In 1975 John Plamenatz was due to deliver a series of lectures at the University of Cambridge. Although he had completed and corrected the lectures, he was prevented from presenting them by two strokes, the second of which proved fatal. The eventual publication of these lectures on Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – the best part of forty years after they were originally conceived – is certainly to be welcomed, for it provides us with Plamenatz's most developed thoughts on each of these great thinkers, and, in many cases, reveals that he had considerably revised important aspects of his interpretations since the original publication of his most famous work, *Man and Society*, in 1963.1

There are at least two ways we might be tempted to read Plamenatz's lectures, both of which may be profitably pursued. The first is to read them historically and to seek to understand the changes to Plamenatz's interpretations between his earliest writings on each of these thinkers (some of which predate *Man and Society*) and the early 1970s. This is not only of interest with respect to the development of Plamenatz's own ideas, but, moreover, because it supplies a more general impression of how important scholarly debates on each of the three thinkers developed during this period. As will become apparent, this is a particularly appropriate approach for reading Plamenatz's lectures on Hobbes. However, we might alternatively, or additionally, read the lectures purely for their contribution in helping us to understand both the three thinkers in their own right and the problems with which they were grappling, independently of the historical context of Plamenatz's interpretations. This approach is more in keeping with the spirit of the lectures, since Plamenatz's principal intention was to evaluate the quality of the arguments that each thinker set forth rather than to explore the historical context in which they developed their ideas; an intention that is well brought out by Mark Philp's illuminating introduction, which situates the lectures within the context of Plamenatz's broader approach to the study of past thinkers and indicates why this approach remains of vital importance for how we practise political theory today.

Philp's introduction aside, the book comprises an introductory lecture, five lectures on Machiavelli, five on Hobbes and seven on Rousseau. Given that this review is for *Hobbes Studies* I shall focus predominantly on Plamenatz's reading of Hobbes, but, before doing so, it is worth briefly commenting on by far the lengthiest part of the book, which is supplied by the lectures on Rousseau.2 Indeed, Plamenatz's analysis of Rousseau is arguably the most perceptive and important contribution that the book has to offer. As Philp notes, Rousseau engages Plamenatz in a way that neither Machiavelli nor Hobbes do.3 Whereas his analysis of Hobbes is largely confined to *De cive* and *Leviathan*, Plamenatz draws on an impressively wide range of writings from Rousseau's *œuvre*. Yet his engagement with Rousseau is not
just distinguished by its being more comprehensive than his analysis of either Machiavelli or Hobbes. Rousseau is an especially troubling figure for Plamenatz, less because he is "baffling" – Plamenatz has no intention of trying to render Rousseau's paradoxes coherent – and more because "he condemns our type of society by appealing to values which we share with him and which he was among the first to proclaim." Plamenatz rejects most of Rousseau's political ideas, but this makes the extent to which Rousseau exposed the tensions and contradictions in the values that modern societies purport to hold dear especially unsettling. It becomes all the more important to respond to the problems that Rousseau tackled once his own proposals are viewed as being either unattractive or inapplicable in modern states.

One of the highlights of Plamenatz's analysis of Rousseau is that he tends to ask the right questions. This is particularly evident in his discussion of Rousseau's account of inequality, which benefits from pursuing the helpful insight that we often "get a clue to what a writer most objects to about something he dislikes by looking at the forms of it to which he objects least." This approach leads Plamenatz to focus, quite rightly, on the distancing effect of inequality and the extent to which it undermines the values of community and fraternity, which further helps to explain (but not to justify) why Rousseau was so little concerned with the forms of inequality that exist within close-knit communities like the family. At times Plamenatz is overly dismissive of Rousseau's ideas, especially when discussing his philosophy of mind – "if indeed it deserves to be called a philosophy" – but, more often than not, he captures the importance of the questions that Rousseau addressed. This is not to say that Plamenatz sympathises with many of Rousseau's proposals, and he is adamant that Rousseau was no liberal. Yet Plamenatz's analysis of why some aspects of Rousseau's thought are deeply illiberal is far more nuanced than the criticisms levelled at Rousseau earlier in the twentieth century by those who denounced him as a proto-fascist or -totalitarian. Conversely, the publication of the lectures provides a timely counter-balance to those who have more recently gone too far the other way and argued that many of Rousseau's ideas can easily be updated and integrated into contemporary liberal political philosophy. Plamenatz is refreshingly careful neither to exaggerate nor to dismiss the importance that Rousseau accorded to ideas of patriotism and civic education in sustaining a well-ordered republic, which are difficult to reconcile with the principles at the heart of much contemporary liberal thought.

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