
KICKING AND SCREAMING ALL THE WAY TO THE GALLOWS

Susanne Sreedhar: *Hobbes on Resistance: Defying the Leviathan*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. 183. \$85.00.)

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In *Hobbes on Resistance: Defying the Leviathan*, Susanne Sreedhar aims to show that “Hobbes’s political philosophy exhibits a unity and coherence that has heretofore been unrecognized” when it comes to his theory of resisting sovereign authority (90). She accomplishes this aim by piecing together the occasional remarks Hobbes makes about this subject and deriving a theoretical framework from them. Her main target in making this argument is those scholars who claim that the fear of death is impossible to overcome in Hobbes’s system, and that the Leviathan therefore rests on a simple mechanism of overwhelming coercive power on the sovereign’s side and fearful ineluctable obedience on the part of subjects. By bringing together all of the instances in which Hobbes clearly states that individuals do in fact resist the fear of death, and would, for example, rather die than submit to dishonor, Sreedhar does a good job of debunking this surprisingly resilient caricature.

According to what Sreedhar calls the standard interpretation, the subject is only justified in resisting the sovereign when he or she is clearly threatened with imminent death by the agents of the state because it is impossible to overcome the fear of death. For Sreedhar, though, rather than the fear of death exercising absolute compulsion, “The key premise is that *it is unreasonable to expect people to overcome such a powerful human urge*” (37). Her thesis is that the right of resistance “is not retained because death is the worst evil or because it imposes a demand that is psychologically impossible to fulfill. Rather the right is retained in the commonwealth, first, because there is no assurance that all parties would fulfill a promise to resist death; second, because such a promise would undermine the purpose of the social contract; and third because the Hobbesian commonwealth does not require such a promise” (51).

In the first half of the book, Sreedhar spells out what she takes to be Hobbes’s “theory of resistance rights,” which not only includes the aforementioned right to resist the sovereign’s attempts to kill the subject, but also extends to Hobbes’s more difficult to interpret statements about the right to resist wounds, the deprivation of the means of one’s livelihood, and the right not to testify against one’s spouse or anyone else whose loss would embitter one’s life (2). In the second half of the book she argues that this theory of resistance rights “is not only *compatible with* his justification for absolute sovereignty, but, in fact, *required by* that justification” (3–4). Sreedhar elaborates this theory of resistance rights with the full awareness that it is not something Hobbes himself ever sets out in any systematic way. Because of this, and because of the paucity of Hobbes’s statements

about the right to resist, Sreedhar borrows freely from Joseph Raz's theory of authority in order to bolster Hobbes's theory, arguing that this right is best seen as a "nonexcludable first-order reason for action," in Raz's terms (90).

Sreedhar devotes a substantial part of her book to bringing this theoretical framework to bear against Jean Hampton's attack on an apparent incoherence in Hobbes's thought. According to Hampton, Hobbes blatantly contradicts himself when he demands that subjects give up their right of judgment to the sovereign while simultaneously allowing subjects to retain their judgment regarding when they are in danger or when their interests are threatened. For Hampton this is a fatal flaw in Hobbes's theory of absolutism. But Hampton's objection rests on a simple misreading. Hobbes states that subjects must "submit ... their Judgements, to his Judgement" (*Leviathan*, chap. 17). Submitting one's judgment, though, does not mean surrendering one's faculty of judgment altogether, as Hampton seems to suggest, but acquiescing to the sovereign's judgment in all cases except those in which one's life or interests are directly threatened. For Hobbes, "the last Opinion in search of truth of Past, and Future, is called the JUDGEMENT," and from what he says about man's use of judgment in various aspects of life in chapters 7 and 8 of *Leviathan* and elsewhere, the notion that Hobbes thought man could give up his judgment as Hampton suggests is untenable (*Leviathan*, chap. 7). That this is Hobbes's position becomes clearer from his discussion of counselors, whom he states the sovereign will need: "he that hath the most experience in that particular kind of businesse, has therein the best Judgement, and is the best Counsellour" (*Leviathan*, chap. 25).

Given that Hampton's objection has so little grounding in Hobbes's text, it does not seem worthwhile for Sreedhar to spend so long rebutting her position. Indeed, she seems to be stating the obvious when she concludes that "if the sovereign issues a life-threatening command, according to Hobbes, the subject is justified in disobeying. The subject must retain the right to private judgment in such cases since it is up to the subject to *judge* whether her life is in danger" (118). Sreedhar is exactly right when she states that "for Hobbes, the private judgments that are problematic and potentially destabilizing in civil society are not preservation-related; rather they are *moral, ideological, and religious*" (127) (a point also made by Bryan Garsten in *Saving Persuasion*), but she seems to have taken an unnecessarily circuitous route to arrive there.

