



# Max Weber Lecture Series

MWP - LS 2008/05

Fear Reverence Terror  
Reading Hobbes Today

Carlo Ginzburg



**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE**  
**MAX WEBER PROGRAMME**

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Lecture Delivered February 13th 2008

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ISSN 1830-7736

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Printed in Italy  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy

<http://www.eui.eu/>  
<http://cadmus.eui.eu/>





*Fear Reverence Terror*  
*Reading Hobbes Today\**

CARLO GINZBURG\*

1. I will speak about terror, not about *terrorism*. I am convinced that a word like “terrorism” does not help us understand the murderous deeds it usually refers to: it is too vague, too broad. Like terrorism, terror is part of our present: but I will not speak about the present. Sometimes we should try to keep the present at a distance, protecting ourselves from the incessant noise of the news surrounding us. In order to understand the present we must learn to look at it obliquely. Or, to use a different metaphor: we must learn to look at it through reversed binoculars. Ultimately, the present will surface in my talk, but in a somewhat unexpected context. I will say something about the present, and even a few words about the future. But I will do it after following a long road: coming, so to speak, from afar.

2. Commentators on political developments have recently (since, let’s say, September 11, 2001) been repeating the name of Hobbes, the author of *Leviathan*.<sup>1</sup> These names – Hobbes, *Leviathan* – will immediately evoke a few harsh, disenchanted sentences: “war of everyone against everyone” (*bellum omnium contra omnes*); “man is a wolf to man” (*homo homini lupus*). Let us take a closer look at the philosopher who pronounced them. (The second sentence, *homo homini lupus*, goes back, I should mention, to antiquity).

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\* Many thanks for their help to Perry Anderson, Maria Luisa Catoni, Alberto Gajano, Carlos Hudson, Sergio Landucci, Tami Sarfatti. Different versions of this paper have been delivered in Turin (Festival del libro), Jerusalem (Hebrew University), Venice (Dipartimento di storia), Bologna (Dipartimento di scienze politiche), Istanbul (Bilgi University), Berlin (Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung), Buenos Aires (Biblioteca Nacional), São Paulo (Universidade Autônoma de São Paulo), Rome (dottorato europeo Marie Curie), New York (Columbia University), Delhi (Indian Economic and Social History Review Lecture). Bibliographical references have been kept to a minimum.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Robin, *Fear. The History of a Political Idea*, Oxford 2004, p. 28 and *passim*.

Thomas Hobbes was born in Malmesbury in 1588. The family was poor; his father was a drunkard who soon disappeared. Hobbes spent some time in several noble households, working first as a teacher, then as a secretary. A voracious reader, he acquired a profound knowledge of Greek and Latin. He translated Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, publishing it in 1629.

At that time Englishmen from noble families used to polish their education by making a journey to the Continent (the so-called Grand Tour), typically spending a considerable amount of time in France and Italy. On one such journey Hobbes accompanied the son of Lord Cavendish, his patron. On another occasion Hobbes went to Florence, where he met Galileo. In Paris he met Marin Mersenne, a learned friar who was the center of a vast intellectual network. Through Mersenne, Hobbes began a correspondence with Descartes, communicating a series of objections to his philosophy. At that time Hobbes was forty-five; he had never published on philosophy, but he had developed a series of reflections set in a rigorously deductive form. This enterprise was due to an accident. Some years earlier, during a visit to a still unidentified nobleman, Hobbes saw a book lying on a table: it turned out to be Euclid's *Elements*. He opened the book at random and, coming across a proposition that shocked him, spat out, "By G\*\*! This is impossible!" He then read the book from cover to cover, until everything became clear. According to his friend and biographer, Aubrey, who told the anecdote, "This made him in love with geometry."

Hobbes's first philosophical work was entitled *The Elements of Law* in homage to Euclid's *Elements*. The dedication to William, Earl of Devonshire, at that time Hobbes's patron, is dated May 8, 1640. The series of events later labeled "the Great Rebellion" had just begun. The tension between Charles I and Parliament was getting worse and worse. Within a few years, civil war would break out. In 1649 Parliament brought formal charges against the king, eventually condemning him to death: an event that profoundly shocked all of Europe.

But Hobbes did not wait for the political situation to get worse. In November 1640 he left England for Paris: "the first of those who fled," as he later wrote. He chose exile to avoid being persecuted for pro-monarchical comments in his *Elements of Law*: a book (conceived as the first part of a tripartite project) which circulated first as a manuscript and then in sloppy abridged editions for which Hobbes was not responsible.

Hobbes spent many, many years rewriting that book in different ways and different languages (Latin and English): enlarging it, modifying it, correcting it.<sup>2</sup> Some concepts that first emerged in an embryonic form later acquired more and more complex meanings. One of them – a fundamental one – is fear.

3. "I was born a twin of fear." Hobbes made this declaration at the very end of his life, in an autobiographical poem written in Latin. He was in fact born during that period when the Spanish fleet – the *Armada Invencible* – was threatening to land on English shores. The allusion to fear was probably meant to confess a private weakness. But we must also recall that Hobbes was a bold thinker, fond of disputes and provocations, which often verged on insolence. With those words Hobbes may have also hinted with some pride at his decision to put fear at the center of his political philosophy.

