Reading Political Philosophy: From Machiavelli to Mill

Hobbes: Jon Pike and Quentin Skinner

Jon Pike
Hello, I'm Jon Pike, and I'm here today to talk with Quentin Skinner, Regis Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, about Hobbes' great work Leviathan. Quentin, you're famously attached to the idea of a contextualise or a contextual approach to political philosophy. Perhaps I could ask you about this. What contextual information do we need in order to understand Hobbes' political philosophy? And if I could break that down into two, there's first of all a social or political context, the historical events in which Hobbes finds himself, and then there's the intellectual context. So perhaps we could take the social and political context first.

Prof. Quentin skinner
Right. Well I do think that there is a sense in which Hobbes' Leviathan is about certain political events. Its interest, needless to say, is not exhausted by our understanding of those events and its response to them, but there are at least three points you would want to make about the text in relation to its date of publication, 1651, and to the politics of the previous decade. And the first is that Hobbes is deeply concerned with the question of the viability of the monarchy, he had seen, with the return of Parliament in 1640, a constitutional revolution put through which would have had the effect of producing a monarchy whose powers were roughly similar to the powers of the monarchy in the year 2000, and he wanted to ask himself if that was viable, and it's very important to him that it does not produce a viable political society because it leaves too much discretion to the subjects to question the sovereign.

A second very important feature of the politics of the 1640's for Hobbes was simply the civil war itself which breaks out in August 1642, and which gave Hobbes, although he'd gone into exile in November 1640, the sense as the Crown and its followers come to Paris where Hobbes is living after the failure of the war against Parliament, gives him a strong sense of the enormous destructive power of civil war, and I think therefore that absolute foregrounding of the notion of peace, the most central concept in Leviathan.

But those are background considerations. The third and most important point I'd want to bring out is that Hobbes does say in the review and conclusion of Leviathan, which by the way is a wonderful summary of his political doctrine, that it was written "without other design than to set before men's eyes the mutual relation between protection and obedience", and that he'd been made to think in that way because, and I quote again, he sees "by divers books lately printed", that the civil wars have not sufficiently yet taught men about the notion of political obligation. Now what it was that the civil wars taught Hobbes about political obligation is of course, in a sense, 'the book'? But the specific doctrine which I associate with the book and with the circumstances of its composition is the disjoining of obligation from right. In Hobbes you are politically obliged if, but only if, you are protected. As he says protection and allegiance are mutual concepts. Now the issue in British politics in 1649 with the execution of the king and the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords was, did the regime which had done all that deserve allegiance, or is it a completely illegal regime which must be resisted in conscience? Hobbes' doctrine offers a very peace-making answer to exactly that question, because instead of saying, 'Well, does Charles's heir, the young Charles II as he was to be, now have the rights of his dead father?' He says, 'Who is protecting you?' And the answer is you're being effectively protected by this government, so you owe it allegiance, and that's what he tells us in the review and conclusion, and I think that the enormous stress placed on the reciprocity of protection of allegiance, only explicable in terms of that particular crisis.

Jon Pike
So according to Hobbes, we owe obedience to the people who protect us and we shouldn't enquire too closely into how they become our protectors. That's the way to secure peace. Well, that's some very useful information on the social and political context. I wonder if I could ask you now, and this is a huge question I realise, about the intellectual context of Hobbes' writing.

Prof. Quentin skinner
Yes. Well, it is Jon a huge question because like every other book, Hobbes' book is about other books. And I think the key to seeing how to get at this question is to look at the very beginning Leviathan, by which I mean the epistle dedicatory, in which Hobbes says to Godolphin that his book attempts to pass unwounded between two sides, one of which he says is concerned with too much liberty, and one of which is concerned with too much authority. And I think in trying to identify the intellectual opponents whom of course Hobbes never identifies by name in this book, it's helpful to bear exactly that in mind. What does he mean when he talks about too much liberty? Well, one of the major intellectual contexts here is one which Hobbes does obliquely talk about in Chapter 21 called 'Of the Liberty of Subjects', because he says there that most destructive force – and it's an extraordinary thing to say – in all of England in his lifetime has been the reading of the classics, and he thinks that a study, especially of the Roman classics and above all of the historians, and he must be thinking here of Livy's discourses, he thinks that by reading these classics, as he says people have come to think that they have rights against their sovereigns and that this has left Europe awash with blood, so that as he says 'nothing has been more dearly purchased than a knowledge of the classical tongues'. That's an almost blasphemous remark because of course the dearest purchase was meant to be Christ's life, but he is saying no, Livy's history, that's done all the damage. Well what is the damage that Livy's history does, and Hobbes does actually in Chapter 21, tell us it says that there's something called a 'free state', that's to say a state which is independent both of any other states, and of any dependence on particular groups of its own subjects. So if it's independent of any particular groups it must be a democracy, because it must be ruled by the people as a whole.

