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Hobbes's Concept of Multitude

Omar Astorga

Full Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Universidad Central de Venezuela
Apartado postal 47.209, Caracas 1041, Venezuela
E-mail: oastorga2001@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this brief article I expound some uses that Hobbes gave to the concept of multitude. Firstly, I explain the distinction between "people" and "multitude", the confusion of which was regarded in *De Cive* as a cause of sedition. The plural and disunited character of the multitude is highlighted, in comparison with the unity that constitutes the people. Secondly, I show that Hobbes, beyond the cited distinction, makes a relevant use in *Leviathan* of the principle of representation, in order to show the way in which multitude becomes State. Finally, I highlight the two-fold use given by the author to such concept: on the one hand, by attributing a theoretical role to it, which should allow thinking of the rational construction of the State; on the other, by showing the historical reality of multitude, turned into a source of madness and sedition.

Keywords

Multitude, People, Representation, State, Sedition

Introduction

Some thinkers have turned the concept of multitude into a central one, from which it is possible to conceive the course that contemporary politics is to follow. Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri –along with Michael Hardt¹ have focused largely on the task of exploring the political and historical consequences of the concept of multitude in times of globalization. Furthermore, they have attempted to do so not from a newest formulation of that concept, but as a result of a conceptual and historiographical reconstruction which goes back to Spinoza, attempting to regain the ethical-political force that the Dutch philosopher attributed to the multitude (*multitudo*). In that reconstruction,

¹ P. Virno, *A grammar of the multitude: for an analysis of contemporary forms of life*, (London: Semiotext, 2003); M. Hardt-T. Negri, *Multitude: war and democracy in the age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).

Hardt, Negri and Virno frequently refer to Hobbes's work, which is considered Spinoza's conceptual opposite, not only with regard to general and doctrine aspects, but also with regard to specific ones, among which we find the concept of multitude. In these interpreters it is possible to clearly appreciate the two-fold movement of drawing themselves nearer Spinoza and radically apart from Hobbes.

In this article we shall not examine the retrieval of the Spinozian concept of multitude, nor the body of criticism that Hobbes's use of that concept has generated. Mentioning Hardt, Negri and Virno is only a motivation that we bring out of the contemporary debate, where, once again, Hobbes appears as the black beast of modern political thought. We only want to briefly show the way Hobbes thought about multitude in two of his fundamental texts. Perhaps in the interpretative ability with which this philosopher critically dealt with that concept lies the enormous attraction he has had among contemporary Spinozian interpreters.²

The importance that Hobbes placed upon the concept of multitude can be clearly appreciated in *De Cive's* chapter XII, where it is categorically asserted that disregarding the difference between people and multitude "prepares toward sedition"³. The first question that arises here is: what is the difference between the concept of people and the concept of multitude? And, secondly, why does disregarding that difference "prepares toward sedition"?

As to the first question, Hobbes says that "the *people* is somewhat that is *one*, having *one will*, and to whom *one action* may be attributed".⁴ And after that we find the following remark: "the *people* rules in all governments. For even in *monarchies* the *people* commands; for the *people* wills by the will of *one man*".⁵ One can see that the root, and the weight, of the people's unity falls –above all in the case of monarchy– upon the will of one man. The unity of the people is not independent from the prince's will. The unification of the political body takes place from above, from the exercise of power. The people express themselves through the assembly or the king. From this perspective, the affirmation of the people is the denial of the multitude, which is just the aggregate of

² See Malcom Bull's, "The limits of multitude", *New Left Review*, 35 (2005), 19-39. It is an examination of Hardt-Negri and Virno's interpretation of the concept of multitude in connection with Hobbes and Spinoza.

³ Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive: Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society, The English Works*, ed. by Sir William Molesworth, (Routledge: Thoemmes Press, 1992), V.II, 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

individuals to whom neither a common action nor a single will can be attributed to, since the latter exists only as a multiplicity of wills.

Regarding the seditious effect brought about by conflating the respective concepts, Hobbes says that one may make the mistake of attributing to the people attitudes and reactions that only belong to the multitude. By definition the people cannot rebel against the State, because it would be to rebel against themselves. And this is why it would be seditious to seek, on behalf of “murmuring and discontented subjects”, to predispose the citizens against the State, leading them to believe that the multitude is the people. The course that these concepts follow is clear; it allows understanding when one is actually faced with a sedition movement. The people are rather unified, assuming as a premise, to that end, the full exercise of the State’s power.

