

## Liberty and Contingency – Living with Metaphors

When Thomas Hobbes' sought to secure a politics of liberty for the commonwealth without a theological concept of the Common Good he knew that self-interested or subject-centred liberties distracted from the possibility of agreeing upon what a Common Good could be.

Here we see Hobbes reject the concept of liberty as something that is beamed down from a transcendental and absolute law, instead it is understood as something we must organize ourselves. At the same time we see him trying to cope with this responsibility to organize our own freedom in the face of what he sees to be a multitude of liberties that spell lawlessness, confusion and danger.

One of the things I will look at today is a contradiction in Hobbes early theory, that is, how Hobbes's opposition to individuated languages and his preference for rationalism is conflated in his mythologico-political beast, the Leviathan. This irony is something that Hobbes would also draw attention to in later work, but for now, this point of contradiction can allow us to formulate how the individuated rhetorical work of re-describing the political sphere is not in opposition to law, nor does it leave the political field in chaos, but rather it allows us to see how it makes law.

This relationship between what is a subjective language and the common languages that form politics, is something that becomes central to Hobbes's thinking and ours if we are to debate the conditions upon which we secure our liberty, for it is here where it is possible to put forward an understanding of liberty as something that is not grounded upon the absolutes of *law or lawlessness*. To take this further I will examine a paradox that arises from Hobbes's liberty metaphor. The paradox is this: the Leviathan can be understood as both *real and representational* at the same time: a metaphor

of liberty that both *demonstrates and represents* the collective consciousness of the political. So here we encounter two issues that are as much aesthetic as political: First, rather than seeing the law in metaphysical terms, where law is above freedom, now we see that law and freedom share the same territory. And second; we can identify liberty as *both a fiction and a public or common language*. It is these relations that I want to focus on today by looking towards the operations of art in contemporary culture. In particular, I want to think about our contingency with the liberty metaphor and the notion of liberty as a metaphor for contingency.

In his book *Leviathan* Hobbes writes:

“All our affections are but conceptions; when we conceive the same things differently, we can hardly avoid different naming of them [...] For one man calleth Wisdome, what another calleth feare; and one cruelty what another justice, one prodigality, what another magnamity; and one gravity what another stupidity”.

This state of free interpretation or rhetorical redescription was for Hobbes a dangerous plurality, implicitly connected to the problem of individual self-interest. If left unconstrained by organisational or rationalist powers, it would leave Man “in the condition of meer Nature,” which is “a condition of War.” It’s here where we can see that Hobbes’ desire to eliminate subjective languages underpinned his political theory, that had at the outset, the extinction of pluralism and thus of radical individualism in its sights.

By understanding this ground of interpretation and subjectivity to be both violent and insecure, Hobbes’ solution is Covenant; a contract where subjects give up their freedom in the political realm, for peace and a better life; the protection and security of the state. This is a pre-moral contract to which there are no signatories and no paper. Hobbes writes: “So - we must divest ourselves of liberty - as an agreement has to be communal for laying down of ones Rights.”

Hobbes understands that this theorising of community is not enough, he knows this Covenant to be “artificiall”, so to win assent, he has to takes this further. In other words, he recognises that such a Covenant requires a higher binding law by which to achieve the consensus he needs. It is here that he introduces his super-metaphor – the Leviathan – a *theory and practice* that makes manifest Hobbes’ expression of the body politic.

This metaphor is a clear symptom of Hobbes' fear of a non-rationalist politics. It is within this fear that we are able to see the degree to which he took the powers of individual will and the rhetorical arts seriously - as tools for political agency – in this ardent fight against them. (*Hobbes doth protest too much!*) Therefore, it is in retaliation to problems of rhetorical redescription that Hobbes invokes a more substantial metaphor- a metaphor of a free state, a metaphor that expresses the contingency of the subjects with the commonwealth and freedom. In doing so, Hobbes mediates his fear of perpetual war as self-interest in a metaphor that constrains; it constrains the civilis as well as himself. The beast, Leviathan, is Hobbes' dream; his literary invention; - a strange mix of hyper rationalism and epic drama and also a figure that collides liberalism and republicanism.

Hobbes's metaphor of Leviathan deliberately effaces the distinction between the needs of the subject and the state, or what is private interest and what is civic duty, precisely when the state becomes a subject. And by being a subject, this body-politic also effects the arts of rhetorical redescription and has to either convince and/or coerce others to agreement.