And secondly, we learn from the classical historians, that you yourself can only be free in a free state, because if freedom is contrasted with dependence, then the only form of state in which you will not be dependent on some other source of power, is one in which you equally are ruling with everyone else. So the doctrines that Hobbes opposes, as he says in Chapter 21, are the view that we are only free in democracies and in the monarchy we are all slaves, as he says, and that there is something which we can call a free state. Now Hobbes' analysis of freedom in Chapter 21 seems to me designed to overcome that entire classical republican analysis which he also satirises when he talks about the citizens of Lucar, who have written the word Libertas in great characters upon the turrets of their city at this day, and he goes on to say, 'but they have no more freedom than in Constantinople', that's to say under the most absolute sovereign that Hobbes had any knowledge of. And why is that? Well, because freedom is simply absence of obstruction to your behaviour, it's nothing to do with democracy, it's nothing to do with independence, all of this is a misunderstanding of freedom. And I think that that body of work, the classical republican tradition, is vehemently denounced by Hobbes in effect in his whole analysis of how to think about freedom. So there's one tradition I'm sure he's working with.

Jon Pike
So there's the classical republican tradition with which Hobbes is crossing swords. What about his contemporaries? What about his 17th Century opponents? I'm thinking here particularly of Chapter 16 and Chapter 17 and the discussion of the covenant?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Yes. These are the people who make Hobbes almost as hysterical, and if I had to put a name to one of them I would guess from some of the language of those chapters, that the man who Hobbes must have read is Henry Parker, the leading parliamentarian theorist at the outbreak of the war who published incomparably the most influential tract in defence of the Parliament, called 'Observations on His Majesty's Late Expresses and Answers', that's to say his answers to Parliament, which was published in July 1642, and is, I think, incomparably the clearest

defence of the idea of parliamentary sovereignty. Now the essence of Parker's case is that the relationship of rulers to subjects is a contractual one, and you have to think of the people as a body, he actually says a universitas, that's to say a corporate body which is a single entity, and can therefore act as one person, and if it can act as one person it can contract with the ruler, and the other side of the contract is the ruler who is conceived to adopt his ruler ship and be given it on certain set terms. So if the ruler fails to obey the terms of the contract, which Parker says would be a contract to maintain the people in security and freedom, then he forfeits their allegiance. Now there is the defence of Parliament because Charles I was claimed to have forfeited the contractual basis of his power.

Jon Pike
So, the Parliamentarian Parker suggests that there is a contractual relationship between the ruler and the people. What's Hobbes' response to this?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Right. Now if you think of Hobbes' account of the covenant, there are two extraordinary features to it which I think are only explicable as an attempt polemically to see of this whole parliamentary way of thought, and one is that Hobbes says 'the right way to think about a political covenant is that each individual citizen contracts with everyone else as to who shall be their sovereign'. Now, one strange feature of that contract is that the sovereign is not party to it, it's a one-sided contract. We agree each with each, that it will be Jon, now you're the sovereign. But you're not a party to our covenant, and so it doesn't in any way bind you. The other claim which is crucial to this is that the people do not act as a corporate entity because they are not a corporate entity, they're a multitude. They covenant each with each, which means that there is no entity that could be conceived to contract with a ruler, because there is no entity which is the people. So the two planks of the parliamentarian platform are knocked away by Hobbes' account in Chapter 17 of how we should really think about covenants. So there's a second body of literature that I think you have to see as being in Hobbes' sights in Leviathan.

Jon Pike
So Livy's account of freedom and Henry Parker's account of parliamentary power both look like targets for Hobbes. What about the traditionalist defenders of the Divine Right of Kings?

