

POLITICAL THEORY

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COMMUNICATIONS

On Glass, "Hobbes and Narcissism: Pathology in the State of Nature"
(Volume 8, No. 3, August 1980)

In the August 1980 issue of *Political Theory*, James Glass attempts to use the modern language of psychology to draw out some implications of Hobbes' understanding of human nature. The effort is well worth the while, and Glass is quite correct to point out the importance of Hobbes' psychology for his theory of politics ("Hobbes took very seriously the issue of 'human nature' and the power of drives in defining and limiting action." p. 377). Psychoanalytic theory, or specifically Freud's understanding of human nature, is particularly useful in understanding the individual which Hobbes portrays in the state of nature. Yet, Glass' argument suffers as he introduces the much more dubious claim that Hobbes mistook "pathological narcissism" for the natural man. Glass recognizes the "speculative dimensions" of his argument, and indeed it is interesting speculation. I would suggest, however, that it fails on several counts.

First, Glass argues that Hobbes' natural man in the state of nature tends to resemble the pathological narcissist that modern psychology postulates (and Glass himself has observed in the wards of the mental hospital). Such a resemblance leads Glass to conclude that Hobbes based his politics not upon man per se, but upon a pathological perversion of man. In this respect, the argument resembles C. B. Macpherson's well-known position regarding the "possessive individualism" upon which Hobbes unwittingly built his politics.

I would suggest that Macpherson is on firmer ground in saying that Hobbes (at least partially) attributed characteristics of bourgeois man to man in the state of nature. Glass' argument is much broader, alleging that Hobbes did not merely mistake the bourgeois for the natural, but that he confused pathology with the natural. The difficulty with Glass' argument is that Hobbes does not describe man as a single type in the state of nature; men are neither uniformly "normal" nor uniformly "pathological."

Hobbes clearly does see some universal characteristics of human nature which are aspects of man's psychology ("appetites," "motion," "desire"). Yet, the *behavior* of men is not uniform, and it is not a universal pathology which leads to the "warre of all against all." Even though Hobbes sees possessive characteristics as fundamental to human psychology, they need not be pathological in their expression, and they need not lead to violence or conflict. Not *all* men are unlimited in their appetites; only *some* men are unrestrained in their desires. However, the logic of the state of nature is such that the need to preserve one's own possessions from the pathological "Invader" is sufficient to force all men into the pathological condition of war. Only the Invader need be genuinely pathological, narcissistic, and violent in his pursuit of his desires in order to provoke a state of war ("there be some, taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires; if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defence, to subsist." Part I, chapter 13). The state of nature makes modest men excessive in their demands. The political institutions of Leviathan are justified, and the whole of Hobbes' politics hinges on the assumption that not all men are naturally and voluntarily violent, but only some men are so. The fear of death leads men to seek protection, and the laws of reason lead to Leviathan. It is precisely the pathological narcissists from whom mankind flees as the leap into political community is made. Men capable of following the laws of reason protect themselves from the aggressive and pathological.

Second, even if it was the case that Hobbes portrays all men in the state of nature as pathological narcissists, it still does not follow that the whole of Hobbesian politics is "pathological." Glass implies that political institutions built upon a conception of man as a pathological narcissist are themselves suspect. Yet, one could easily argue that these institutions are desirable precisely because they repress pathological behavior. In this respect, Leviathan is capable of repressing the violent and excessive desires of man, and hence is therapeutic. Freud himself had a similar view that external authority and internalized conscience are necessary to control distinctly antisocial behavior. These institutions need not be "pathological" themselves, and Hobbes does not imply elaborate institutions of social control. Hobbes was not the theorist of the bureaucratic state, and the state of Leviathan is actually

rather tame in regard to intervening in the normal conduct of life. Modern bureaucratic institutions may drive men to madness; however, Hobbesian political institutions are only intended to drive men to civility

Finally, despite recognizing the potential in comparing Hobbes' understanding of human psychology to Freud's, Glass does not really see how close the two conceptions are. Freud viewed civilization, both culture and politics lumped together, as providing the means for repressing the aggressive and violent drives of the id (natural man). While he is a good deal more gloomy than Hobbes in his assessment of how such repression would threaten mankind's potential for happiness, Freud still comes down clearly in favor of repression as the only means available for civilizing most men. I find Professor Glass' reading of Freud to be distinctly utopian. "The Freudian vision of an autonomous self capable of love and work points toward a theory of individualism premised on respect for the other, a sensitivity to internal needs and feelings, and a healthy skepticism of all forms of authority." Such a picture resembles the world of Fromm, Horney, and Sullivan more than that of Freud himself. Freud portrays human affairs much more often as selfish indulgence or "instinct gratification" than as mutually rewarding relationships.

Professor Glass has seen much of interest in Hobbes' psychology. Yet I do not think he has quite seen how Freudian Hobbes' psychology can be (or should I say, how Hobbesian Freud can be). For Freud and Hobbes, pathological urges are inherent within all men, and the need for strong institutions is based upon the need to repress the excessive "appetite" or id. Yet while pathology is inherent in man, neither Hobbes nor Freud fails to recognize the difference between the pathological and the "normal," and both stress some form of repression as the "cure" for antisocial behavior.

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