In *De Cive’s* chapter VI, devoted to the “right of him, whether council or one man only, who hath the supreme power in the city”, Hobbes had already asserted that “the power of a city over its citizens, almost wholly depends on the understanding of the difference which is between a multitude of men ruling, and a multitude ruled”.⁶ Hobbes goes on to say that “which difference I did believe was clearly enough explained in this first article; but by the objections of many against those things which follow, I discern otherwise. Wherefore it seemed good to me, to the end I might make a fuller explication, to add these few things”.⁷

Let us see Hobbes’s explanation in greater detail. Firstly, the term multitude refers to plural things (many men), without this meaning that one can speak of “one single will”. There is only one single will and, therefore, it is not possible to think of an action of the multitude, but rather of an action by oneself. This clarification allows Hobbes to deny to the multitude (as a unity, as a single will), a political condition, and even an economic-social one: “a multitude cannot promise, contract, acquire right, convey right, act, have, possess, and the like”.⁸ Then, if the multitude can only be thought of by means of each one’s will, only each individual will be able to do the actions indicated before. The multitude “is not a natural person”, and can only become a collective subject if each of its members agrees –with all or most of them- that it should be so. It would become a sort of person –with duties and rights- only by means of an extraordinary, timeless and placeless deed, determined by the individual exercise of the will. It is a formula which we shall find perfected in Rousseau,

⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

when he presents the sudden mechanism, involved in the contract, by means of which each one, in giving up their right as a man, regains it in the same way as a citizen. The isolated and unprotected man, turns into a political person by being subsumed under the general will, not under each and every one's will, but under a new political entity. Getting ahead of that mental experiment, Hobbes tells us that when the multitude can be thought of as a single will, then instead of multitude must be called people.⁹

One must notice that he does not refer to the people -or which according to Locke, Kant, Hegel and Marx will be called civil society- regarded as a community or social body previous to the State. The multitude becomes people with the very emergence of the State. As Norberto Bobbio has put it, in Hobbes there is only room for the *pactum unionis*, by means of which society (the people) is created as a State¹⁰. The people exist because of, and through, the State, and their action can only be thought of in that way. By contrast, the multitude can indeed be thought of as an aggregate of isolated men (before the State) or as single citizens (after the State's creation). Hobbes identifies the State with civil society, and, in that way, seeks to resolve the problem of the seditious autonomy that its members may attain. Sedition is a political problem that becomes a theoretical and ideological problem in noticing that it has not been understood that the people, by definition, does not rebel. Only the multitude does.¹¹

Confusion between people and multitude is not the only cause of sedition. Hobbes lists a number of causes, a good deal of which are the opinions devised regarding the State's power. In *De Cive's* chapter XII we read, for instance: the opinion that judgment over good and evil belongs to individuals; that in obeying the Prince one sins; that tyrannicide is licit; that sovereigns are subject to civil laws; that supreme power may be divided; etc. Put another way: the causes of sedition take place when the multitude's opinions are placed above the State's reasons. It is true that the confusion between people and multitude is just one of those causes. But it is a fundamental cause, for the very conception of the State depends on it. And, as it is well known, Hobbes is not just

⁹ Ibid., 56. About the continuity between Hobbes and Rousseau with regard to this, see R. Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps* (Paris: Vrin, 1970).

¹⁰ N. Bobbio, *Società e Stato nella filosofia politica moderna: modello giusnaturalistico e modello hegel-marxiano* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1979).

¹¹ Surely it is no chance that the faction, main subject of war as will be stressed in *Behemoth*, is defined in *De Cive* as follows: "Now I call a faction, a multitude of subjects gathered together either by mutual *contracts* among themselves, or by the power of some one, without his or their authority who bear the supreme rule. A *faction*, therefore, is as it were a city in a city" (*De Cive*, 167).

another ideologist seeking only to denounce the causes of sedition, but is essentially a theorist who was trying to provide the conceptual grounds for conceiving the institution of the State. Thus: the project of creating the State as an artifice entails using concepts whose meanings must be clearly distinguished from those traditional -and mistaken- meanings, based upon which sedition might turn out to be justified.