Prof. Quentin skinner
I said that Hobbes is much concerned with writers whom he believes are concerned with too much liberty, but he's also anxious about writers who are concerned to give too much authority to our governments. And that I think must be a reference to the ideas of the Divine Right of Kings. In the hands of someone like Sir Robert Filmier circulating his patriarchal in the 1630's, and publishing in the 1640's, the assumption had been that politics is part of the order of nature given to us by God, and thus and here Filmier's Aristotelianism comes in, that politics must be seen as natural, just like family life according to Filmier is natural, so the power of kings is natural. Now, given that background, which was of course roughly the orthodox view of the Church of England about politics at the time, I think Hobbes' account of the state of nature has to be seen as a fiercely polemical rejection of that entire picture of the political world. For Hobbes the fundamental distinction is between nature and artifice, but the world of politics is the world of artifice, by which he means we make it ourselves. It's not part of nature, nothing is given, we have to consent explicitly to any arrangements that are set up, and we set them up ourselves. So in a way Hobbes is saying, 'Look, that is what the radicals say, but they're not wrong'. In a way what Leviathan is trying to show you is, you can accept all those radical premises of the social contract and still be an absolutist. And of course Filmier noticed that. When he wrote on Hobbes, he said, 'I like the doctrine, I just don't like its foundations'.

Jon Pike
That's some very useful information about the intellectual context of Leviathan. Let me be cheeky, though, and ask you what difference such information might make to our understanding of Hobbes.

Prof. Quentin skinner
Well, it's not cheeky, it's a critical question, and the concessive answer has to be that if we're treating this as a science of politics based on tracing the implications of definitions, then it doesn't make any difference at all. Those definitions can be readily understood in the 21st as well as in the 17th Century, and you can read it. Where it does make a huge difference is if we're asking a slightly different question: Why is Hobbes preoccupied by certain concepts? Why peace? Why freedom? Why the covenant? It's not set in stone that politics has got to be like this, and the answer to the question why are those the concepts that most deeply preoccupy him, absolutely requires you to understand the sort of intellectual context that I've offered.

Jon Pike
Okay Quentin, you mentioned in Chapter 21 Hobbes' account of freedom as the absence of external constraint. Now that's a notion that ties in with his account of human nature and the nature of man earlier on, which is essentially a materialist account. How do you see Hobbes' materialist account of human beings playing a role in his wider political philosophy?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Right. Well, I think the short answer is that it plays a role especially in relation to the concept of freedom, and in two ways, and I'll come on to that in a moment, but of course the first point to make is that you're absolutely right to say that Hobbes is an out-and-out materialist, and he even says in his verse autobiography which he wrote in his old age, that only reality is matter in motion. Really that's all there is. As always with Hobbes there's something deeply anti-Aristotelian there because Aristotle is the great philosopher who tells us that the world is roughly as it appears. Hobbes, like many 17th Century iconoclasts and Descartes is another great example, thinks that the real underlying truth about the world is that it's nothing like what it appears, and what it really is just motion. So, man – that's to say mankind – is part of the order of nature, and everything that's true of nature will just in the same way be true of mankind. So now let's think about freedom. The freedom of man's body is going to be like the freedom of a body of water, Hobbes' own example in Chapter 21, that's to say a body of water is free, that's to say according to its nature it is free to roll downhill, not to roll uphill, that's against its nature. And it's free so long as nobody puts a dam in the way, there's an obstruction. And if there is a dam in the way it's not free. So absence of freedom is simply presence of obstruction. And what Hobbes does amazingly, is to apply that to human action, and to say human action is free if and only if it is unobstructed. So the second point to make there would be in that case there's metaphysics of freedom which is that there can be no free will. A free action is not a free action because it's freely willed, it's simply because it's unobstructed. So notice an extremely – as you say in your wonderful notes on the text – an extremely elegant form of compatibles in Hobbes, that's to say he rescues the notion of free action although he's a complete determinist. And how do you do that? Well you say, 'Of course there is no freedom of the will because the will is caused, and the will is itself the cause of actions'. So there's a casual chain that goes back Hobbes says, if you like, to the mind of God. But it doesn't mean that there isn't free action, although it's always caused. As long as it's unobstructed, it's free. So there is the way in which the materialism really enters the heart of both the metaphysics and the political philosophy.

Jon Pike
In the build-up to the account of the state of nature Hobbes gives us an account of power and particularly of a human desire for power after power. Does Hobbes do you think give us a persuasive account of this desire?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Well it's a very reductionist account, it certainly fits on to what we've said about his materialism, that these bodies have a conatus, they're in pursuit of a certain end, and the end is their own power, and that we're ruled by passions to engage in that pursuit. But even according to Hobbes himself, it isn't quite as simple as that because there's a strange fissuring of that theory which I commend to students' attention because it's very little noticed but there it is running as a different vein through the text, the discussion of generous natures, who are people who are able to control this power, and who out of pride are anxious to obey

the law, who don't have to be coerced by fear. So there are actually two sorts of personalities in Hobbes' theory, a point rather rarely noticed.