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<sup>2</sup> N. Malcolm, "A Summary Biography of Hobbes", in Id., *Aspects of Hobbes*, Oxford 2002, p. 15.



In *The Elements of Law* one comes across a concise description of the state of nature, based on an argument that Hobbes would cling to for the rest of his life. In the state of nature men are fundamentally equal and have the same rights (including the right to offence and defense): therefore they live in a condition of perennial war, of “general diffidence,” of “mutual fear.”<sup>3</sup> They are able to escape this intolerable situation by mutually renouncing some part of their rights: through this process they build up a covenant which turns an amorphous multitude into a political body. This is the birth of the State, which Hobbes will label Leviathan: a name which, in the Book of Job, refers to a whale, a huge sea-animal nobody is able to catch. On the title page of *Leviathan* (**Figure 1**) Hobbes quoted, from Saint Jerome’s Latin version of the Bible, a verse from chapter 41 of the Book of Job: “Non est potestas super terram quae comparetur ei.” The passage, which continues “qui factus est ut nullum timeret,” literally means “There is no power on earth comparable to his own, which was made so as to fear no one.” In the King James Bible the passage reads: “Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear.”

On the meaning of the title page (which was certainly inspired by Hobbes) I will say something later. For the time being I will limit myself to a reminder that according to Hobbes the State arises from a covenant generated by fear. In a Europe torn by religious wars, in a Great Britain disrupted by the conflicts between the king and Parliament, Hobbes regarded peace as the supreme good – a good which deserved any sacrifice. He defended this idea until his death. But can a covenant stipulated under constraint, like the one that allowed the State to emerge from the state of nature, be regarded as valid? This question, which Hobbes raised explicitly in *The Elements of Law*, echoed the quandary repeatedly raised at that time by both Protestant and Catholic theologians: whether it was permissible to give a false oath in order to avoid religious persecution.<sup>4</sup> Hobbes’s answer was unambiguous: a covenant is valid even when it has been made under the pressure of fear. Retrospectively, one has the impression that he could not answer otherwise. In Hobbes’s argumentative strategy, fear played a fundamental, and scandalous, role.

Time has softened the scandal. But many contemporary readers found Hobbes’s description of the state of nature unacceptable, mostly because it lacked any reference to the Bible and original sin. Another contentious argument, of a totally different kind, could be read between the lines of the introduction Hobbes wrote for the second edition of *De cive* (The Citizen), published in Amsterdam in 1647. (The first edition had appeared, anonymously, in Paris in 1642.) In the introduction Hobbes described his “method.” In order to understand the genesis and form of the city and the origins of justice we must identify their constituent parts. Likewise, in order to understand the functioning of a watch we must dismantle it otherwise we would be unable to understand the function of each wheel and spring.

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<sup>3</sup> T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, ed. by F. Tönnies, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. with a new introduction by M. M. Goldsmith, chapter 14, pp. 70-74.

<sup>4</sup> For this reason Hobbes’s *Leviathan* was interpreted by some more or less hostile contemporary readers as a book written in defence of Cromwell’s regime: see O. Skinner, “Hobbes’s Life in Philosophy”, in Id., *Visions of Politics, III: Hobbes and Civil Science*, Cambridge 2002, p. 21. See also J. P. Sommerville, “The ‘new art of lying’: equivocation, mental reservation, and casuistry”, in *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. E. Leites, Cambridge 1988, pp. 159-84.



**Figure 1**

The learned audience addressed in the Latin edition of *De cive* would have immediately identified Hobbes's polemical target: Aristotle's *Politics*. My "method," Aristotle had argued, consists in identifying the elements which compose the *polis* – the city, that is, the political community. The starting point was similar, but then the two paths immediately diverged. For Aristotle man is a political animal (*zoon politikon*): therefore the *polis* exists by nature, is a natural phenomenon. For Hobbes, on the contrary, the state of nature is marked not by sociability but by its opposite: the war of everyone against everyone. Aggression, either real or potential, generates first fear, then the impulse to elude fear through a covenant based on the mass renunciation of natural rights. The city (*civitas*, that is, the political community) which is the outcome of this covenant is an artificial phenomenon: a conclusion in some way anticipated by Hobbes's comparison with the watch.

4. In order to understand the importance of Hobbes's argument we must understand how, along which paths, he came to articulate it. An indirect answer seems to come from Hobbes himself. He often opposed the effectiveness of the natural sciences to the sterility of moral philosophy, declaring that, as a moral philosopher, he took Euclid as a model. It has been noted, however, that it is difficult to believe that Hobbes's mind was suddenly awakened in his forties, at the moment he started reading

Euclid's *Elements*.<sup>5</sup> In the preceding years he had been working on the translation of a work that inspired many reflections: Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. A passage that has long attracted the attention of scholars is chapter 53 of the second book, in which Thucydides describes the impact of the plague that afflicted Athens in 429 BC. But there is still something to be said about the way in which Hobbes read and translated that passage.

