ by Hirschmann, “Gordon Schochet on Hobbes,” 133: “That leaves ‘acquisition,’ specifically conquest.” See also Hirschmann, *Gender*, 51–53.

⁵² *Leviathan*, p. 306 [101].

⁵³ *Leviathan*, p. 314 [104].

Monarchy ... wherein the Father or Master is the Sovereign." The only condition required to be so ("properly a Common-wealth"), and therefore the only distinguishing feature, is that that family must have the power, afforded by number or other advantages, "as not to be subdued without the hazard of war," otherwise it would fall apart at the first clash with the enemy.⁵⁴ In sum, both the patriarchal family and despotism are based on the same exchange between obedience and protection, with the difference that the former exists on a smaller scale and affords no great security, whereas the latter holds on a larger scale and ensures more protection, like a "proper" Commonwealth. Furthermore, the general ideology of Hobbesian contractarianism makes it easy to shift from institution to acquisition, and then from this to "parental" or "paternal" dominion. The prevalence of fear as the basic disposition of the subjects is not an obstacle, either in practice or in theory. As Hobbes often recalls, a contract made out of fear is taken as valid, otherwise the political covenant, the contract *par excellence*, would be invalid. For even this covenant is made out of fear of the utmost danger, namely violent death that constantly looms over people in the state of nature.

There are still other reasons that justify framing the sexual contract into the category of dominion "by acquisition." In the first place, it seems unlikely that the marriage contract could be a contract "by institution," since women would not agree to enter relationships that systematically undermine equality and violate their basic interests. In this regard, Hobbes's radicalism is particularly ambivalent: on the one hand, it "covers" with the ideology of contract the relations of domination that come out of violence and fear, but, on the other hand, it reveals the "despotic" feature of any "paternal" dominion. Ideology (contractarianism) does not prevent him from unveiling the real nature of relations of power, including those inside families.

If the basic motif of fear is common to political dominion, on the one hand, and to paternal and despotic on the other, there is, however, the difference noted in the diverse kinds of fear: mutual fear between the covenanters in the former case, and fear of the conqueror or the father-husband in the latter. In the particular case of dominion by acquisition, what makes the difference is not only the matter of scale, but also the question of hierarchy. While submission to the sovereign by institution keeps some equality among the citizens as they are all equally subject to the same

⁵⁴ *Leviathan*, p. 314 [104].

power,⁵⁵ submission to paternal dominion establishes instead inequality and hierarchy within the family, putting wife, children, and servants on different levels. This way of resolving conflicts at the small scale by resort to “acquisition” can be more odious than “institution” in that it builds hierarchies and different degrees of subordination into the micro-level of the family. Even if it is personated by a sovereign that must be a king or a queen, except for the case of an assembly, the authority of the Leviathan is supposed to be that of an artificial man whose sex is not defined. Being universal and equally exerted, the sovereignty looms in the same way over all subjects as the figure represented in the title page that impends on the landscape of city and country. By contrast, the dominion by acquisition in the family is male-gendered, strictly personal, and weighs heavily on every single component, which means that fear of the head of family can become particularly oppressive, i.e., properly “despotic,” in Hobbes’s language, and discriminatory.

Thanks to the distinction between institution and acquisition and the clear assimilation of the paternal dominion to acquisition, Hobbes provides readers with a description of the mechanisms of subordination occurring in gender relations that is logically transparent and philosophically consistent with the general principles of his political theory – namely, that power arises from conflict and stabilizes by contract.

We can now answer the questions we left open before: What kind of contract, and consequently dominion, puts an end to the possible or actual conflict between men and women in a pre-political situation? It is dominion by acquisition. Does this come down to endorsing Schochet’s position (conquest or female subjugation without contract) against Pateman’s (pre-political contract establishing women’s subordination)? No. On this second issue, between the two different theses one can see complementarity instead of opposition. In the logic of *Leviathan* “conquest and contract are not mutually exclusive”⁵⁶ since the former acquires legal value only through the voluntary consent of the dominated person, i.e., by a contract. Even female subjugation must be contracted.

⁵⁵ See *Leviathan*, p. 342 [113].

⁵⁶ Hirschmann, “Gordon Schochet on Hobbes,” 134.

