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Feminist Perspectives on Hobbes

Introduction

Feminist approaches to the history of political thought have expanded our understanding of Hobbes's political theory from two main directions: first, they have sought to explain why women in his theory move from a position of natural equality—and indeed, in sharp contrast to patriarchal accounts, a position in which they possess right over their children—to one of subordination to men. Second, feminist perspectives have expanded the range of issues which are considered subjects for “political” theory, and hence on which we might look to Hobbes for insight. The first two papers in this issue fall into the first category; the third focuses on an issue that feminism has helped us acknowledge is a political issue: sexual morality. Yet all deal with questions of fundamental importance to interpreting Hobbes's thought. For example, how should we interpret his idea of “equality”? How should we understand the “state of nature”? What is the relationship between conquest and consent? What moral imperatives exist before the establishment of positive law?

The contribution of feminism to the history of political thought has in many respects been so successful that few readers would now dispute the significance of the topics discussed. But recent interest does not counterbalance years of neglect.¹ Almost a decade after the “first collection of essays dedicated exclusively to feminist interpretation of Hobbes” by Nancy J. Hirschmann and Joanne H. Wright,² this special issue is based on the premise that the topic still deserves more attention. It is thus intended to continue to stimulate important strands of thinking about Hobbes's philosophy.³

The issue assembles papers from three scholars who bring in their approaches to Hobbes's work expertise in political philosophy and the history of

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- 1 For an overview of feminist interpretations of Hobbes's political theory, see 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), 223–241.
 - 2 *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Nancy J. Hirschmann and Joanne H. Wright (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 5.
 - 3 Two of our three papers were written by scholars who were featured in Hirschmann and Wright's volume, thus their papers here illustrate the development of their perspectives.

European political ideas. It is our hope that the emerging picture of Hobbes—focused through the lens of feminism—will be relevant for readers of *Hobbes Studies* from different fields.

Hobbes is known for the rigour and meticulousness of his philosophical argument, and he was certainly not unwilling to embrace opinions that were unpopular or shocking in his time when they appeared to him consequences of his premises. Apparent inconsistencies in his thought therefore inevitably generate intellectual excitement, as they present a conundrum to solve or a weakness to reveal. As S.A. Lloyd and Gianni Paganini prove in this special issue, the question of how women move from alleged equality to subordination is certainly one such “puzzle.”

Lloyd contends that although, according to Hobbes, men are naturally fitter for actions of labour and danger, with the help of technology this advantage disappears. By distinguishing skill fitness and affective fitness, she considers whether Hobbes’s texts might offer possible explanations for the subordination of women. Lloyd argues that the *cui bono* test unmasks men as employing “religious wiles,” and offers the intriguing hypothesis that it is “sex-linked and gender-linked differences in affective fitness” that most plausibly explain the subjection of women in Hobbes’s theory. In a sense, then, this paper can be seen as a development of Lloyd’s earlier thesis in the Hirschmann and Wright volume, that “nothing in Hobbes’s theory necessitates the subordination of women.”⁴ Her hypothesis about how men might possess a stronger motivation, and thus a stronger affective fitness to gain allies, offers an explanation for why subordination is the rule and not the exception.

Paganini puts the Hobbesian paradox concerning the position of women in Rousseauian terms: women are born free and equal but are subjected to men almost everywhere. After setting out “some of the most striking discrepancies” in Hobbes’s claims about women, and exploring some other proposed solutions to the paradox, he proposes one of his own. Taking a path similar to that opened up by Lloyd, he considers the possibility that the divide between vain-glorious and moderate people is, for Hobbes, a gendered divide, and discusses the merits and pitfalls of this hypothesis. According to Paganini, one explanation for the puzzling mixture of subordination and equality in Hobbes’s thought can be found in his radicalism: Paganini’s Hobbes was both too honest and too radical to simply hide the mechanisms of subordination that lie behind the contract.

4 S.A. Lloyd, “Power and Sexual Subordination in Hobbes’s Political Theory,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, 58.

Susanne Sreedhar's paper addresses a gap in Hobbes scholarship by considering what Hobbes has to say about sexual morality. She constructs a "largely coherent and consistent position" from Hobbes's "scattered" remarks on the subject, arguing that he was committed to "positivism about sexual norms." Here too the radical nature of Hobbes's position, in the context of his time, is emphasised through comparisons with the views of medieval and early modern philosophers on the moral status of sexual practices. Sreedhar considers the feminist implications of Hobbes's position, arguing that his theory itself is both "promising and problematic" from a feminist perspective. Sreedhar sees "a lot of liberatory potential" in what she calls Hobbes's "de-throned" view of sex. Yet his positivism can also be "deeply worrisome" and even "frightening."

Two reviews of books in keeping with the theme of this issue are also included: a new German edition of Filmer's *Patriarcha* by Peter Schröder (reviewed by Peter Nitschke), and a volume of Margaret Cavendish's *Selected Writings*, edited by David Cunning (reviewed by Laura Georgescu). As Nitschke's review emphasises, Filmer's work, which grounds political right in paternal right, is the "real antipode" to Hobbes's theory. Cavendish's philosophy has not received a great amount of attention from Hobbes scholars, but as Georgescu's review demonstrates, the general neglect of Cavendish—resulting in no small part from the fact she was a woman—is rightly being corrected.

Feminist perspectives cannot only enrich our understanding of Hobbes. The reverse is also true: Hobbes can be a highly relevant dialogue partner for those interested in feminist topics. It is hoped that the papers in this issue will provoke further conversation.

Alexandra Chadwick

University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands
a.a.f.chadwick@rug.nl

Eva Odzuck

Friedrich-Alexander-University, Erlangen-Nuremberg
eva.odzuck@fau.de

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