

## Towards a Politics of Mediation: Self, Society, and the State in Hobbes, Marx, and the Shantiparva

ANURADHA VEERAVALLI

Humanity is in a condition of public war against every man and private war of each man with himself.

Plato, *Laws I*

This paper attempts to contrast and compare what may be called a politics of duty with a politics of rights, and the consequences they have for a theory of the self or man, society, and the state. The texts chosen for this purpose are the 'Shantiparva' from the *Mahābhārata*, as an example of the former point of view, and Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (EPM)*, as two different formulations of the latter point of view.

The focus of this paper is the possibility of mediation between being in the world and renouncing it, between the pursuit of wealth, power, and pleasure, and the pursuit of morality and self realization, and between sovereignty in society and the state, and sovereignty of the self. This is discussed with reference to the state of nature, the nature of society and that of the state.

The state of nature in Hobbes is one where all men are considered essentially equal in ability of mind and body and therefore are in constant competition due to a conflict of interests, security, and glory. There is no space for industry and man's life is, in the oft quoted phrase, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (*Leviathan*, p. 143). According to Hobbes, this is no fault of man because, after all, there is no law that forbids them from doing what they are doing:

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues, justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body, nor the mind. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude. (*Leviathan*, p. 145).

Man has the right to self-preservation in the state of nature but the needs of competition exceed and overrule the needs of preservation.

Therefore, the law of nature is born out of prudence – to have a covenant with other men exchanging their rights of self-preservation, and to have a sovereign to make sure that men keep their promise to follow the covenant. This is the origin of justice in Hobbes. Society and the state come into existence simultaneously. There can be no society without the social contract and society is an ‘artificial’ construct. Justice, therefore, has only legal but not social or moral foundation.

According to Hobbes, man’s essential nature is to be free to do whatever he wants to do provided he does not interfere with the rights of others to be equally free. Thus freedom is defined with respect to the relationship between man and man and between man and sovereignty. There can be no covenant between man and sovereignty, since men have given the right of maintaining peace and security to sovereignty and he has an unquestioned right to restrict freedom and adjudicate.

Marx opposes this view of a contrived or constructed society. For him, ‘Above all we must avoid postulating “society” again as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual is the social being’. (*EPM*, p. 92). The proof of this lies in the act of creation and procreation which involves more than one human being. This Marx calls ‘the species-act of human beings’. (*EPM*, p. 99). However, the alienation of man ‘... changes for him the life of the species into a means of individual life’. (*EPM*, p. 68). And the history of man can be understood in terms of a series of revolutions in the changing modes of production which have led to class antagonism and the ultimate alienation of man from the modes of production, the product of labour, of man from man, and of man from nature. Communism, when it transcends private property, which is an outcome of alienation, is, as it were, a solution to these developments in history.

This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism, it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution. (*EPM*, p. 90).

What Marx understood to be the essence of man’s nature, or man in the state of nature can perhaps be seen from his description of unalienated man: ‘Assume man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust etc.’ (*EPM*, p. 123). Thus it is not any ‘contract’ which civilizes, it is man’s essential nature to be so. This is an important difference from Hobbes since there is, in spite of the alienation from one’s true nature, a

possibility of overcoming it, whereas in Hobbes, it goes against man's nature to be in society.

According to the Shantiparva, in the beginning men protected each other righteously. But decadence set in and men became greedy and wrathful and lost all consideration of right and wrong. The gods were worried by this and requested Vishnu, the grandsire of the Universe, to do something about it.

In response, he composed a treatise on the triple aggregate, *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*. Then he dealt with *mokṣa* (liberation) which had opposite meaning and attributes. In relation to *mokṣa*, he dealt with another triple aggregate – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tāmas*. These constitute that which is manifest (*Prakṛti*) according to the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. *Sattva* illuminates, *rajas* activates/agitates and *tāmas* restrains. *Sattva* alone cannot bring about self-realization but it is the predominance of *sattva* over *rajas* and *tāmas* that makes it possible. Vishnu deals with a fourth along with these three – *niṣkāmakarma* or the performance of action without desire for the fruit thereof. Finally, there is the triple aggregate of conservation, growth, and destruction in society with respect to *daṇḍanīti* (the science of chastisement) or the science of the administration of justice. Here, there is the study of the hearts of men, place, time, overt acts, alliances, and causes.

Etymologically, *puruṣārtha*, referring to the four human goals, *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa* can also mean the embodiment of Puruṣa – the Self/Soul in the universe. Understood this way, the *puruṣārthas* refer both to the microcosm (man) as well as the macrocosm (the universe). Thus *dharma* is 'that which supports' not merely society but all creation and it is not an accident that the Shantiparva defines *dharma* as that which is for the good of all creatures.

