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By JEFFREY COLLINS

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes is now a good deal more popular than he once was. When his "Leviathan" appeared in 1651 it was denounced everywhere. England's King's Charles II, a believer in the divine right of kings, disliked its coolly rational account of sovereignty. The Church of England loathed its attacks on Christian orthodoxy. Hobbes later claimed that agents of the king tried to assassinate him and bishops of the church to burn him alive. If they tried, they failed, but during his lifetime "Leviathan" was banned in England and across Europe. Upon his passing in 1679, Hobbes was known (after his birthplace) as the "Monster of Malmesbury."

But today "Leviathan" is considered one of the greatest works of political theory ever written. It is a standard text in college courses, mercifully replacing the slumping Marx. The very title of Hobbes's masterpiece has become a byword for the modern state. In bookstores we encounter titles such as "The American Leviathan," "The Islamic Leviathan" and even "The Obama Leviathan." Those seeking the genuine article can sample Hobbes's own "Leviathan" in at least 10 paperback editions.

This latest version—edited by Ian Shapiro and accompanied by commentaries from scholars writing for a general audience—appears in Yale University Press's "Rethinking the Western Tradition" series. There is some irony in this. Among Hobbes's more immodest habits (he had few that were otherwise) was his presentation of himself as history's first political scientist. Contemporary to both Galileo and Newton, Hobbes boasted that he had applied the iron logic of the Scientific Revolution to the hitherto soft subject of human politics. He scorned the "traditions" of Western thought and dismissed predecessors such as Aristotle and Aquinas as insipid moralists. Being immortalized by Yale alongside John Ruskin, Cardinal Newman and other luminaries of the "Western tradition" is not exactly what he had in mind.

No matter. If he failed to render politics a perfect science, Hobbes nevertheless earned his place in the canon. "Leviathan" is an ingenious account of the modern state and its intellectual foundations. Hobbes composed the book during the English Civil War of the mid-17th century, when armies clashed over the limits of monarchical power, the prerogatives of Parliament and the rights of subjects. Most debate during this ruinous age was conducted in a historical idiom, as an effort to commandeer the traditions of English law (or the Bible) for rival points of view.

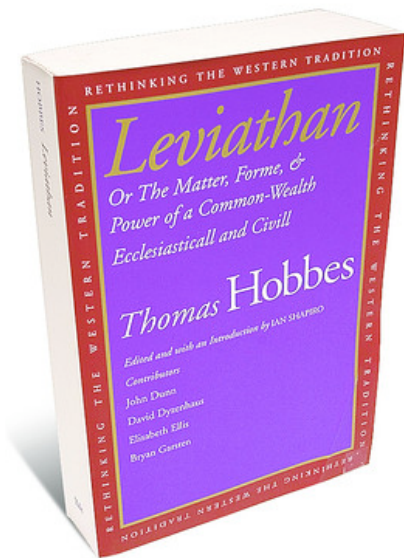
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Leviathan

By Thomas Hobbes, edited by Ian Shapiro
Yale, 583 pages, \$16

in a society unified by a single, absolute will. There was no third way.

Much of this is well-known. The question is why Hobbes's account has enjoyed such popularity in recent decades. The likes of John Locke and James Madison long ago demonstrated the limits of Hobbes's raw statism. But many thinkers and political actors, lately, seem to prefer Hobbes's vision of society to theirs. Why should this be so?

One might point to several reasons. Hobbes's snide irreligion, once the main complaint against him, may now commend him to those who perpetually fear the supposed return of theocracy. His tendency to portray humans as appetitive beasts flatters our present eagerness to explain every aspect of human conduct in biological terms. Hobbes was also acutely suspicious of democracy. He considered it a breeder of faction. When pundits such as Thomas Friedman decry "broken government" and fawn over China's "enlightened" response to global warming, one wonders if the Hobbesian within the liberal breast is stirring.

Yale's edition of "Leviathan" lacks a biography of Hobbes and an account of his times, but it does include four interpretive essays exploring some of the fraught areas of Hobbes's writing, and there are a lot of those. Hobbes often felt the need to veil his meanings. "A wise man should so write," he remarked, such that "wise men only should be able to commend him."

Mr. Shapiro has done well here and found some shrewd commentators. David Dyzenhaus's essay intelligently contests the common claim that "Leviathan" deployed the language of natural law as a mere rhetorical ploy; by Mr. Dyzenhaus's lights, Hobbes did indeed believe that some dictates of ethical reasoning constrained naked statecraft. Elisabeth Ellis adroitly surveys Hobbes's modern reception among everyone from socialists to game theorists. Bryan Garsten, writing on the religion of "Leviathan," shows the importance of anti-clericalism to Hobbes's project and its influence. In his own essay about Hobbes's contempt for democratic deliberation, John Dunn writes that "Leviathan" has made "very deep inroads" into the modern mind. Mr. Dunn correctly observes that Hobbes often seems "our philosophical contemporary." What we make of his company is its own question.

Mr. Collins, a professor of history at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, is the author of "The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes."

Hobbes would have none of this. He "scientifically" attacked Aristotle's venerable claim that men are naturally sociable. He rejected all presumed natural hierarchies, which ranked humans according to nobility, sex, race or religion. Instead, he portrayed men as equal rivals in a state of nature, which he characterized as a "war of all against all."

Hobbes's contemporaries understood politics as something descended from the ages or the heavens, but Hobbes built politics from the ground up. Self-interested individuals, craving protection for their lives, contracted to create sovereign states. Sovereigns (preferably monarchs) provided this service, but the price was unfettered power and unqualified obedience. Once sheltered under sovereignty, subjects enjoyed only the right to life. They could neither demand the return of their surrendered rights nor expect to share in the exercise of power. Hobbes thus acknowledged equality, rights and individual interest but sacrificed all of these on the altar of political order. To Hobbes, men live either in an anarchic hell of equal misery or

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