But what I would want to say is that whether or not it's persuasive, Hobbes rhetorically has to have this analysis especially in Chapter 13, because what he wants you above all to believe is that the only alternative to absolutism is chaos. Now that is the rhetorical fulcrum of the book. Either you have Leviathan or you have war.

Now in order to persuade you of that there's got to be a chapter which is about what it's like not to have absolutism. And that is Chapter 13. The natural condition of mankind which would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short, because it would be a condition as he says memorably in the Latin '*De Cive of bellum omnium contra omnes*' – a war of everyone against everyone else. And the power of that chapter, I think, unusually for Hobbes, is not so much an analytical as a rhetorical power. It's a huge rhetorical portrait of what it would be like to live without government. And incidentally, it strikes me as being a kind of obverse of the primitivist account that Montaigne in his essay *On The Cannibals*, had given of how much nicer it would be to live without government. Hobbes picks up a great deal from Montaigne here, and recycles it as a vehement rhetorical denunciation of the idea that we could ever be autonomously able to govern ourselves.

Jon Pike
In the last few decades some interpreters of Hobbes have approached his work using the rather formal analysis, characteristic of game theory. How wise do you think it is, or how useful do you think it is, to interpret Hobbes' account of the state of nature in these sorts of terms?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Yes, well I like the way you distinguish wise and useful. I think it has been extremely useful in that it provides a grid for thinking about some of the most difficult crux's in Hobbes' text not just in that chapter, but in the discussion in Chapter 15 of the Fool. But I'm not sure that it's wise because the grid that it imposes on Hobbes' text is completely anachronistic, and there's a danger of criticising him for failing to ask questions which wasn't part of his project to ask. I don't have anything very interesting to say about this I'm afraid, except that I don't feel that anyone has understood that celebrated crux about the Fool very well. I'll leave it at that except to say that one thing that nobody seems to have said about the famous crux about the Fool, "who seethe in his heart that there is no justice" which of course is a deliberate mistranslation of the opening of Psalm 14, 'what the fool hath said' according to the psalm, 'in his heart is that there is no God', so there's a very dramatic change in Hobbes. But what Hobbes then goes on to say is, "he seethe in his heart, and sometimes with his voice", and I think that the power of rhetoric is something that Hobbes always hates and fears, and what that may mean that he's a fool is that he's said it.

Jon Pike
Moving on from the famous account of the state of nature in Chapter 13, we find at the start of Chapter 14 that Hobbes introduces the right of nature. What does he mean when he's writing about this right of nature?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Yes he means something very peculiar from the perspective of our normal understanding of a right, which I suppose has been greatly affected by utilitarianism, in which theory a right is simply the shadow of a duty. Not all for Hobbes. A right is simply a liberty to use your power as you will yourself, so it doesn't correlate with obligation at all. It is a bare liberty of action, and that is a very striking analysis of the notion of a right because it equates rights with rights of action. Whereas we might want to talk in addition of rights of resilience, Hobbes simply wants to talk about freedoms, and so it's a demoralised notion of a right, and the image is of, shall we say you know, the tree in the wilderness and there's only one apple and both of us have liberty to use our power to get it. And we're in completely demoralised circumstances in the sense that they are not moral circumstances.

Now it's very important also that Hobbes because this is simply a mistake that a lot of people have made about the text, that when he tells us that the summary of the right of nature is 'do all that you can to preserve yourself', he is not offering a psychological generalisation. He's not saying, 'in general people seek to do all they can to preserve themselves'. He thinks that that is generally true, but that's not what he says. What he says is that if they take all the means they can to preserve themselves, that is blameless because it is a right, and a right is simply a blameless liberty.

Jon Pike
Where morality does seem to enter in, is in this enumeration of the laws of nature.

Prof. Quentin skinner
Yes absolutely. There are effectively I think three things that Hobbes wants you to understand about the laws of nature, and each one moralises them deeply. And the first is, and we've got to bite the bullet here, Hobbes does say that the laws of nature are also and are the same as the laws of God. I've got a quotation here, this is actually later, Chapter 26. 'Heaven and Earth shall pass but not one title of the law of nature shall pass for it is the eternal law of God'. There's the first thing he wants you to understand. The second, which comes up in Chapter 14 as you've rightly said, is that the laws of nature are also exactly the same as the traditional list of the moral virtues. It's the same list, and that's what he says at the end of Chapter 14, and finally, they are the means to peace, and since peace is the whole aspiration of politics they're moralised yet a third time.