Sreedhar never delves very deeply into the reasons why, for Hobbes, these are the issues over which the sovereign must retain absolute judgment, nor into the connection between these and man's concern for self-preservation. She never explores why it is that individuals would be willing to die for their country or for honor or why they would disobey the state in order to gain admission to heaven, although these are clearly the human drives that most concern Hobbes and that pose some of the greatest obstacles to his political system. In the absence of such an analysis, Sreedhar's conclusions seem to abstract from what, for Hobbes, are the central issues.

She makes a similarly strained argument against those who believe that rebellion can never occur under the Leviathan. She correctly points out the error of those scholars who believe that the Hobbesian sovereign can do anything he likes without ever fearing a rebellion. She recognizes that if the sovereign mistreats his subjects, at a certain point they are likely to rise up against him. In order to fit Hobbes's statements to this effect into her theoretical framework, Sreedhar makes a distinction between "ideological rebellion," which is not allowed, and "rebellion from necessity," which is (143). She uses this distinction to argue that Hobbes would, very graciously, have made an allowance for necessity in the case of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: "It is clear that the residents of the Warsaw Ghetto did not lead secure lives. Indeed, their lives were likely worse than they would have been in Hobbes's state of nature, where at least they would have been on a more equal footing with their attackers. Given this insecurity, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising can be justified on Hobbesian principles" (144). This conclusion rests on what Sreedhar calls the "'no obligation without security' principle" (137).

Leaving aside whether this new term had to be coined given that Hobbes himself says that the aim of *Leviathan* was to "set before mens eyes the mutuall Relation between Protection and Obedience" (Review and Conclusion), we might wonder whether Sreedhar is drawing the best conclusions from Hobbes's statements about rebellion. Sreedhar is right when she notes that "all of the cases of justified disobedience are cases in which the threat of punishment is likely to be ineffectual" (130) and that "Hobbes's solution to the problem of rebellion is best understood as an object lesson for political rulers on how to govern well, such that subjects are not disposed to rebel" (136). But if Hobbes's statements about the right to resist are really only observations about what individuals are very likely to do regardless of whether they have the right to do so or not, and if the aim of *Leviathan* is to warn sovereigns against pushing their subjects too far, then this calls into question Sreedhar's entire approach in recreating a system of resistance rights from Hobbes's sparse statements on this subject.

Sreedhar wants to demonstrate that the right to resist is more than a brute fact, and more than simply the "right to kick and scream on the way to the gallows," to borrow a phrase from James Martel, but something that has real moral worth (27). According to Sreedhar, "Hobbes's intent was to reconcile self-interest and morality, showing that the dictates of morality, rightly understood, were consistent with, and required by, the dictates of self-interest, rightly understood" (51n90). She concludes by suggesting that, in light of Hobbes's wide-ranging rights to resist, "we are not prepared to allow liberties that he was," and that Hobbes should therefore serve as "a mirror in which we may somewhat uncomfortably look upon some of our own (perhaps unjustifiable) illiberal tendencies" (175).

This trajectory of her argument, though, seems not to fit with her conclusion that Hobbes's description of the right to resist was in fact meant

as advice to wise sovereigns. Such a sovereign would understand, as Sreedhar notes, that when Hobbes describes the rights of resistance, he “clearly thinks that these are cases in which disobedience can be systematically expected” (130). Such a sovereign will likely conclude that in order to have a peaceful state he must not only avoid pushing his subjects into rebellion but also maintain a police force powerful enough to render any attempt to resist futile; that is, he must ensure that the right to resist is nothing more than the right to kick and scream all the way to the gallows.

—Christopher McClure

PARADOXES AND AMBIGUITIES

George G. Szpiro: *Numbers Rule: The Vexing Mathematics of Democracy, from Plato to the Present*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. xi, 226. \$26.95.)

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Every year, the faculty of my college elect a vice chair from among the tenured professors serving on the Faculty Council. In most years, we choose from among at least three candidates, and the voting has always been by plurality. That is, the candidate with the most votes wins. This process can result in the selection of a candidate who is the least favorite of the majority of the faculty. For example, in a case with three candidates, if just over a third of the faculty vote for Candidate A, and the remaining are split evenly between B and C but would all rank A last, A will win, leaving almost two thirds of the faculty with their third choice as vice chair.

Every year after the election, one of my mathematics colleagues fantasizes about trying to persuade the faculty to adopt an alternative to the plurality system, but he always concludes that too many of them will be suspicious of something unfamiliar or intimidated by anything more mathematically complicated than simple majority rule. What he needs is a concise, straight-forward account of the alternatives that outlines their strengths and weaknesses and provides some historical context for their use. After reading such an account, his colleagues might be willing to consider a new way of voting.

George G. Szpiro offers *Numbers Rule* as just such an account. For a general audience, Szpiro sets out to explain the standard alternatives to plurality voting, as well as the problems inherent in allocating seats in a parliament. He aims to provide “an elucidation and a historical account of the