6 Moderate and Vainglorious: A Possible Gendered Divide?

However, even at this point, the main puzzle still stands: why is subordination almost always unidirectional, from woman to man, from wife to husband? Of course, there is some prejudice even in such a subtle thinker as Hobbes. In the first place, he might have been influenced by an authoritative philosopher like Grotius who believed the right of a husband as a head of family to be unquestionable and considered father-right to be a "natural" and self-evident fact.⁵⁷ Yet, as we have seen, this is just the sort of prejudice that Hobbes shook from the roots with his thesis of the original mother-right. Moreover, it is not only the principle of equality but also realism that clashes with the idea of a constant female subordination. The logic and the actuality of the conflict as these are depicted by Hobbes, make the outcome unpredictable and not necessarily favorable to males.⁵⁸ Furthermore, even if one assumes with Lloyd the hypothesis of a gradual process consisting in marginal increases in power, nothing guarantees that this accumulation should be unidirectional, unless one adds initial conditions already unfavorable to women, which would unbalance all the process from the start. And, as we have seen, motherhood is not considered by all interpreters to be a disadvantageous factor.⁵⁹

Probably, Hobbes was not entirely coherent in his representation of gender relations, so that, after all, some issues must remain unanswered. First and foremost, when considering the transition from the state of nature to the commonwealth, he did not succeed in connecting the theoretical and the historical levels in a single structure. Consequently, the role and composition of the family remained floating from a theoretical point of view, especially when the family is considered in a pre-political context. This is the reason why some interpreters tend to situate the regulation of family and gender relations directly in the civil state, thus making them depend on the authority of the sovereign. This approach has been adopted recently by Hirschmann, who writes: "although the picture Hobbes seems to draw indicates that the family, and particularly the patriarchal family, predates the

⁵⁷ Hugo Grotius, *De iure belli et pacis*, II, v, 8, i (Amsterdam: apud Janssonio-Waesbergios, 1712), p. 237.

⁵⁸ See Lloyd, "Power and Sexual Subordination," 50: "the outcome of conflict in Hobbes's state of nature could easily have been radically different, and in fact could have led to the subordination of men as well."

⁵⁹ See Hirschmann, "Gordon Schochet on Hobbes," 136–137.

social contract ... the logical tenets of his theory do not require it or even assert it with consistency; indeed, his theory becomes stronger and more consistent if the social contract predates the patriarchal family.”⁶⁰ According to Hirschmann, power in the family would be shaped by Hobbes on the model of power in the Commonwealth, so that family becomes the very “key to Hobbes’s theory,” in the sense that women’s subordination can be considered as the perfect example, on a little scale, of what would be political subordination, on a larger scale.⁶¹

Yet, before surrendering to the idea that Hobbes was not wholly consistent or yielding to the temptation of reshaping his theory to make it sounder, it is worth exploring another possible account of the female subordination. This one, to my knowledge, has not been tried before, with the only exception of a quick hint made by S.A. Lloyd, although she did not consider it convincing.⁶²

Feminist interpretations of Hobbes have not tended to take account of the important divide within the state of nature between “vainglorious” and “moderate” men.⁶³ In *Elements* and *De Cive*, more than in *Leviathan*,⁶⁴ this divide is considered as one of the main factors of rivalry, mistrust, mutual fear, and aggression that make the state of nature degenerate into a state of war. It is true that this difference is not specifically gendered; Hobbes usually refers to the whole of mankind when he speaks of “men” in general. Furthermore, it is easy to underestimate the difference between these two different attitudes or temperaments, considering them to be only

⁶⁰ Hirschmann, “Hobbes on the Family,” 260.

⁶¹ Hirschmann, “Hobbes on the Family,” 261. Hirschmann assimilates the status of wives to that of servants (247) and uses this paradigm for the political subjection: “what Hobbes does to women, he seeks to do to all men” (260). On the contrary, I emphasize the distinction – in terms of hierarchy vs. equal subordination and in terms of different kinds of fear – in the political covenant and in the family.

⁶² Lloyd, “From Natural Equality to Sexual Subordination in the theories of Hobbes and Rawls,” in *Women, Philosophy, and Science: Italy and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sabrina Ebbersmeyer and Gianni Paganini, forthcoming. As we shall see later, it is not by nature that women are more “moderate,” but by the dynamic connected to the comparison between short-term and long-term advantages of competition and “society” respectively (see section 7 below).

⁶³ *Elements*, 1.14.3, p. 71; *De Cive* 1.4, p. 93.