Jon Pike
So we can read the laws of nature, first as divine commands, as God's word, God's law. Second as moral principles and third as simple councils of prudence, as sensible guides to our self-preservation. This raises the question of motivation, doesn't it? Why should I go around obeying the laws of nature?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Yes, well your account is absolutely right and this is the moment to say something negative, which is there's been a whole literature which has suggested that the answer to your question is that you obey the laws of nature because they are the laws of God, and that God is the law giver who commands you to do so.

Now Hobbes does say often, and I quoted him, that the laws of nature are the laws of God, but I defy you to find any place in Leviathan where he says that you obey them because they are the laws of God. On the contrary, you obey them because as you say they are maxims of reason, and it is reason which obliges you to obey them, and reason which forbids you to disobey them. And Hobbes says at the end of his discussion, they are improperly called laws, for they are but theorems conducive to the conservation of mankind. And you follow those theorems and are obliged to follow them if you in fact want peace, because they are also the means to peace. Now actually you do above all want peace and that's what it means to say that you are obliged by reason to follow them.

Jon Pike
Perhaps the most dramatic chapter of Leviathan is Chapter 13, but different interpreters, different commentators give different accounts of where the crux is in the book. For example C.B. McPherson has argued that the real work's done before we get to Chapter 13, and notably you argue that Chapter 16 of Leviathan is absolutely critical in understanding Hobbes' political philosophy. Why do you regard it as so important?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Good. Well, I think the first thing I'd like to say about Chapter 16 is that it's a completely new set of thoughts on Hobbes' part. It's important to remember that the Leviathan is Hobbes' third attempt at his political theory. He circularised very widely a text which he called '*The Elements of Law*' in 1640, and he published in Latin his '*De Cive*' in 1642. Neither of those earlier versions of the text has anything resembling Chapter 16 which is called 'Of Persons'.

Now the reason that I think of 'Of Persons' as such a pivotal chapter in Leviathan, is the very fact that it's a new chapter suggests that Hobbes has seen something for the first time that's really worrying him about his own presentation of his political theory, and he tried to get at it. And I think that's so and I'll come to what that is in a moment. But the other way in which the chapter is pivotal is, as it were, to be seen by looking at the table of contents, there are four books in Leviathan and the first is called 'Of Man'. Chapter 16 is the final chapter of 'Of Man'. It's the end of the world of nature, and it is the beginning of the world of artifice which is Book 2, which is 'Of A Commonwealth'. So it's literally the pivot, it's the hinge that takes you from the world of nature into the world of artifice. And what is that hinge? It's given by understanding what a person is because Hobbes distinguishes natural persons and artificial persons.

Now, I think that the reason in terms of the economy of the theory why I want to say this is the chapter we've got to understand is that I take Leviathan to be a theory of the state. Now so does Hobbes, and the very first thing that Hobbes says is that he has written a book – this is in his own introduction – about that great Leviathan, which he says is called The Commonwealth or State, which of course is our word. It is a theory of the state. Now any theory of the state runs into two immediate and obvious problems which remain with us to this day and one is how do you distinguish a legitimate state from mere usurpation. And the other is, if the state is the name of the sovereign, and yet the name is the name of a mere abstraction for after all the state as Hobbes says at one point, is nothing, it is 'but a word'. How can it nevertheless be the case that it's the state which declares war and peace and puts criminals in jail? Now Hobbes' answer to those questions, that's to say, 'what makes it possible to say that the state is sovereign, and what makes it possible to ask is this sovereign legitimate?' Both of those questions according to Hobbes require a theory of persons, and that's why it's the pivotal chapter.

Jon Pike
So what is Hobbes' theory of persons?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Yes well Hobbes' theory of persons is theatrical through and through. Persons are understood entirely in relation to the concept of representation, or representing someone or as he sometimes say, 'personating them', impersonating them. Now there are two kinds of persons according to the opening sentence of Chapter 16. There are natural persons, and there are artificial persons, and to understand Hobbes' theory of the state what you have to understand is what sort of a person the state is because the state is a person, and it must be because it acts, for example it declares war and puts you in jail, and only a person could do that.