This is Thucydides, translated by Hobbes:

“And the great licentiousness, which also in other kinds was used in the city, began at first from this disease. For that which a man before would dissemble, and not acknowledge to be done for voluptuousness, he durst now do freely; seeing before his eyes such quick revolution, of the rich dying, and men worth nothing inheriting their estates. Insomuch as they justified a speedy fruition of their goods, even for their pleasure; as men that thought they held their lives but by the day. As for pains, no man was forward in any action of honor to take any; because they thought it uncertain whether they should die or not before they achieved it. But what any man knew to be delightful, and to be profitable to pleasure, that was made both profitable and honorable. Neither the fear of the gods, nor laws of men, awed any man: not the former, because they concluded it was alike to worship or not worship, from seeing that alike they all perished: nor the latter, because no man expected that lives would last till he received punishment of his crimes by judgment. But they thought, there was now over their heads some far greater judgment decreed against them; before which fell, they thought to enjoy some little part of their lives.”<sup>6</sup>

5. Thucydides' dense analysis opens with the word *anomia*, which designates the absence of law – or, more precisely, the dissolving of any law under the impact of the plague.<sup>7</sup> A power vacuum (we would say) had emerged, which had been filled by the satisfaction of brute instincts. But, significantly, *anomia* – a term destined to be retrieved and reshaped by Durkheim and contemporary sociologists – did not refer to human laws alone. For men facing imminent death, Thucydides says, even fear of the gods ceased to be effective.

Thucydides' dissolution of the political body ineluctably reminds us of Hobbes's state of nature. They mirror each other: in plague-ridden Athens law no longer exists; in the state of nature law has not yet come into being. It is tempting to assume that the extreme situation described by Thucydides might have suggested to Hobbes a mental experiment – the description of the state of nature – based on an equally extreme situation.

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<sup>5</sup> This point was first made by L. Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* [1st ed. Oxford 1936], Chicago 1961, p. 29 and *passim*. Following Strauss, Q. Skinner has provided a detailed analysis of Hobbes's humanistic education as a crucial element of his intellectual development (*Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 3, 217). For a criticism of Strauss's reading of the impact of Aristotle on Hobbes see C. A. Viano, “Analisi della vita emotiva e tecnica politica nella filosofia di Hobbes”, *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia*, XVII (1962), pp. 355-392 (an important, albeit often overlooked article). Although both my approach and my conclusions are different from Viano's, I agree with him on the importance of Thucydides in the development of Hobbes's thought.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides, *The History of the Grecian War*, translated by Thomas Hobbes (1629), in Hobbes, *English Works*, vol. 8, ed. W. Molesworth, London 1843 (reprint 1966), pp. 203-211, especially pp. 208-209 (II, 53).

<sup>7</sup> M. Gigante, *Nomos basileus*, Napoli 1956, p. 184; M. Orrù, *Anomie. History and Meanings*, London 1987.

But Hobbes the translator – in Latin, *interpres* – imposed his own interpretation upon his readers. Thucydides had written: “*theon de phobos e anthropon nomos oudeis apeirge*.” The translation in the Loeb Classical Library closely follows the Greek text: “No fear of gods or law of men *restrained*.”<sup>8</sup> Hobbes’s translation diverges on one point, one word: “Neither the fear of the gods, nor laws of men *awed* any man.” In my view, this decision to translate the Greek verb *apeirgein*, “to restrain” (both in a literal and a metaphorical sense), with the verb “to awe” can be regarded as the first, sudden emergence of an idea that played a crucial role in Hobbes’s moral philosophy.

6. In order to understand the implications of the verb “to awe,” which Hobbes inserted in his translation, I will start from a book that appeared in London in 1613 and was republished several times with additions: *Purchas His Pilgrimage; or, Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered, from the Creation to the Present*. For this huge in-folio the author, the Anglican parson Samuel Purchas, drew on a large body of travel literature to describe customs and religions all over the world as a metaphorical journey or pilgrimage.

Purchas and Hobbes knew each other. Their names are listed in the proceedings of the board of the Virginia Company: a commercial enterprise which counted, as one of its main stockholders, Lord Cavendish, Hobbes’s patron. The company’s main activity was the exploitation of that region of the New World named Virginia after Queen Elizabeth, the “Virgin Queen.” It has been suggested that the few allusions to American Indians in Hobbes’s writings were inspired by Purchas’s work.<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, in a chapter dealing with contemporary Jews and their messianic expectations, Purchas spoke at length of the two huge animals mentioned in the Book of Job, Leviathan and Behemoth.<sup>10</sup> Hobbes must have chosen his titles directly from the Bible, which he read assiduously. But in Purchas’s imaginary pilgrimage through the religions of the world Hobbes may have found other elements of interest.

Purchas believed that British colonial expansion would powerfully contribute to the religious unification of humanity and therefore to the imminent end of the world. He thought that religious unification was possible since “religion in it selfe is naturall, written in the hearts of all men.”<sup>11</sup> Purchas strongly opposed the arguments, put forward by some irreligious men, “which they do not tell, but as they dare, whisper, that Religion is but a continued custome, or a wiser Policie, to hold men in awe.”<sup>12</sup> Did Hobbes, in translating Thucydides, echo this sentence, turning the noun *awe* into a verb, *awed*? This is not impossible, but far from certain: the idea expressed by Purchas was in fact widespread, as the polemical remark suggests. Its target becomes clear in the passage which immediately follows the aforementioned sentence: “But where had custome this beginning? And what is Custome, but an uniforme manner, and continuance of outward Rites? Whereas Religion it selfe is in the heart, and produceth those outward ceremoniall effects thereof. In one Country men observe one habite of attyre, another in another. So likewise of diet: and yet is it naturall to be clothed, more

<sup>8</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War. Books I and II*, transl. Ch. F. Smith, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, p. 353.