From the context of the treatise we can see that its problem is the mediation between being in this world and seeking liberation from it, between state craft and the life of self-realization and renunciation, which, as we have seen, can equally well be looked at as the soul of the universe/cosmos, or the soul of man seeking manifestation in this world. *Niṣkāmakarma* is the method of this mediation – not the renunciation of the world and all that is worldly, but the renunciation of the fruits of one's actions. Thus renunciation cannot be a matter of running away from the world; it is liberation achieved from living righteously, and having completed one's *dharma* in this world. This is the basis of *daṇḍanīti* as well as all other activity in society.

The intervention of the gods and Vishnu need not then be dismissed as myths. Vishnu is entrusted with the duty of preservation of the earth

and represents the unmanifest law 'that only those actions, which take account of the good of all creation, can sustain man, society, and the cosmos'. The duty to implement this law on earth rests with the king. A king who is righteous in the performance of his duty is the *avatār* (incarnation) of God/Vishnu on Earth. The law and the lawgiver are one and the same, as Gandhi used to say.

This is a different understanding of freedom and selfhood from that of Hobbes and Marx. When Marx says that 'fully developed humanism equals naturalism' it is different from the Shantiparva talking of *dharma* as that which is for the good of all creatures. For Marx, 'naturalism' is a term essential to his atheism which does not permit talk of creaturehood or creation since there can be no 'creator'. His descriptions of unalienated man and the following discussions on 'industry' and natural science will reveal a Marx who is unable to come to terms with the dynamics of man's acquiring freedom/liberation from himself or from the world. There is, of course, a tongue-in-cheek appraisal of renunciation being a virtue in the political economy – only meant for labour and not the capitalist! But it doesn't go with the understanding that it is perhaps a conscious and determined renunciation that can contain the seeds of 'revolution'.

Hobbes is clear that there can be no covenant with 'brute beasts' because they do not possess the powers of reasoning. And this is only a prelude to the rejection of anyone who reasons differently from the members of the covenant! Again, there can be no covenant with God, except through a mediator, since it is impossible to know whether He accepts your covenant. Only the law of nature born of reason and prudence is binding – 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. (And this is the law of God as well.) Only 'others' here does not include God or nature.

Marx holds that it is impossible not to have a tacit covenant with nature as well. In fact, there is no need for a covenant, for man is a part of nature and vice versa.

Nature is man's *inorganic body* – nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself human body. Man *lives* on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature. (*EPM*, p. 67).

This relationship is given more concrete articulation in his discussion of natural science and what he calls 'industry' which may be said to include in its meaning notions of labour, modes of production, and the products of labour. 'Industry is the *actual*, historical relationship of nature, and therefore of natural science to man.' (*EPM*, p. 97).

According to Marx, natural science has become divorced from the science of man, though in time the science of man will become incorporated into natural science. However, he does not discuss what exactly the mode of production would be, to enable such incorporation. Nor does he see that the breach between the two is of a fundamental nature. Thus he is able to say: 'The nature which develops in human history – the genesis of human society – is man's real nature; hence nature as it develops through industry, even though in an estranged form, is true anthropological nature.' (*EPM*, p. 98).

This is surprising in so far as he argues that it is the modes of production which are fundamental to man's alienation from man and from nature and therefore his own nature. This diffidence in his criticism of natural science and of 'industry' thereof is again symptomatic of Marx's underplaying man's 'antagonism' with himself and emphasizing the war of man with man.

Marx seems to be carried away by his admiration for man's ability to 'work upon inorganic nature' which is proof of his 'conscious-species being' and distinguishes him from animals who produce only for their immediate physical need. Man is capable of creating a world of objects free from physical need: 'An animal produces only itself while man reproduces the whole of nature.' (*EPM*, p. 69).

The focus of this discussion enables one to see that Marx, in spite of recognizing the unity of man and nature, does not grant that in the eyes of the law of the sustenance of the universe both are equal – though they have different roles to perform.

This leads us to the crux of the difference, in Hobbes's, Marx's and the Shantiparva's understanding of 'equality'. For Hobbes it is the uniformity of initial conditions. All men are equal in ability of mind and body and therefore have an equal right to freedom (where private/personal freedom is seen as divorced from public freedom). This is the ground for the ultimate celebration of individual identity in liberal society though the argument is in terms of the minimum condition of the right of self-preservation.