⁶⁴ In this work “vainglory” is clearly defined along with the other passions (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 88 [27]). Yet in the chapter “Of the NATURAL CONDITION of Mankind,” the dynamic of vainglory is only hinted at with regard to wisdom, wit, eloquence, and learning (“a vain conceit of ones owne wisdom”); there, the description of the “moderates” is omitted (*Leviathan*, p. 188 [60–61]). On this topic more in general, see Gabriella Slomp, *Thomas Hobbes and the Political Philosophy of Glory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

psychological factors, concerning the presence or the absence of the superiority of which some boast. This presumption of superiority ("vain glory") arises from a degeneration of what *Leviathan* considers to be "right" glory that is based on the real experience of one's abilities and success. However, far from being only a matter of different tempers or a simple shade in a psychological scale, the notion of vainglory is revealed to be crucial in the dynamic of the state of nature and impacts on one of the main pillars of Hobbes's political theory. In the first place, vain or false glory prevents a person from admitting natural equality and permitting "as much to others, as he assumes to himself." The vainglorious tend to undermine the basic rule of reciprocity that underpins the whole construction of natural law. As we have seen, this rule of reciprocity, together with the premise concerning equality, grounds the very possibility and the basic procedure of contracting. In this sense, vain glory is the most dangerous challenge not only to egalitarianism but also to contractarianism. By contrast, the sense of equality is presented as the hallmark of the "temperate" or moderate man who "rightly values his strength."⁶⁵

The distortion of perspective that induces the vainglorious to overestimate their superiority, along with the circumstance that "many men's appetites carry them to one and the same end; which end sometimes can neither be enjoyed in common, nor divided," triggers a contention that quickly degenerates into hostility and open war, without any certainty of victory: "And thus the greatest part of men, upon no assurance of odds, do nevertheless, through vanity, or comparison, or appetite, provoke the rest, that otherwise would be contented with equality."⁶⁶ In *Leviathan*, the ninth law of nature (mentioned above with regard to the topic of equality) is specifically directed "against pride" and prescribes respect for equality: "*That every man acknowledge other for his Equall by Nature.*" Vainglory or pride and "arrogance" (forbidden by the tenth law of nature)⁶⁷ are major obstacles to bringing about "society," since those who presume their superiority will be constantly tempted to obtain the advantages of "confederacy," resorting rather to the subjugation of others than to mutual collaboration on an equal footing. If the state of nature were populated only by moderates, the achievement of peace through social covenant would be much easier and the

⁶⁵ *De Cive* 1.4, p. 93 (trans. *English Version*, p. 46); *Elements*, 1.15.1, p. 75.

⁶⁶ *Elements*, 1.14.5, p. 71.

⁶⁷ *Leviathan*, p. 234 [77].

arrogant behaviors of the vainglorious would be quickly dismissed without requiring violent conflicts.

Might we approach our topic (the transition from the equality of women to subordination) from this new angle, i.e., the divide between moderate and vainglorious? Let us start from an easy inference derived from Hobbes's principles and focus on the difference between different kinds of conflicts. In a generalized "war" like *bellum omnium contra omnes* the vainglorious have neither a privileged position nor more chances to prevail than the moderate since these large-scale conflicts involve so many people, with wide varieties of real or fictional "superiorities," so that the pretensions of the arrogant turn out to be pointless. By contrast, in more limited and local conflicts such as those between men and women inside the small communities that precede the institution of family, it is possible that the vainglorious have more chances to subjugate the others, and specifically women. One could object to the clause: "specifically women." Actually, this is one typical case in which from the ascertainment of effects it seems to be allowed to infer their cause. Since rulers and heads of families are in fact mostly male as, Hobbes says, is attested by the common experience of history and nations, one can rightly believe that males end up obtaining parental dominion precisely because, going against the ninth natural law, they do not recognize the "*other as their equal by nature*," and thus reserve to themselves rights that they are "*not content should be reserved to every one of the rest*"⁶⁸ (in this case women). My hypothesis is that males mostly tend to succumb to the sins of pride and arrogance. Furthermore, if, for political reasons, the sovereign aims to create, by education, courageous and more competitive men, males might be driven to more arrogant behaviours.⁶⁹ I see that I am risking a logical circle.⁷⁰ From the actual effect, witnessed by a wide experience of human history, namely the prevailing of males in becoming heads of family, I have inferred the cause, i.e., that most males tend to be vainglorious and do not acknowledge natural equality, and vice versa. In reality, the two sides of the process support and involve each other, as often happens in actual history.

⁶⁸ *Leviathan*, p. 234 [77].

⁶⁹ I owe this particular remark on the importance of education to Eva Odzuck.