<sup>9</sup> N. Malcolm, “Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company” [1981], *Aspects of Hobbes*, pp. 56-79, especially pp. 60-61.

<sup>10</sup> S. Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimages*, p. 181.

<sup>11</sup> S. Purchas, *Purchas Pilgrimages*, p. 15: “Religion in it selfe is naturall, written in the hearts of all men”.

<sup>12</sup> S. Purchas, *Purchas Pilgrimages*, p. 26.

naturall to eat, but naturall most of all, as is said, to observe some kind of Religion.” Clearly, Purchas was referring to Montaigne. The *Essays* had recently been translated into English by John Florio: the author of the first English-Italian dictionary, whose father had left Italy as a Protestant exile.<sup>13</sup> In his famous essay entitled “De la coustume et de ne changer aisément une loy receüe” (On custom: and on never easily changing a traditional law) Montaigne had argued that any opinion, including the most extravagant, can find some custom that will support it. Then he added within parentheses: “(je laisse à part la grossiere imposture des religions)” (I omit to speak of the gross imposture of religions).<sup>14</sup> This tongue-in-cheek, ostensibly easygoing remark alluded to *De tribus impostoribus* (The Three Impostors): the scandalous title of a mythical work (at the time not yet written) which since the Middle Ages had identified as impostors Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, the founders of the three monotheistic religions of the Mediterranean. This tradition, evoked by Montaigne, regarded religion both as a custom and as a political instrument that restrained the impulses of ignorant people. But Purchas objected to Montaigne that religion is natural – more natural than eating or wearing clothes.

7. Echoes of this and other readings can be detected in chapters 11 and 12 of *Leviathan*, which are entitled, respectively, “Of the Difference of Manners” and “Of Religion.”<sup>15</sup> Hobbes argued that religion was born of fear – a fear resulting from ignorance of natural causes, so they were replaced by invisible powers. This was the central theme of Epicurean philosophy, which had inspired Lucretius’s great poem on the nature of things. A famous Epicurean motto had it that *Primus in orbe deos fecit timor*, that is: “The gods were at first created by humane Feare.”<sup>16</sup> Hobbes quoted the motto, commenting: “which spoken of the Gods (that is to say, of the many Gods of the Gentiles) it is very true”. Then he went on: “But the acknowledging of one God Eternall, Infinite, and Omnipotent, may more easily be derived, from the desire men have to know the causes of naturall bodies, and their severall vertues, and operations; than from the feare of what was to befall them in time to come.”<sup>17</sup> A prudent, misleading statement; a few paragraphs before, Hobbes had argued the opposite, that the need to know the causes of things generates “anxiety” and “perpetuall feare.” In a marginal note he wrote: “The naturall Cause of Religion, the Anxiety of the time to come.”<sup>18</sup>

To attack religion by destroying its roots, that is, false fears generated by ignorance. This project had inspired in Lucretius many splendid lines, whose echo can

<sup>13</sup> M. Pfister, *Inglese Italianato – Italiano Anglizzato*, in *Renaissance Go-Betweens*, ed. by Andreas Höfele and Werner von Koppenfels, Berlin-New York 2005, pp. 32-54.

<sup>14</sup> Montaigne, *Essays*, I, XXXIII, Paris 1962, ed. A. Thibaudet and M. Rat, p. 109. See also Montaigne, *Essays*, London 1613 (1st ed. 1605), p. 48: “Is there any opinion so fantastical, or conceit so extravagant (I omit to speake of the grosse imposture of religions...)”.

<sup>15</sup> J. Freund, “Le Dieu Mortel”, in *Hobbes-Forschungen*, ed. R. Koselleck and R. Schnur, Berlin 1969, pp. 33-52, writes on p. 42: “Comme il y a un droit naturel, il y aussi une religion naturelle – bien que Hobbes n’utilise pas cette expression – qui a pour fondement la crainte”. See also T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, Harmondsworth 1974, p. 167 (marginal note: “Naturall Religion, from the same [curiosity to know]”).

<sup>16</sup> See also Suetonius, *Div. Jul.* 6: *est ergo in genere [amitae meae Iuliae] et sanctitas regum, qui plurimum inter homines pollent, et caerimonia deorum, quorum ipsi in potestate sunt reges*; Horace, *Carm.* 3, 1, 5, 6: *Regum timendorum in proprios greges, reges in ipsos imperium est Iovis* (both passages are quoted by K.-H. Roloff, “Caerimonia”, *Glotta*, XXXII [1952], p. 104).

<sup>17</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, p. 170.

<sup>18</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, p. 168.

be heard between the lines of Hobbes's arguments. But there is an important divergence. Hobbes does not want to destroy fear: on the contrary, he turns fear into the very base of the State.<sup>19</sup> He starts from the Epicurean critique of religion, but then he seems to move in a different direction. However, this divergence, which has been emphasized by many scholars, conceals a more complex argument. We can try to decipher it with a passage in which Hobbes, as he often did, vigorously combined elements of various provenance, reshaping them into a new configuration.