*So this metaphor has to do a lot of work*

Taking this further, we can now acknowledge that rhetorical redescription is not anathema to collectivity, but key to it, and it's with this in mind that we can begin to think through how the liberty metaphor operates in contemporary culture. In other words, what we can take from Hobbes is that interpretative practices are key to asserting normative power in their singularity rather than something that directly stands in opposition to a concept of collectivity. In this way, these interpretative practices that although singular and individualistic compose and assert the norms that binds and expresses the collective communal body.

As we know, this inability to separate subject and state interest is as present as much in contemporary liberal narratives of liberty as it is in Hobbes' republicanist contract theory. It is only in the fiction, or the metaphor that we recognise that the general will is contingent to the subject, or vice versa. For example, in Season One of *24*; Jack Bauer's private interest - the kidnapping of his daughter coincides with his job; his responsibility to protect and secure the freedom of the nation. What's so exciting is that Bauer perfects a mechanistic ambivalence to his immediate civic responsibilities; he gets to tase his boss. But ultimately his rules, and his law, and what could be seen as his personal revenge are understood as the inscription of an ultimate and true justice: a higher sovereign law that he is equivalent to. His actions play out a *deeper* democracy where the interests of the individual are co-extensive with the well-being of the state. Bauer doesn't rationalise, strategise or organise his freedom, instead he lives out the liberalist ethic of "not to be governed so much" with an ambivalence to moral codes, and an overturning of judicial protocol that is read as inevitable to his agency. When Bauer resolves his private life the US will also be free from oppression. Any tension between personal and civic duty is either co-opted back into state interests or is evacuated from the political field altogether.

Here, in both *24* and with the leviathan metaphor, we are able to identify the individuated subjectivity as "free with" and "free as" rather than "free from" the normative or institutional powers of government and the collective community. Neo-liberalism's concern for the individual and a classical republicanist concern for the state over the citizens are made less distinct. In Hobbes the law of leviathan embodies the commonwealth and for Bauer, he embodies universal law.

In both narratives the metaphor of the subject as the body politic allows us the fantasy of understanding our relationship to the collective. These fictions allow us to theorise the limits and conditions of freedom, as if we are outside of its grasp, in as much as they allow us to see, the coincidence between the subject and a higher law in a representational and real political world.

In this way, these representations of contingency construct a freedom from it – a place to hold into view the disconnect and clash of singular and normative powers – to see the contradiction that constitutes liberty. However, they are also attractive, where in a mixture of pleasure and force they also offer an experience of contingency. In this way, we could say that these images of freedom produce an experience of contingency; but they don't allow us to hold our private interests or our public interests in view at the same time in the sense that, in our lives, we can then understand these relations in absolutist terms and then go and act upon them. Given this, we have to think about how these representations understood as self-interested images and scenes of liberty operate. This is key to examining how and in what way these fictions of the political remain central to it.

Machiavelli tells us that the best means of securing the freedom to pursue our own interests – which is to be less governed - is to secure a democratic state. Here we see that in democracy, the relationship between state and individual interests are correlative, but to secure this state and to create the conditions for our own freedom we are asked to somehow understand the structure of this connectivity. In particular we are to understand that we legislate our freedom; and the state manifests the conditions of self-interest. The metaphors of liberty that I have talked about today demonstrate our inability to comprehensively determine our interiority or exteriority from the democratic state.

The reason we cannot make clear and categorical distinctions between the common good and our individual well-being is because *it is our interests* that produce these universals.

The way the subject universalises, reminds me of the misconceived and over-use of terms like, ‘the general public’, itself a non-substantive term that can mean anything you like, (and is often used in art galleries). This is an abstract term we don’t assume responsibility for, but, it’s still called upon when someone wants to convince us that we are wrong and they are right. *Your abstract beats my particular*. Now understanding these abstractions to be the property and responsibility of the speaker we can begin to see that in the same way the liberty metaphor operates as constraint. This is not to say that liberty and constraint are two sides of the same coin, or even that constraint is the bad conscience of liberty; rather *the operation of liberty is constraint*.

