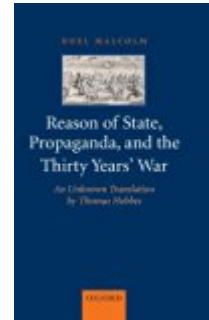


Noel Malcolm. *Reason of State, Propaganda, and the Thirty Years' War: An Unknown Translation by Thomas Hobbes.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007. x + 227 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-921593-5.



Reviewed by Paul Sonnino

Published on H-HRE (January, 2008)

Thomas Hobbes was probably one of the most personally timid and intellectually intrepid individuals of his time, and any new insights that we can gather into his life and thought are priceless. Thus the identification by Noel Malcolm of a manuscript in the British Museum as being in Hobbes's own hand, along with its analysis and publication by this same scholar, is a welcome addition to our knowledge of Hobbes and furnishes me with some extremely fattening food for thought, more fattening, perhaps, than the well-informed and intellectually prudent Dr. Malcolm may be willing to absorb.

The manuscript is a translation from the original Latin, most likely undertaken by Hobbes himself, of a mischievous pamphlet titled "*Altera serenissima instructio*," published in 1626 in the midst of what would become known as the Thirty Years' War. Under the guise of giving friendly advice to the Calvinist Elector Palatine Frederick V, whose ill-fated attempt to replace the Catholic Ferdinand of Hapsburg (later Ferdinand II, Holy Roman Emperor) on the throne of Bohemia resulted in his own quick expulsion from both Bohemia

and the Palatinate, the pamphleteer bitterly tells Frederick that by seeking what belonged to another he had lost his own, ruined his friends, and isolated himself in a Europe full of princes who were not about to abandon their own "reasons of state" in order to bail him out. The pamphleteer, who showed a remarkable knowledge of the current discontent in England with the government of Frederick's brother-in-law, Charles I, then derides Frederick with some outrageous advice, such as becoming a champion of the English Presbyterians and replacing his brother-in-law on the throne. Brilliantly, Dr. Malcolm traces the origins of this pamphlet to the privy council of the imperial court in Vienna, which is a major scholarly achievement in itself, although he might have investigated further just how the pamphleteer obtained his familiarity with English affairs.

Dr. Malcolm's principal purpose, however, is to understand why Hobbes would have translated the pamphlet, and what this enterprise tells us about a little-known period of his intellectual development. Malcolm points out that Hobbes's first patron, William Cavendish, later Earl of Devon-

shire, "had more than adequate grasp of the Latin language" (p. 11). This patron, moreover, was a member of the parliamentary opposition to Charles I and most likely sympathetic to Frederick V. As for Hobbes's second patron, William Cavendish, Viscount Mansfield, he was less likely to have been intrigued by the polemics of a distant conflict. Since Malcolm dates the translation tentatively to 1627, he envisages the possibility that one or the other of the Cavendishes requested it, but he most prudently leaves this question open.

Hobbes's patrons aside, Dr. Malcolm concludes that Hobbes was demonstrating an early involvement with, if not interest in, sixteenth-century reason of state theories, which Malcolm, adhering to traditional wisdom, traces back to the ideas of Machiavelli.[1] Indeed, Malcolm makes a considerable effort, as the title of his book suggests, to align Hobbes's political theory with that of reason of state, an effort which does not entirely come off, and Malcolm himself is not entirely persuaded by his own argument. He cannot help but admit that "the overall flavour of [Hobbes's] work is very different. Just as his writing lacks detailed instructions on the art of government, so too it virtually ignores all the case histories of political and military actions" (p. 118). It is surprising to me that Malcolm, who is coming so tantalizingly close, does not break through to the conclusion of his own syllogism, which I hereby dare to furnish, namely that *Hobbes has very little to do either with reason of state or with Machiavelli!* The reason of state theorists, along with Machiavelli, presumed to be giving instruction to *princes* on how to rule. Hobbes was personally too timid to do such a thing. On the contrary, in each and every one of his major works, he attempted to give advice to *people* not to revolt. That is why his writing lacks instructions on the art of government. That is why one of his books is titled *De Cive* or *On the Citizen* (1642). That is why the only hint of instruction on the art of government that he gives to sovereigns in the *Leviathan*

(1651) is that they should read his book and protect "the public teaching of it." [2]

If one revisits the "Altera serenissima instructio" from this perspective, its charm for Hobbes himself, irrespective of the curiosity of his patrons, becomes immediately apparent. What Hobbes liked about it was that it reproached Frederick with having abandoned his status as part of the Leviathan and placed himself in the situation of a rebel. The inevitable that followed, the loss of his own possessions, the ruin of his friends, and the indifference of his peers, was what happened to anyone who abandoned what Hobbes would later define as the "social contract" and reentered into what Hobbes would later define as "the state of nature." Here was a piece worthy of translating and presenting to his own countrymen, who, from Hobbes's point of view, were blindly plunging into the same abyss.