Men, from their ignorance of natural causes and “from the feare that proceeds from the ignorance it selfe,” Hobbes writes, “are inclined to suppose, and feign unto themselves, severall kinds of Powers Invisible; and to stand in awe of their own imaginations; and in time of distresse to invoke them; as also in the time of an expected good successe, to give them thanks; making the creatures of their own fancy their Gods.”<sup>20</sup> Once again Hobbes associates religion and awe, but in a context which emphasizes that men are inclined “to stand in awe of their own imaginations.” In describing this apparently paradoxical attitude, Hobbes must have recalled a striking sentence by Tacitus: “fingebant simul credebantque” (*Ann.* V, 10), “to believe what they had just made up.” This sentence recurs three times in Tacitus's oeuvre, with minimal variations, to describe specific events like the spread of false news.<sup>21</sup> Hobbes used Tacitus's formula (which Bacon, for whom Hobbes had worked as a secretary, had paraphrased) to describe a general phenomenon: the origins of religion. Hobbes's verb *feign*, close to *fiction* and *fictive*, echoes the verb used by Tacitus: *fingebant*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> P. Cristofolini, *Vico pagano e barbaro*, Pisa 2001, pp. 71-74 has some helpful comments on this topic (although Hobbes is never mentioned, he seems to be implicitly present).

<sup>20</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 167-68: “And they that make little, or no enquiry into the naturall causes of things, yet from the feare that proceeds from the ignorance it selfe, of what it is that hath the power to do them much good or harm, are inclined to suppose, and feign unto themselves, severall kinds of Powers Invisible; and to stand in awe of their own imaginations; and in time of distresse to invoke them; as also in the time of an expected good successe, to give them thanks; making the creatures of their own fancy their Gods. By which means it hath come to passe, that from the innumerable variety of Fancy, men have created in the world innumerable sorts of Gods. And this Feare of things invisible, is the naturall Seed of that, which every one in himself call Religion; and in them that worship, or feare that Power otherwise than they do, Superstition”. Latin translation (*Opera Latina*, III, p. 84): “Etiam, qui de rerum naturalium causis parum aut nihil solliciti sunt, illis tamen metus quidem inest, ortus ab eo ipso, quod an sit potentia aliqua necne, qua juvari aut laedi possunt, ignorant; atque ab eo metu proclives sunt ad suppositionem et fictionem variarum potentiarum invisibilium, metuuntque sua ipsorum phantasmata, invocantque in rebus adversis, laudantque in prosperis, et faciunt denique Deos. Atque inde factum est ut homines a phantasmatibus suis innumerabilibus innumerabiles creaverint sibi Deos. Metus autem invisibilium semen est ejus, quam quisque in seipso *religionem*, in illis autem qui diverse metuunt coluntque, *superstitionem* vocant”.

<sup>21</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, V (recte, VI; according to the custom, the old reference system has been kept) 10; *Historiae*, I, 51, 5: “sed plurima ad fingendum credendumque materies”; *Historiae*, II, 8, 1: “Sub idem tempus Achaia atque Asia falso exterritae, velut Nero adventaret, vario super exitu eius rumore eoque pluribus vivere eum fingentibus credentibusque”.

<sup>22</sup> See also F. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (*The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding, VI, Boston 1863, 1<sup>st</sup> book, p. 125): “an inquisitive man is a prattler; so upon the like reason a credulous man is a deceiver: as we see it in fame, that he that will easily believe rumours will as easily augment rumours and add somewhat to them of his own; which Tacitus wisely noteth, when he saith, *Fingunt simul creduntque*: so great an affinity hath fiction and belief”. Here I am following in the footsteps of one of Hobbes's most perceptive readers: see G. B. Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, 376 (*Opere*, a cura di F. Nicolini, Milano-Napoli 1953, p. 503; and see the entire section “Metafisica poetica”) (cfr. G. B. Vico, *New Science*, tr. D. Marsh, p. 145). I will develop this point elsewhere. On *fingo* and its ambivalent meaning see my essay *Das Nachäffen der Natur. Reflexionen über eine mittelalterliche Metapher*, in *Fälschungen*, ed. A.-K. Reulecke, Frankfurt am Main 2006, pp. 95-122.

8. Hobbes's aim was not the destruction of religion as the product of imagination. He wanted to understand, through Tacitus's paradoxical formula, how religion, born of fear and human imagination, could be so effective. This line of questioning had a profound impact on Hobbes's thought.<sup>23</sup> The model he set up to explain the origins of religion surfaces again in the central section of *Leviathan*, on the page describing the origins of the State.