One may argue that if this is so, the presuppositions of the liberal state in Hobbes are those that level down real differences – all talent, all strengths – physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual, are reduced to a naught for justice to be possible (the 'Original position' in Rawls). Each human being is equal just by being human, and one does not ask what it is to be human. *Apriori*, the fear is that no answer to this can be fair. Ironically, it is under these circumstances that advantages of power and wealth decide questions of right and wrong. This is only a more refined

version of the state of nature with the stamp of legitimacy given to it by the state coming into being.

In Marx, the unfair and unequal relation between capital and labour is a consequence of estrangement, and the use of money as a medium of exchange of value, 'the general distorting of individualities which turns them into their opposite and confers contradictory attitudes upon their attributes.' (*EPM*, p. 122).

However, this is perhaps, basically, an argument from within the tenets of liberal thought if seen in the context of its being a politics of rights. Marx argues for a society that will nurture the truly human qualities of man such that his 'conscious free will' is creative in its relation to the world. Of course, this is different from Hobbes in that Marx's understanding of what it is to be human involves an organic and necessary relationship with nature, and society.

If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultivated person; if you want to exercise influence over other people, you must be a person with stimulating and encouraging effect on other people. Everyone of your relations to man and to nature must be a specific expression, corresponding to the object of your will, of your real individual life. (*EPM*, p. 123).

This can be considered as saying that people should do what they have a real aptitude and ability for doing. But Marx's understanding that society should ultimately become classless is not sustained by an alternative structure in society. There is no recognition of the fact that society cannot be sustained unless there is a sharing of duties which can only be partly of your choice. Besides, for society to function, the problem of continuity has to be addressed. It cannot therefore be an arbitrary sharing of duties or picking of lots that will suffice.

The Shantiparva seems to recognize the need both for the reciprocity in the sharing of duties and for continuity. Thus the primary duty of the king is to prevent a confusion of duties on the basis of his knowledge of *daṇḍanīti*.

The science of chastisement [*daṇḍanīti*], which establishes all men in the observance of their respective duties, which is the groundwork of all wholesome distinctions, and which truly upholds the world and sets it agoing, if properly administered, protects all men like the mother and the father protecting their children. Know, O bull among men, that the very lives of creatures depend upon it. (Shanti Parva, p. 162)

This is not to say merely that duties are emphasized *vis-à-vis* rights. In fact, in the Shantiparva there is a complete absence of any discussion of the rights of man. Since self-realization (the embodiment of the self and the renunciation of the fruits of action) is the goal of man, society, and

the universe, each has a right (claim) over this goal. The emphasis, then, in society and the state, is on the rightness of the means and not on one's rights over the means. Given the rightness of the means, whatever their form or content, they hold equal potential for the attainment of this goal. It is in this context that the Shantiparva discusses the role of the *varnāśrama* classification in society.

It is said that the brahmana sprang from the mouth of Brahma, the kṣatriya from his arms, the vaishya from his thighs and for waiting upon these three orders, the sudra was created from the feet of Brahma.

The brahmana takes birth on earth as the lord of all creatures, his duty being to maintain the Vedas and to be the repository of all duties [dharmakoṣa]. The kṣatriya's duty is to rule the earth, wielding the rod of chastisement and to protect all creatures. The vaishya's duty is to support the two other orders by cultivation and trade, and brahmana ordained that the sudra should serve the other three orders.

But who does the Earth righteously belong to – the brahmana or the kṣatriya? To the brahmana. However, 'As a woman, in the absence of her husband, accepts his younger brother for him, even so the Earth, in consequence of the refusal of the Brahma, has accepted his next-born viz, the Kṣatriya, for her hold' (Shanti Parva, p. 166). Though, in times of distress there can be exceptions. Anyone from the other orders who can give protection should be respected.

This understanding of the four orders can be said to be hierarchical, prejudiced, and unjust – as has been said often of the caste system. However, one should note that there is an organic understanding of the relationship between the different duties that these groups have to perform in a way in which one cannot do without the other. This is seen in the fact that they all originate in Brahma. Besides when the Shantiparva discusses the duties of the four varans, it states that sacrifices should be performed by all orders 'by every means in their power'. Such a person who desires to perform sacrifice is regarded as righteous even if he happens to be a thief, a sinner of the worst kind.

The brahmana is the performer of the sacrifices of the three orders. For this reason all the four orders are holy. All the orders bear towards one another the relation of consanguinity, through the intermediate classes. They have all sprung from Brahma (Shanti Parva, p. 138).

It is significant that it is the brahmana who is explicitly forbidden from being addicted (for the express purpose of amassing wealth or power) to the practices of the other three orders, and if he does, he is said to become a sudra, and should be assigned the place of one. Then no

offering made to such a brahmana will bring merit.