⁷⁰ Note that there is circularity also about contracts for dominion over children (as remarked by Hirschmann, "Hobbes on the Family," 252) and, more generally, about the covenant in the state of nature. This covenant would require a sovereign to enforce, but a sovereign is not in place when the covenant is stipulated: see Gregory Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 137–140.

The problem with this kind of hypothesis is, first, textual, since Hobbes never explicitly says that women are by nature less prideful and less vainglorious than men. Yet, this objection can be met by considering two things that confirm the hypothesis: the former, that alternative explanations have been ruled out above. The many competing explanations of female subordination have proved to be partial, defective, and not fully satisfying, as criticisms of their proponents have demonstrated. The latter thing to be considered is that the hypothetical explanation I have advanced fits well with the whole structure of Hobbes's conception concerning family and gender relations, including its paradoxical result of *de facto* female subordination.

7 Why Women Tend to be More Moderate? For "society's sake"

Thus, my argument comes down to the claim that in small-scale conflicts, like those that precede the structuration of familial authority in the Commonwealth, males tend to be vainglorious and to deny natural equality while females, being more "moderate," end up by accepting subordination; they take for real the boasted superiority, or accept it, and therefore yield to the protection afforded by males. There is no such explicit claim in Hobbes's work, but the conclusion can be derived by consequence from the logic of *Leviathan*. The combination of the gendering (at this small scale) of the divide between moderates and vainglorious with the dynamic of the dominion by acquisition, which is also despotic, tends to this outcome. Yet, there is another open question, which is raised by the previous argument. If it is true that moderates, because of their peculiar temper, are more liable to surrender to the vainglorious, and if it appears that women are in general more moderate than males, which is attested by the fact that they are mostly subjugated by the latter, why are women supposed, in this argument, to be moderate rather than vainglorious?

In *De cive* Hobbes reviews four ways in which parental dominion passes from the mother to the father.⁷¹ For the purpose of my argument I shall focus on the fourth way: "if a woman for societie sake give her selfe to a man on this condition, that *he* shall bear the sway."⁷² The first part of the phrase "for

⁷¹ *De Cive* 9.4-5, pp. 165-166.

⁷² *De Cive* 9.5, pp. 165-166 (trans. *English Version*, p. 123): "Quarto, si mulier viro se tradiderit in

societie sake" (*"in vitae societatem"*) is the most interesting and I think it is worth considering separately. Subjection is accepted by women in view of the advantages of "society," and not only as a result of an impending threat, be it real or boasted, exerted by arrogant males. It is typical of the "moderate" to appreciate the long-term benefits of cooperation more than the short-term advantage that can be obtained by trying to overpower the others. Yielding the parental right that at first belonged to mothers is a way to achieve the longer-term advantages of a peaceful coexistence inside the family instead of a risky and short-term chance of defeating the male.⁷³ One must also bear in mind that all this takes place in the state of nature. In such a state, there is another consequence of moderation: that whoever is ready to recognize equality and reciprocity ends up becoming subject to the vainglorious who for that reason do not fulfill their commitments. This explains that males "bear the sway."

Once it is applied to gender relations this conflict between moderates and the vainglorious can shed new light on the puzzle with which I started: how one of the earliest and most consistent political theories based on equality, that in addition claimed an original mother-right, results in taking female subordination for granted in most families, with very few exceptions (Amazons), at least as a matter of fact. Using all the textual evidence and rearranging some of it in a different way, I hope to have found out a response to the puzzle, taking into account both formal and factual arguments of Hobbes.

An objection can still be raised. After all, applying Hobbes's main ideas and following the logic of *Leviathan*, I have construed an explanation for the basic tenets of the original argument (equality as a principle, early matriarchy, the major divide between moderates and the vainglorious, the simultaneously despotic and contractarian nature of dominion by acquisition) and some paradoxical but factual outcomes (end of matriarchy, inauguration of *de facto* gender inequality, and in the end the establishment of patriarchy). However, a clear and explicit statement that women tend in general to be moderate and therefore to yield to arrogant males, or that

vitae societatem, eâ lege vt imperium apud *virum* sit, qui nascitur ex ambobus, *patris* est, propter imperium in *matrem*."