The agreement among beasts, Hobbes explains, is natural: "that of men, is by Covenant only, which is artificiall: and therefore it is no wonder if there be somewhat else required (besides Covenant) to make their Agreement constant and lasting; which is a Common Power, *to keep them in awe*, and to direct their actions to the Common benefit."<sup>24</sup>

In describing the state of nature Hobbes used the same words: "Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power *to keep them all in awe*, they are in that condition which is called Warre, and such a Warre, as is of every man, against every man."<sup>25</sup>

To sum up: at the origin of religion, as well as at the origin of the State, there is fear that produces awe. In between, there is fiction, which imposes itself, upon those who make it up, as a reality:

"This is the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speake more reverently) of that *Mortall God*, to which wee owe under the *Immortall God*, our peace and defence."<sup>26</sup>

Leviathan, an artificial creation, stands against those who, through their covenant, *created* it, as an awesome and threatening object. The title page inspired by Hobbes turned Tacitus's words – *fungunt simul creduntque* – into a powerful image. In the original pencil drawing made by Abraham Bosse on the front-page of the parchment copy of *Leviathan* dedicated to Charles II, each of the little men had faced the reader, i.e. the king (Figures 2&3).<sup>27</sup> The final version in the first printed edition, also (I believe) inspired by Hobbes, is much more effective.<sup>28</sup> A multitude of men look up "in

<sup>23</sup> The aforementioned argument, which points at a fundamental philosophical continuity between the early and the late Hobbes, should not be confused with Q. Skinner's conclusion (*Reason and Rhetoric*, especially pp. 426-437) that the continuity between the early and the late Hobbes is provided by a similar attitude towards rhetoric. Skinner's conclusion is consistent with his approach: "I am less interested in Hobbes as the author of a philosophical system than in his role as a contributor to a series of debates about the moral sciences within Renaissance culture" (p. 6).

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. *Leviathan*, cap. 17 (Macpherson pp. 226-227) (Italics are mine). Latin translation (*Opera Latina*, III, p. 130): "Postremo, animalium illorum consensio a natura est; consensio autem hominum a pactis est, et artificiale. Mirum ergo non est, si ad firmitatem et durationem ejus aliud praeter pactum requiratur, nempe potentia communis quam singuli metuant, et quae omnium actiones ad bonum commune ordinet" ..

<sup>25</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* ch. 13 (Macpherson, p. 185) (Italics are mine). Another excerpt from the same passage: "Again, men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deale of grieffe) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all".

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. *Leviathan*, cap. 17 (Macpherson p. 227).

<sup>27</sup> This last remark has been suggested to me by Carlos Hudson (Buenos Aires).

<sup>28</sup> N. Malcolm sees Hobbes's intervention only in the pencil drawing (British Museum, ms. Egerton 1910), which he attributes to Wenceslaus Hollar, and declares his inability to explain the change in the final version ("The Title-page of *Leviathan*. Seen in a Curious Perspective" (1998), now in *Aspects of Hobbes*, pp. 200-233, especially 200-201). H. Bredekamp attributes to Abraham Bosse the drawing as well as (less convincingly) the engraved front-page (*Thomas Hobbes visuelle Strategien: der Leviathan, Urbild des modernen Staates ; Werkillustrationen und Portraits*, Berlin 1999; see also the revised version: *Thomas Hobbes Der Leviathan: das Urbild des modernen Staates, und seine Gegenbilder, 1651-2001*, Berlin 2003). Bredekamp notes that the crowd in the latter looks at the giant with a

awe” at the “artificial man” they have created – the Leviathan built through their covenant (Figure 4).<sup>29</sup>

9. As we have seen, Hobbes advances a parallel explanation for the origins of religion and the origins of the State. But in the State he describes, religion – more exactly, the Church – has no autonomy whatsoever. The front page of *Leviathan* shows the “Mortall God,” the State, holding the sword in one hand, the crosier in the other. Hobbes points out that the power of the State is based not only on strength, but also on awe: the word we have seen playing a strategic role in the passages of *Leviathan* devoted to the origins of religion and the origins of the State.

Hobbes had used the same word as a verb (“awed”) in translating Thucydides’ description of the impact of the plague on Athens. “No fear of gods or law of men restrained,” Thucydides had written. You will recall Hobbes’s translation: “Neither the fear of the gods, nor laws of men *awed* any man.” The reason for the divergence between the Greek original and the English translation may be found in the immediately preceding passage, in which Thucydides spoke of “fear of the gods” (*theon de phobos*). In writing the words “fear of the gods,” Hobbes must have recalled that the word “fear,” both as a noun and as a verb, frequently occurs in the King James translation of the Bible, associated with God and “the fear of God.” But fear of God and fear are not synonymous. The expression used by Saint Jerome in his Latin translation of the Bible, *timor Dei*, or fear of God, echoed the Greek phrase *phobos theou*, used in the so-called Septuagint, but it does not convey the ambiguity of the corresponding Hebrew word: *yir’ah*. I am quite ignorant of Hebrew, but I have learned from my informers that *yir’ah* expresses at the same time fear and reverence.<sup>30</sup> The word *timor*, chosen by Saint Jerome in his translation of the Bible, was not only inadequate but risky, since *timor* evoked the Epicurean motto (*primus in orbe deos fecit timor*) linking the origins of religion to fear. The word *awe*, which in some passages of the King James Bible refers to the attitude of man towards God (Pss. 4:4, 33:8, 119:161; Prov. 10) seems much closer to the ambiguity of *yir’ah*, as adjectives like “awesome” and “awful” show. We may speculate that Hobbes, in translating Thucydides’ passage, felt the need to use the word *awed* immediately after the word “fear” to convey the ambivalent attitudes generated by religion. This might have been the starting point of Hobbes’s reflections on fear.

