

## COMMENTS ON THE HOBBS AND LENIN PAPERS

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I would first of all like to express my thanks to everyone connected with this session for putting it together. It allows me to be with friends again, with former students like the chairman, Professor Gann, and Professor Azariah, and with colleagues like Bill Spencer and Linda Piper in the audience. But I would also like to make it clear that I did not create this session or dream up this juxtaposition. In fact, Hell or an extended version of Purgatory would be reading papers on Hobbes and Lenin; the only thing worse, if I may turn to the comics, would be papers on Calvin and Hobbes. I am a medievalist who teaches Early Modern Europe; so I am quite familiar with the gruesome Mr. Hobbes. My only acquaintance with the loathsome Mr. Lenin is what I share with everyone else in the audience, living through the past fifty years of Stalinism and post-Stalinism, of Reaganism and post-Reaganism. But I accepted this chore and I shall do my best.

I should like to put us under the device of Lord Acton's remark, not the one about the corruption of power, although that would have some pertinence to this session, but his injunction that we should study problems, not periods. Both papers address central problems of our world and the authors deserve our thanks for bringing up the subjects of law and utopia's disillusionment. As historians, we would all agree, on the basis of our own experience as scholars and teachers, that approaching texts like those of Hobbes and Lenin is the only way to grasp the past and understand the shoals we must traverse.

Hobbes had to pay considerable attention to the questions of law, just and unjust, good and bad, because it is the means by which the sovereign curbs his subjects. Professor Azariah has properly focused on this issue: without laws we would all dissolve into a Lebanese festival of self-destruction. The centrality of law and of its acceptance is a corollary (Hobbes would like this geometric allusion) of human viciousness, mastered only by an almighty sovereign, whose word is final in both state and church.

As a medievalist, I find Hobbes's presentation of law sadly deficient, truncated, lopsided. Reading this paper, I kept remembering those classic lines from the *Summa*, where Aquinas magisterially sets forth his understanding of law, divine and human, eternal and temporal, secular and ecclesiastical. In their majestic sweep they have something of the power of Augustine's paragraph on peace in the nineteenth book of the *City of God*. That is no accident because the two themes are quite parallel to each other.

I admit that there is a way in which Hobbes could draw close to Aquinas, through the latter's disciple Giles of Rome or Aegidius Romanus. This Augustinian master managed the seemingly impossible feat of influencing

both Boniface VIII and Philip the Fair through his understanding of law as the expression of the will of the sovereign. The beginnings of absolutism are back there in the early fourteenth century, even before the popes settled into Avignon. But Giles was a Thomist, just as Lenin was a Marxist.

And as a Marxist, Lenin valued history, at least as seen through the lenses of dialectical materialism. professor Klenbort has briefly remarked that Lenin believed that his work was scientific, resting solidly on the scientific achievements of Marx and Engels. Hobbes would have had nothing to do with such a notion; for him history could not be scientific, given its origin, nature, and presentation. The truly awful thing about Lenin is not simply that he was wrong in so many of his ideas, historical, scientific or otherwise, but that he had others attempted to implement these notions. We have seen the more than seventy years of sorrow, misery, wretchedness and delusion that have flowed from this attempt. Today, not only are they tearing down his statues throughout eastern Europe, they are rejecting him and his party as failures, utter failures.

And a good part of the reason for this disastrous course of decades is right there in Professor Klenbort's title, "From Utopia to Nowhere. . ." Thank God no one rushed to implement Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Maybe they did not do so because it was so obviously non-utopian, so "doable" as we would say. (The recent bicentennial of the French Revolution recalls exactly when a form of *Leviathan* first came into being.) Another Saint Thomas will help us here, too. When Thomas More wrote *Utopia*, he had not any anticipation of seeing it realized. He says so at the very end of the book. He meant it as a jest, a *jeu d'esprit*, a reply to the *Praise of Folly*. He had not way of knowing the kind of readers he would encounter and the kind of adulation he would receive among Marxists. And there we have the sad difference between the sixteenth century and the twentieth, between an innocent book and a bloody, failed ideology, full now of fallen walls, broken stars and tumbled statues.

I would like to conclude with a predecessor of both Hobbes and Lenin, Niccolo Machiavelli, who has been the object of considerable interest and research of Professor Azariah over the years. (It may all go back to a paper he did for me in a Renaissance course two decades ago.) In the euphoria of the moment, when a disciple of Allen Bloom can apparently in all seriousness speak of the end of history, we would do well to remember that it is especially when things seem to be going along very well that we should prepare for the opposite. So I have brought us from Hobbes and Lenin to Machiavelli, Bloom and Fukuyama. Sayonara.