Now a natural person is, well I suppose you're a natural person, though by no means all human beings are natural persons, although all natural persons are human beings. A natural person is roughly speaking in Hobbes' society a sane adult male, that's to say someone who can represent themselves, who is as Hobbes says at one memorable moment 'their own person'. Now, lots of people are not their own person, although they're human, for example children, because they're not legally their own person. Madmen he says, because they can't take responsibility for their actions. And I suspect also servants are not their own person because it's the right of their master to speak for them, and that is an extraordinary thought because twenty percent of people in Hobbes' England would have been sane adult male servants. So, the notion of a natural person is by no means coterminous even with a sane adult male. But if there are any natural persons they are going to be sane adult males. I doubt, by the way, if wives are natural persons because their husbands can speak for them, but widows almost certainly are.

So they're the natural person. Now what is an artificial person? An artificial person is an agent capable of action, but not capable of representing themselves, so there's an artificial person can act, but only if somebody else acts in the name of that person. Now there is an absolutely fundamental but very illusive notion in Hobbes that I've just articulated there, the notion that there are two sorts of actions. There are actions that you and I can perform, but there are also actions that can be attributed to someone, or indeed Hobbes says 'something',

which although they are not performed by the relevant agent, nevertheless count as the actions of that agent because that agent takes responsibility for them. Now you can see where the state as a person lies on Hobbes' map. The state is an artificial person. The state can act, that's to say it can put you in jail, but only if someone acts in its name.

Now the question then about the state is, who has the right to act in its name, because that will answer the second problem about the state which is 'how do you distinguish usurpation from a legitimate state?' And Hobbes has a very interesting answer to that, which again appears in neither of the earlier versions of this political theory, but is arguably the central concept of the political theory of Leviathan. And you can give the answer in one word, and it is 'authorisation'.

The state legitimately acts if the person who acts in the name of the state is authorised to act in the name of the state. Now who can that be? Only the sovereign, Hobbes says. The sovereign is the name of the person who bears the person of the state, that's to say impersonates it, represents it, acts on its behalf and in its name. But who has the right to tell the sovereign to act in the name of the state? Who authorises the sovereign? And the answer to that takes us right back to the beginning of our conversation, and Hobbes' discussion of the multitude. The answer is each and every person who covenants, thereby authorises the sovereign to act in the name of the state. And there is the very intricate theory of the person of the state that Hobbes lays out. The state is an artificial person represented by a sovereign, and authorised by you and me.

Jon Pike
It follows from this account, does it not, that when the state acts in some sense that's me acting myself. What does this tell us about the capacity to resist the state?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Well, good point. It tells you that there is no such capacity, and for a very interesting reason which is that if you asked for the power to resist you would be asking for a self-contradiction. We can see how this comes about just by reminding ourselves of the structure of concepts here. You and I convent together to authorise a sovereign to represent the state. Now that turns us into a person, because we are made a person in virtue of having a representative. But if you ask what legitimises the actions of our representative, the answer is we have authorised the sovereign to represent the state, but that is equivalently to say, according to Hobbes, that we, that's to say you and I, are the authors of the actions of the sovereign performed in the name of the state. So you and I are the authors of the acts of the state. So if you ask for the power to limit or resist the actions of the state you're simply asking for the power to limit or resist your own actions and that is a self contradictory demand, and that's the extremely subtle way in which Hobbes' theory of personating, absolutely knocks out theories of resistance.

Jon Pike
If I might draw a contrast ahead as it were, what we find in Locke's *Second Treatise* of Government is an argument that justifies resistance to the sovereign, and the basis of that resistance seems to be something like the loan of power to the sovereign, rather than handing it over on a once-and-for-all basis. Is that the right sort of comparison to draw?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Exactly. I think that it would be worth saying that a rather crass but not altogether misleading remark you could make here is that John Locke's *Second Treatise* of Government recycles Henry Parker's observations that we talked about earlier. The structure of concepts and even some of the vocabulary are startlingly similar, and that what Locke has in common with Parker is the desire to say two things that Hobbes has the deep desire to contest. First that the people should be conceived of as a body in pre-political conditions, a universitas, or a society as Locke likes to call them. And that they should be conceived to entrust the powers that they have to some certain person or persons for their own benefit, so that the relationship between government and governed is seen as a contract, and in the form of a limited trust which, if the terms of the trust are broken, licences resistance, and not merely resistance by the body of the people but as you rightly say in Locke, by any one man as he says in the

Appeal to Heaven in the Discussion of Prerogative. Now of course, as we were talking about earlier in my speaking of Hobbes' wish to reply to parliamentarian theory, which Locke is recycling, it's exactly that picture of a limited and rescindable trust which Hobbes designs his theory to try to knock out.