A word like “awe” – as well as, apparently, *yira’h* – is not easily translated into languages like Italian, French, or German.<sup>31</sup> I realized this when I tried to find an equivalent to “awe” in Italian, my mother tongue. The ancient word “terribilità” – which Vasari applied to Michelangelo – first came to mind. Then an alternative solution:

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“Mischung aus Zuwendung und Devotion” (pp. 109-110), but his explanation of the changes in the final version seems inadequate (p. 114).

<sup>29</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (ed. Macpherson), introd. p. 81: “For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man...”

<sup>30</sup> A. Cruden, *A Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testament*, London and New York 1889; B. Fischer, *Novae Concordantiae Bibliorum Sacrorum iuxta Vulgatam Versionem critice Editam*, E. Hatch – H. A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament*, II, Graz 1954.

<sup>31</sup> The absence of an equivalent of awe in German is stressed by H. Bredekamp, “Marks und Signs. Mutmaßungen zum jüngsten Bilderkrieg”, in *FAKtisch. Festschrift für Friedrich Kittler zum 60. Geburtstag*, hrsg. von P. Berz, A. Bitsch, B. Siegert, München 2003, pp. 163-69, especially p. 163 (many thanks to Maria Luisa Catoni who made me aware of this essay).



“reverenza,” reverence, a word which derives from the Latin verb *vereor*, to fear. But maybe the best Italian translation of “awe” would be *terrore*, terror. Hobbes himself seems to suggest this indirectly:

“For by this Authoritie, given him [i.e., the Leviathan] by every particular man in the Common-Wealth, he hath the use of so much Power and Strength conferred on him, *that by terror thereof*, he is inabled to conforme the wills of them all, to Peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad.”<sup>32</sup>



Figure 2

<sup>32</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, Harmondsworth 1974, pp. 227-28 (ch. XVII); italics are mine. I corrected “forme” into “conforme” following Richard Tuck’s suggestion (N. Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, p. 228). Cfr. *King James Bible*, XIII 3: “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil” (I am grateful to Pier Cesare Bori for having pointed this passage out to me).



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

All interpreters explain that Hobbes initiated modern political philosophy by putting forward for the first time a secularized interpretation of the origins of the State. My reading is different. Hobbes believed that political power implies force, but force alone is insufficient. The State, the “Mortall God” generated by fear, inspires terror: an

emotion in which fear and reverence converge.<sup>33</sup> In order to present itself as the legitimate authority, the State needs the instruments (the weapons) of religion. This explains why the modern reflection on the State is based on political theology: a tradition that Hobbes inaugurated.

This conclusion leads us to see from a different perspective a phenomenon that is still in the making, so-called secularization. Alberico Gentili's motto *Silete Theologi, in munere alieno* (Be silent, theologians, this is not your domain) quoted by Carl Schmitt, can be referred to political theology and secularization as well.<sup>34</sup> The purely secular perspective from which Hobbes developed his argument on the State as "mortal God" is significant. Secularization does not claim for a sphere autonomous from religion: it invades the sphere of religion. The reactions against secularization which we have been witnessing for years can be explained (I said *explained*, not justified) in the framework of this invasion.

10. I began my talk by saying that I would move away from the present, although ultimately I would come back to it. Many of you here today remember the bombing of Baghdad in March 2003. The operation's code name was Shock and Awe. Some Italian newspapers translated it as "Colpire e terrorizzare," literally, "Hit and Terrorize." Clara Gallini, the historian of religions, in an article that appeared in *Il manifesto* on March 24, 2003, remarked that the translation "did not convey the sinister complexity of the original expression," which did not refer to terror in a psychological sense but to "holy terror."<sup>35</sup> The same article recalled a passage from the Bible – Exod. 23:27 – commented at length in Rudolf Otto's famous book *The Idea of the Holy*: "I will send my feare before thee," the Lord said, "and will destroy all the people to whom thou shalt come."<sup>36</sup> In this case the Hebrew word (*emati*) refers, I have been told, to a terror devoid of ambivalence. Rudolf Otto recalled Behemoth and Leviathan, the

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<sup>33</sup> This point has been insightfully grasped (and immediately put aside) by L. Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 28: "For what is the antithesis between vanity and fear of violent death, if not the 'secularized' form of the traditional antithesis between spiritual pride and fear of God (or humility), a secularized form which results from the Almighty God having been replaced by the over-mighty enemies and then by the over-mighty State, the 'mortal God'? But even if this affiliation is right, it by no means follows that the moral antithesis in Hobbes's work which we are at present discussing is simply the superfluous residue of a tradition which has in principle been cast aside" Note: *Leviathan*, ch. 17 (p. 89); cf. *De cive*, cap. 6, art. 13; *Leviathan*, ch. 30 (pp. 180 ff.). See also N. Bobbio, "Introduzione al *De cive*" (in Id., *Thomas Hobbes*, Torino 1997), p. 99: "Ed ecco perché lo stato hobbesiano ha un volto così minaccioso: è la risposta della paura organizzata alla paura scatenata. Ma la paura è la sua essenza".