If sacrifice is the primary duty of the brahmana, then service is the primary duty of the sudra. There are certain sacrifices he cannot perform but devotion is said to be for him the highest sacrifice. And the Shantiparva categorically states that 'it is not true that Gods and other persons do not manifest a desire to share the offerings in such sacrifices even of the sudra'. (Shanti Parva, p. 136).

Besides it is well known that the brahmana is ordained the *bhikṣu āśrama*; however, it is also open to members of other varnas but after they have been seen to have fulfilled their wordly duties. And *sanyās* and *mokṣa* are not denied to anyone; only each one gets it through different modes according to his propensities and attitudes, provided it is not an excuse for him to stay away from his assigned duties.

If this is looked at from the point of view of the politics of rights, this will appear to be a legitimization of inequality. In defence, one may say that it is difference that is legitimized. And neither equality nor difference are arbitrarily granted. It is an attempt to give focus to the propensities of individuals and groups in keeping with the principles of reciprocity and co-operation that sustain society. It enables the possibility for each to realize himself in and through the duties he performs, creating a structure which provides the least amount of hindrance in terms of temptations and distractions from the goal to be attained.

So, the king cannot escape either the public war, or the private one, nor are they separate. Yudhisthira cannot wage his war and believe that after it is over it would be time for him to look after himself and go away to the forest.

One may say that within such a system of a sharing of duties, no individual initiative survives. Strangely, it appears that it is within this very structure that man's abilities are tested and trusted the most: for instance, in the Shantiparva Yudhisthira asks Bhiṣma whether it is the king who makes the age (*yuga*) or the age that makes the king. Without a moment's hesitation Bhiṣma answers: 'It is a question about which you should not entertain any doubt. The truth is that the king makes the age'. (Shanti Parva, p. 160).

It could further be argued that such initiative is all very well when it is expected of the king, but what happens to the other orders? Again, Yudhisthira raises the question as to what happens when the age of decadence has set in and there is a confusion of the orders/varnas and the kṣatriyas are incompetent. In such a situation is a brahmana or a vaishya or a sudra, if he succeeds in protecting the people by righteously



wielding the rod of chastisement justified in doing what he does or should he be restrained by the ordinances? Bhiṣma's answer is again clear and unambiguous.

Be he a Sudra or be he the member of any other order, he that becomes a raft on a raftless current, or a means of crossing where means there are none, certainly deserves respect in every way... As an elephant made of wood, or a deer made of leather, as a person without wealth, or one that is a eunuch or a field that is sterile, even so is a Brahmana that is void of Vedic lore and a king incapable of granting protection. (Shanti Parva, p. 179).

Note that the emphasis is on the sharing of duties to sustain reciprocity and continuity in society. (History is created by man and not *vice versa* unlike in Marx, who holds the view that the course of history is ultimately inevitable). But this cannot be left to free choice altogether. One may say that this urges the individual to know what he is in a more focused and compelling manner. However, if there is a seriously felt need by society or the individual, it is quite clear that men are respected for rising to the occasion even if this requires a change from one's original varna as *āśrama*. However, under normal circumstances, the understanding is that it is possible to attain *mokṣa* through the performance of *varnāśrama dharma*. Creativity in the performance of assigned duties has to be in harmony with creation and is restricted by the law of the sustenance of creation. This is not to say that this system will have no faults but one must see that it has attempted to find an answer to a fundamental need in social and political theory and practice.

This paper has attempted to formulate the basis for a dialogue between Hobbes, Marx, and the Shantiparva. Through a method of comparison and contrasts of the fundamental presuppositions of each with respect to man, society, and the state, the differences in the understanding of the nature and content of liberty/freedom, equality, and fraternity have only been briefly worked out. It is hoped that this will indicate the direction and possibilities of each of these perspectives and make a case for a more comprehensive study of this nature.

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3. Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. VIII (Shanti Parva), tr. Pratap Chandra Roy (Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Co.).

The first part of the document is a letter from the Secretary of the  
 Board of Education to the Board of Trustees of the University of  
 California, dated January 15, 1942. The letter discusses the  
 proposed changes in the curriculum of the University of California  
 and the need for a more liberal arts education. The Secretary  
 states that the Board of Education has approved the proposed  
 changes and that the Board of Trustees should also approve them.  
 The letter also mentions the need for a more liberal arts education  
 and the importance of the liberal arts in a university education.  
 The second part of the document is a report from the Board of  
 Trustees of the University of California, dated January 15, 1942.  
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