⁷³ This consideration for "society's sake" has been framed by Hirschmann in the category of "love" and "conjugal affection" ("Hobbes on the Family," 255). I emphasize, by contrast, that besides being a private and familial affection, this care for "society's sake" has the primary goal of ensuring and so grounding the very first beginnings of civil association.

moderation is more common amongst women than men, cannot be found as such in Hobbes's work, even if the argument I have construed rests on his theoretical and political principles. What corroborates, in my opinion, the whole reconstruction is that its foundation lies at the important junction between psychology and politics. The distinction moderate/vainglorious plays on both levels, psychological and political, in accordance with the novelty of Hobbes's theory that consists in building a new kind of handbook of politics (as *Leviathan* was meant to be) based on the "science of man," and not on the techniques of power, like Machiavelli, or on the idea of prudence, as Lipsius, or on the classification of the forms of government, like Bodin. Founding politics on philosophical anthropology paved the way to gendering its treatment, and it is not by chance that we can find in Hobbes's works so many, significant, and original subjects concerning gender relations.⁷⁴

8 Conclusion: The Interplay between Power, Psychology, and Ideology

The peculiar interplay between power, psychology or anthropology, with its basic divide between the two fundamental kinds of temper and their respective "interests," amounts to what the so-called "masters of suspicion" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries portrayed as "ideology." Of course, Hobbes never used this word, even if he was able to study and unmask "ideological" means of dominion, especially at the intersection between politics and religion, as in in the fourth part of *Leviathan*. "Ideology" proves to be fruitful especially when one has to conceal truth, even to oneself, or to avoid the consequences of it, or to cover inconsistencies. As a matter of fact, Hobbes proved to be unable to maintain the promises of his egalitarian principles, especially when it came to gender relations. One can think, with some authoritative scholars, that he tried to "cover" with the ideology of

⁷⁴ Even if moderation is revealed to be more common among women, it is important to stress the fact that according to Hobbes, every difference of "wit" and by extension of temper is "acquired" and not entirely natural, since the difference of passions, from which diverse wits derive, proceed "partly from the different Constitution of the body, and partly from different Education" (*Leviathan* p. 110 [35]). We must thus suppose that female moderation is the result both of natural events, such as pregnancy and motherhood, on the one hand, and on the other of the acquired familiarity with the offspring. I thank Eva Odzuck for having attracted my attention to this chapter of *Leviathan* in this connection.



contract the impasse into which he ran by taking female subordination for granted *de facto*, contrary to his conceptions of human equality, in all of its various meanings. Nevertheless, Hobbes was too honest and, also, too radical to simply hide the mechanisms of subordination that stay behind the contract. The “ideology” of contract is applied by him and by the same token unveiled. On the one hand, he is driven by the force of his principles to affirm the full equality of rights between genders and to explain any relation of subordination uniquely through the institution of contract, with its requirement of equality between the covenanters. On the other hand, even while the transfer of power from the mother to the father is validated by some form of contract (if anything, an implicit one), Hobbes is so honest as to frame it into the category of “acquisition,” with all the similarities between “parental” dominion (that so becomes “paternal”) and “despotic dominion.” One can appreciate both sides of Hobbes argument and recognize that his theory affords the means to analyze and disassemble the mechanisms through which equality has been progressively transformed into subordination. Both his ability and honesty in first deconstructing and then reconstructing the dynamic of gender relations are to be considered among the most prominent traits of his “radicalism,” in the literal sense of the word: to go in depth, straight to the “roots” of the problem, without concealing the bare reality that stays behind the formal clauses of the contract.

After an accurate review of the feminist interpretations of Hobbes’s political theories, Eva Odzuck has written that the English philosopher is “an indispensable conversation partner for the self-reflection of liberal societies,” and that “Hobbes scholars might also help to stimulate feminism to leave standpoint epistemology and to look for alternative conceptions of nature and politics.”⁷⁵ As a matter of fact, in Hobbes’s theory the “dark” side (subordination) and the “bright” one (equality) go together and to look for a reconciliation the reader must go *with* Hobbes, yet also *beyond* him. For a philosopher to go as *far* as to lead his readers to go even *farther* is not of little worth.

⁷⁵ Eva Odzuck, “Not a Women-Hater,’ ‘No Rapist,’ or Even Inventor of the ‘Sensitive Male’? Feminist Interpretations of Hobbes’s Political Theory and Their Relevance for Hobbes Studies,” in *Interpreting Hobbes’s Political Philosophy*, ed. S.A. Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 241.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Alexandra Chadwick and Eva Odzuck for their careful reading of my paper and the helpful comments and suggestions that contributed much to its improvement. A previous version of this article was presented at the workshop organised at Copenhagen University by Sabrina Ebbersmeyer on "Women and Radical Thought in Early Modern Period" (November 22-23, 2018) and I benefited much from the comments of the participants. 