Why, then, did the translation remain unpublished? Let me hazard a guess, once again based on Hobbes's personal timidity. Hobbes may have translated the work with alacrity, but as he looked over his translation, he must have thought twice about insulting Frederick, who was extremely popular in England, and thrice about what the pamphleteer was recommending that Frederick do *vis-a-vis* his own brother-in-law. Even in jest, this was a suggestion with which no person of Hobbes's disposition would have wanted to be associated. Not to speak of the fact that, as Dr. Malcolm points out, the government itself was pursuing distributors of the Latin version of the pamphlet. And so Hobbes put the work away for Dr. Malcolm to find it.

Hobbes, however, did not abandon his *idée fixe*. If a discussion of the troubled state of England was just a little bit too touchy, he had a book at his disposal which did the job better and much more discretely, namely Thucydides' *Histories*. Here was a book that conveniently began by describing the primitive state of Greece in a manner that prefigured what Hobbes would later define

as the "state of nature." Here was a book in which the Athenians prided themselves on having stepped forward to establish an empire, over which they ruled by a combination of power and enlightened self-interest. Here was a book in which the Athenians departed from the advice of their wise governors and placed themselves in the hands of demagogues. Here was a book that demonstrated the fragility of what Hobbes would later define as the "social contract," and how easily a civilized society could degenerate into barbarism. And here was a book on which Hobbes could comfortably affix his name to the title page without obtrusively entering the political fray.

The jury is still out on the exact dating of Hobbes's translation of Thucydides. The most likely scenario, however, is that Hobbes had been working on it for years, and as he himself wrote in the preface, "it lay long by mee, and other reasons taking place, my desire to communicate it ceased." [3] The "other reasons" may have been that his first patron was part of the parliamentary opposition, and Hobbes may have been hesitant to displease him in any way. This makes it all the more striking that Hobbes would have summoned up the courage to register his translation with the Company of Stationers on March 18, 1628, three months or so before his patron died. If this chronology is correct, therefore, the combination of the two translations confirms the consistency of Hobbes's private thought, and reveals to us a fascinating psychological moment in his life, where we see him reaching a *modus vivendi* between his timidity and his convictions.

It may also be hoped that Malcolm's discovery will help to revise the received opinion of Hobbes as the poster boy for the rise of the state. If Hobbes was aware of anything, he was aware of the weakness of any state, even a so-called absolute monarchy. If Hobbes would have given rulers any specific advice, it would have been not to rock the boat, either internationally or domestically. This was certainly the moral of the "Alter

serenissima instructio," whose foolish villain, Frederick V, had been both a bad ruler and a bad subject. In this respect the "Alter serenissima instructio" supplements the moral that Hobbes derives from Thucydides, and thereby adds another dimension to our understanding of Hobbes. Dr. Malcolm, in any event, deserves the highest praise for his admirable blend of erudition and stimulation.

Notes

[1]. Please see my own critique of the traditional wisdom in the introduction to my edition of Frederick of Prussia's *Anti-Machiavel* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), where I point out that Machiavelli never used the expression "reason of state" and might well have deprecated it; and in the introduction to my edition of Machiavelli's *Prince* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey and London: Humanities Press, 1995), where I attempt a more detailed reinterpretation of Machiavelli's ideas.

[2]. Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan, or, The matter, forme, & power of a common-wealth ecclesiastical and civill* (London, Printed for Andrew Crooke, 1651), Ch. 31, p. 193.

[3]. Thucydides, *Eight Bookes of the Peloponnesian Warre*, tr. Thomas Hobbes (London, Imprinted for Hen: Seile, and are to be sold at the Tigris Head in Paules Churchyard, 1629), "To the Readers."

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-hre>

Citation: Paul Sonnino. Review of Malcolm, Noel. *Reason of State, Propaganda, and the Thirty Years' War: An Unknown Translation by Thomas Hobbes*. H-HRE, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14059>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.