Jon Pike
We've got this big authoritarian theory from Hobbes in which the sovereign has tremendous power, but it has been argued that Hobbes' authoritarianism is unstable, because he does, in the end, reserve a very small legitimate area of resistance for subjects. Do you think this introduces instability into the theory?

Prof. Quentin skinner
A very good point. I think it does, and I would like to make the distinction that you there make between introducing instability and introducing inconsistency. It looks as if any theory of resistance is going to be an inconsistency just because what we've already been saying about how disobeying the sovereign would be disobeying yourself. But Hobbes is always very keen, since he thinks of politics as entirely constructed by us for our purposes, he's always very keen on our motivations for that construction. And the entire motivation for having this authoritarian construction is that it will be for your protection, and that's to say fundamentally for the protection of your life and liberty.

Now if that is so, there are things which the sovereign cannot in justice ask you to do, because they would be just those things that would gravely endanger your life or liberty. Now that's not an inconsistency to say that in those circumstances you would have a right to disobey and even resist, because you never covenanted to have your life or liberty threatened. On the contrary the whole point of the covenant was to avoid your life and liberty being threatened. And so there is, as you say, this small space, although it's quite a large space even in relation to modern states, because the Leviathan for example cannot conscript you. It can't compel you to be a soldier, because you know that could be dangerous. And the whole point of the covenant was to get out of danger to your life.

You also cannot be compelled to kill yourself or any of your fellow citizens, because you never covenanted that you should be asked to take away your own life or anyone else's. Preservation was always the motivation. There is finally an extraordinary image in this discussion in Chapter 21 that I'm citing, which is that you have a residual right – always – to save your own life, so if you're justly condemned and you're on the scaffold and you're about to be executed, you have a right to try to fight off your executioner. And this is all because as Hobbes says, 'the end of obedience is protection'. So there is this residual right as you correctly pointed out at the beginning. It is not an inconsistency. It follows from the character of the covenant.

Jon Pike
Perhaps surprisingly, Hobbes has been of particular and special interest to feminist political philosophers such as Carol Pateman. Why do you think that is?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Well I mustn't speak for Carol, but it seems tome that Hobbes is of particular interest from the perspective of feminism, because of a number of ways in which he and this is in virtue of his theory, is remarkably emancipated from the patriarchal assumptions common in the 17th Century society. And maybe I could just gesture at three elements in his theory that seem to me to produce that emancipated effect. Well, one is something which we've already talked about, namely his theory of artifice. The world of politics for Hobbes is entirely a world of artifice, so nothing in that political realm is natural. So families are not in that sense natural, they are legal entities, I mean of course there could be – as he says in Book 1 – a coupling of male and female based on affection, but that's not what we mean by a family which would allow for the transfer of property, the having of wills, rights of children and so forth. If that's what we mean by a family then it's part of the world of artifice. Now, if even families are part of the world of artifice, there's nothing answering to the Filmerian notion of natural subordination, so there's not even a natural subordination of women to men, and there is a

very emancipated thought for the 17th Century, but it follows immediately from the idea that we are constructing all of this, nothing is given.

A second element of Hobbes' theory, which we've also talked about, that gives rise to an unusually emancipated view about the relations of men and women, is his account of representation. According to Hobbes, there's no reason whatever why a representative should have to resemble the persons represented, and of course that's part of his attack on Parliament and especially on the levellers, who though that you couldn't have a proper theory of representation unless everyone was represented, so the poor with the rich and people who lived in the north as well as people who lived in the south and so forth. Hobbes says that's ridiculous. A representative is simply somebody authorised, there's no reason why one person shouldn't represent everyone. Moreover he says, although people are gendered, authority is not, so there's no reason why this representative person shouldn't be a woman. And Hobbes is quite explicit, that we can be Queen's Regent, which of course was disallowed at the time in the law of France, as well as King's Regent. Moreover he says, if you have a Queen Regent, and she marries one of her own subjects, then her children are in obedience to put her above their father, because their father is her subject. And again that's rather remarkable talk for the 17th Century.

The third point I'd want to make is that Hobbes' theory of obligation generates a remarkably egalitarian view of the sexes and indeed in this case a kind of feminist preference, if I could stretch it that far. Remember as we've said on several occasions in our conversation, that the end of obedience is protection, as Hobbes says. The ground of your obeying anyone is that they are able to protect you. Now who is the first person who protects you? It's always your mother, and of course in the natural condition of mankind it might only be your mother, because there might be no family. But under any circumstances the prime person to whom you own obedience is not your father but your mother.