<sup>34</sup> Here I am developing a remark made by S. Weigel, "Souverän, Märtyrer und 'gerechte Kriege' jenseits des Jus Publicum Europaeum. Zum Dilemma politischer Theologie, diskutiert mit Carl Schmitt und Walter Benjamin", in *Figuren des Europäischen. Kulturgeschichtlichen Perspektiven*, hg. D. Weidner, München 2006, pp. 101-128, especially p. 108; see C. Schmitt, "Die vollendete Reformation. Bemerkungen und Hinweise zu neuen Leviathan-Interpretationen", *Der Staat*, IV (1965), pp. 51-69, especially p. 55. See also *Politische Theologie. Formen und Funktionen im 20. Jahrhundert*, J. Brokoff and J. Fohrmann (hg.), Paderborn 2003.

<sup>35</sup> C. Gallini, "Shock & Awe, potere e paura", *Il manifesto*, 24 Marzo 2003. A. Portelli, echoing Manzoni, astutely translated "percossa, attonita" ("Bombarda e doma", *Il Manifesto*, 26 marzo 2003). See also B. Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, Chicago 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Vulgate: "Terrorum meum mittam in praecursum tuum, et occidam omnem populum ad quem ingredieris".

monstrous animals described in the Book of Job, as examples of the terrible ambiguity of the sacred. Neither Rudolf Otto nor Clara Gallini mentioned Hobbes.<sup>37</sup>

The reference to Hobbes implied in the expression “Shock and Awe” was, on the contrary, immediately identified by Horst Bredekamp, in a brilliant follow-up to his book on the title page of *Leviathan* and its implications. (On the issue of “awe” the path of my research intersected with Bredekamp’s; then our respective trajectories diverged). Bredekamp pointed at the impact of a “banalized version” of Leo Strauss’s idea on American neo-cons.<sup>38</sup> Richard Drayton made a similar point, in a much less nuanced tone, in an article that appeared in the *Guardian* on December 29, 2005, devoted to the American neo-cons and their disastrous foreign policy.<sup>39</sup> Drayton remarked that Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and their friends, inspired by the teaching of Leo Strauss, had tried to adapt Hobbes to the twenty-first century, spreading technological terror to overcome their putative enemies. Both “Shock and Awe” and Hobbes, Drayton commented, ultimately backfired on those who had evoked them.

But of course the game is not over. Harlan Ullman, the American military analyst who in 1995 created the motto “Shock and Awe,” mentioned Hiroshima as a model of this strategy. After September 11, 2001, Ullman attacked again. The conclusion of the war against global terrorism, he explained in his book *Finishing Business*, was at hand. “Combining nearly perfect knowledge, speed, brilliant performance and environment control,” he wrote, “we can reach a quick, decisive victory with the minimum amount of casualties.”<sup>40</sup> Obviously Ullman meant only American casualties; as far as the enemy was concerned, casualties (including civilian casualties) were to be maximized. But the news from Iraq gives the lie to the military-technological arrogance of Harlan Ullman and those like him.

11. We live in a world where States threaten terror, spread terror, are sometimes the targets of terror. A world inhabited by those who try to steal the venerable, powerful weapons of religion, as well as by those who use religion as a weapon. A world in which huge Leviathans either move frantically or squat waiting. A world not too different from the one Hobbes imagined and dissected.

But somebody could object that Hobbes could help us to imagine not only the present but the future: a remote future, not inevitable but perhaps not impossible. Let us assume that the degradation of the physical environment continues, reaching levels today unthinkable. Air, water, and earth pollution would ultimately threaten the survival of every species of plant and animal, including the one named *Homo sapiens*. At this stage there would be no alternative to imposing an intensive, extraordinary control over the world and its human inhabitants. The survival of humanity would demand a covenant not so different from the one postulated by Hobbes: each individual would renounce his or her liberty in favor of an oppressive super-state, a Leviathan infinitely more powerful than those that emerged in the past. The social bond would unite all in an

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, tr. J. W. Harvey, Oxford 1958, p. 80 (ch. “The Numinous in the Old Testament” on Behemoth and Leviathan).

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. H. Bredekamp, “Marks und Signs”. See also Bredekamp’s conversation with Ulrich Raulff in FAZ, 7. 4. 2003 (quoted by S. Weigel, “Souverän, Märtyrer und gerechte Kriege”, p. 103 note 6).

<sup>39</sup> R. Drayton, *Shock and Awe and Hobbes have backfired on America’s Neocons*, “The Guardian”, December 29, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> H. Ullman, *Finishing Business. Ten Steps to Defeat Global Terror*, pref. di N. Gingrich, Annapolis, MD 2004, p. 55.

iron knot, not against “impious nature,” as Leopardi, the Italian poet, wrote in his poem *La Ginestra*, but for the survival of a frail, debased, wounded nature.<sup>41</sup>

Let us hope that this hypothetical future will never turn into reality.

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<sup>41</sup> G. Leopardi, “La Ginestra” (*Canti*, ed. N. Gallo and C. Garboli, Torino 1962, p. 280: “E quell’orror che primo / Contro l’empia natura / Strinse i mortali in social catena...”).