Michel Foucault in “The Birth of Biopolitics” states that his concern in the essay is to analyze liberalism as a practice rather than something that represents itself, and this is because he is interested in the practice of power in the “ways of doing”. But here I have tried to show that the way society represents itself is not distanced from a *technology* of governance. Instead if we are to think about these narratives and images of power and freedom in a non-representationalist sense (that is without forcing distinctions between the real and the representational), we are directed to the rationalising and desiring power of organisational systems that in their processes allow us to understand liberty as an active image that not only describes our freedom but also secures it.

Looking back at Hobbes, it's quite easy to see that the practice of rhetorical redescription is the living out of our disagreements and thus the enabler of democratic practices. Of course, this was the exact thing that Hobbes feared most – rhetorical persuasion as “perpetual war”. This is the fear that individualism is championed over and above the Common Good, or a concept of law, community and social justice.

These same anxieties are the anxieties over equality that seem predestined to art practice. This is a theory that the individuated nature of art practice is somehow not political, or even antithetical to the *freedom of communities*. Here we see that wrapped up within the ethics of such practices are the problems of *social engagement, that an artwork's facility is to be the social glue for community and politics*. However, at the same time, we also know that artistic practice places a high value on the sentiment of dissent or differentiation from the norm; something central to the liberalist ethos of critique as a means to securing *individual freedom*.

Both these notions of individualism and equality are hinged upon a correspondence theory, where the artwork is key to social change. Here artistic practice is given the task of securing and producing the criteria for liberty whilst somehow avoiding those universals that are immanent to it. This is the hope that art can generate and produce *freedom from* languages of dominance and oppression through understanding and realising a set of distinct relations between the subject, the community and the state.



Already, we can see the contradictions in such a position. These become more stark when we examine some recent tendencies in art practice. For example, art often actively expresses its passivity in relation to the political, this is the fantasy of *the real*; that art knows its limits - resulting in the artwork as an open apology, or a confession, or the artwork as nihilistic self-degradation; the evidence of its acknowledgment of an inherent 'lack'. Alternatively, when art understands itself to be of direct consequence to the political, artworks result in trivialising themselves and politics, by becoming an indistinct or often unhelpful and supplemental part of the social fabric. Both these positions establish art as and within the ethical space of *the real*, retracting from the political sphere and reinforcing the status quo. We can articulate these problem because, as we have seen, the passive, compliant or organic body, a body that knows its limits, required for Hobbes's contract theory is as much a myth as the lawless freedom of the singularised cultured body set out in our neo- liberalist metaphor.

What's interesting about both *the Leviathan* and *24* is the force and appeal of metaphors that express our contingency and the question of if and how art operates within the very same jurisdiction; within the nuances of representation and demonstration that position liberty as embodied within practice rather than something we can find if we either work hard enough, or reject by putting down tools. This finally opens up the question of how and in what ways the liberty metaphor is practiced in a non-representational sense or the way a fiction assumes it place within the political. This is an aesthetic question as much as a political question and denies us the simplicity of assuming that liberty is something we recognise.

By understanding our activities as forming and practicing government, we can now begin to think through the type of constraint, or in other words, the types of new consensus on liberty that our politics produces. It is here that we can decide not only whether or not these politics are liberal, but perhaps more importantly, whether these aesthetic and political narratives express our contingency, or not.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 31

Ibid., 111 Hobbes also writes on this “natural” state of war in *On the Citizen*, [ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, 1998], “It cannot be denied that men’s natural state, before they came together into society, was War; and not simply war, but a war of every man against every man. For what else is WAR but that time in which the will to contend by force is made sufficiently known by words or actions? All other time is called PEACE.” 29-30

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 92

Stanley Fish in ..... discusses Hobbes theory of fear as self love. He then moves to understand this universalising tendency as self constraint; a self-policing self government.

Taking this metaphor as our cue, Hobbes’ liberalism becomes manifest more so at the end of *Leviathan* where he admits that self-interest not only could not be separated from moral and political languages, but is central to them. In this way, the rhetorical arts and with them, self-interest are re-inscribed back into the political realm and we see this in his ideas on mastery, eloquence and self invention. Hobbes writes for example, “What I found pleasing about Thucydides beyond all other historians was the fact that he demonstrated how inept democracy is, and how much wiser is the rule of a single man than that of a multitude.”

Michel Foucault, “The Birth of Biopolitics”, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One*, (Ed.) Paul Rabinow Trans. Robert Hurley et al, Penguin, 1994, 73