Jon Pike
So, to sum up you've outlined three reasons why Hobbes could be viewed favourably from a feminist perspective. First, is the artificial rather than the natural basis of politics, and that includes the family. The second reason is the way in which representation is not sexually specific, and the third reason is the way in which obedience is owed by children to mothers in the state of nature. Well, that's one way in which Hobbes looks like quite a modern writer. Let me ask you Quentin finally, why should we read Hobbes today? What are the enduring features of his political philosophy?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Ah well, that's the most important question of all, so we should doubtless end with it. Let me split that up because in a way I'm inclined being an historian to think that there could be a non-sequitur there, even if nothing had endured about Hobbes' philosophy in the sense of there being propositions that we should be disposed to affirm. Nevertheless I think that there are powerful reasons for still reading Hobbes. And one – if you don't mind my saying this – is simply the extraordinary literary quality of the work. To which I'd like to add that since it's a work which is fiercely engaged at all points polemically with its opponents, it's also, as it happens, a wonderfully funny book to read because they're mostly satirised in the most withering way, and much of the text as I say is just wonderfully funny to read. So it is also one of the greatest works of 17th Century prose, and well worth trying to approach I think in purely literary terms. So that would be a kind of literary historian's insistence that things don't have to endure in the sense of 'look like us' for us to think them important.

I mean *Paradise Lost* doesn't look very much like us, written at exactly the same time we would nevertheless think there's another sense in which it endures. However, much of Hobbes does endure, and here there's a kind of contingency that we have to take account of which is of the extraordinary impact which social contract theory of the 17th Century and of the 18th, and here I'm thinking particularly of Hobbes and of Locke and of Rousseau, simply happened to have upon all subsequent thinking about politics. So that the grid of concepts they set up, the notion of a state of nature with rights, the idea of a political covenant of some kind of trust, the idea that that generates obligation, the notion that we're talking here about something called 'the state', that the state has obligations as well as rights, and that that

includes an obligation of protection and the right of punishment, that the whole structure just happens to be the structure that we have, we still think in exactly those terms. So there are many points in which we can if we wish, quite straightforwardly seek to sharpen our wits by arguing with this person, who is of course amongst our betters as well as our elders. And they are about a number of the questions we've talked about. He has an interesting account of what a right is, has an interesting account which we haven't actually talked about, of what justifies punishment. He thinks that revenge, for example, has no place at all in punishment, and that it must be entirely to do with deterrents. He has a very interesting account of how we should think about the character of the state, and associated view about the general philosophy of action, and so on. In a way this would be to summarise our whole conversation, but I think it is very striking that the structure of Hobbes' theory is the structure that we have inherited and still employ, and for that reason if no other, there is a sense in which we can engage absolutely directly with Hobbes.

Jon Pike
It seems to me true that the concepts and categories of the social contract tradition of Hobbes and Locke and Rousseau are the categories that structure contemporary thought about politics, but especially in Hobbes, those categories seem to be based on a very pessimistic account of human nature, so the social contract is required partly because of the appalling ways in which we would behave to each other in its absence. Do you think this pessimistic account of human nature is plausible and persuasive?

Prof. Quentin skinner
Well not altogether. I agree, and I think this points to something that C.B. McPherson put very well, which is that Hobbes presents as an account of man, what might be thought an account of 17th Century English males. And 17th Century English males were for excellent reasons in a deeply pessimistic mood, and I think that we do really have to get back to the social context in which this work was conceived to end with if we're going to do justice to Hobbes' pessimism. This is a theory overwhelmingly marked by the experience of civil war and the chaos that ensued. Hobbes' pessimism is probably over-emphasised except when we reflect that those were the circumstances in and for which this text was written, and the problems that it was designed to solve. If you think of that, what you think of is someone who is pleading for peace above everything else. It is a book about the supreme importance of acquiring peace. You might say pessimism about human nature is prudent in political theory because it will avoid getting you caught out, and sometimes Hobbes does talk like that. But I think he is marked by his time, and that his pessimism does give rise to some of the more unnameable features of his theory, and it also gives rise to its fundamental structure. That's to say the view that if you're going to get peace what you have to recognise, although you won't want to recognise this, is that you've got to give up all discretion as citizens in relation to the law, hand over all your rights, and trust someone to rule on your behalf.

Jon Pike
Quentin Skinner, thank you very much.

Prof. Quentin skinner
Thank you too Jon, I've greatly enjoyed myself.