Precisely in the early 1640's, just as Hobbes publicized his *De Cive*, there emerged different and opposed voices that grounded the sovereign power's legitimacy on the existence of the people. This has been clearly documented by Quentin Skinner in referring to the doctrine, and the vocabulary, set in fashion by Parliament members and radical thinkers of those years, to whom it is not God but the people the "Author" that decides who is to rule them. This proposition is based on the doctrine according to which the pact that gives rise to the State embodies the existence of the people, regarded as a previously unified community. Skinner reminds us that Hobbes precisely refers to these thinkers, calling them "democratical writers" (*Leviathan*, 29), who pointed to the Parliament and its members as representatives of the people. In order to ensure peace and avoid tyranny, these writers defended the establishing of a political regime controlled by the people's representatives.¹²

What was Hobbes' strategy, faced with the democratic writers of his time? The strategy consisted, according to Skinner, in using the same vocabulary they did, but under a radically different meaning. We have already seen that Hobbes in *De Cive* took pains to distinguish the people from the multitude, so as to avoid that (unified) multitude might be thought of as a political subject. In *Leviathan* more care is exercised, in the face of the republicanism and the parliamentarianism reigning in 1640's England. Now the mentioned confusion does not appear as one of the causes of sedition (presented in *Leviathan*, 29), but one can see, instead, that the term multitude is employed and redirected in the context of the same vocabulary of republicanism, that is to say, by means of the concept of representation.¹³ The seditious role which Hobbes attributes to the multitude, and the answer to that problem, are developed by

¹² Q. Skinner, "Hobbes on Persons, Authors and Representatives", *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*, ed. by P. Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157-180. See Hanna Pitkin's pioneering studies: "Hobbes's Concept of Representation. Part I and Part II", in *Thomas Hobbes. Critical Asesments*, 4 vols., ed. by P. King (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), III: 443-493, where *Leviathan's* chapter 16 is taken as a starting point.

¹³ The shift from interest by the difference between people and multitude to interest by the concept of representation has been clearly seen by M. Forsyth, "Thomas Hobbes and the Constituent Power of the People", in *Thomas Hobbes Critical Asesments*, III: 579.

means of the express and systematic incorporation of that principle, fundamental, as it is known, in order to understand a good deal of the sense of modern political thought. The principle of representation allows thinking of, and organizing, the multitude in such a way that there is no room for seditious opinions or the emergence of factions. Skinner also reminds us that this decisive step is not taken by Hobbes in *De Cive* but rather in *Leviathan*.

In both texts the concept of person is used, and the State is defined as a person. But it is in *Leviathan* where such concept becomes the presupposition from which the concept of representation is introduced. And in order to do that, unlike in *De Cive*, Hobbes extensively paves the way before the definition of the State which he provides in chapter 17.

The definition of the State as a person is grounded on chapter 16. The need to turn the multitude into State through the contractualist device, by means of which the role of the sovereign is created, is reinforced through the political mechanism of representation. Let us see, firstly, what that mechanism consists in, and how Hobbes incorporates it into his grounding of politics.

Hobbes first defines the person as that “*whose words or actions are considered, either as his own*” [it is the case of the natural person], “*or as representing the words or actions of another man*” [it is the case of the artificial person]¹⁴. Hobbes was interested in the second meaning, namely, the artificial person, because the latter is the one representing another, just as it happens at the theater, where one performs on stage on behalf of somebody else. This is why he says that “*one person is the same as an actor*”, who represents the words or actions of an author: “*the author acts by authority*”.¹⁵

This underscores the connection existing between the representative and the author. The one acts on behalf of the other, and the key point is that any agreement authorized by the author is binding for him, and makes him liable for whatever such agreement may entail. This is why Hobbes shows that the contractualism previously presented in order to justify the origin of the State is valid precisely whenever it is referred to those who are appointed as representatives.

Based on that two-fold actor-representative model, there takes place the establishment of all the hierarchies from which the State is organized. Hobbes conceives that organization by attributing to the author all the liability by the deeds, good and bad, just or unjust, committed by the representative; but he

¹⁴ Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, 2nd revised student edition, edited with an introduction by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

likewise attributes to the representative all the power with respect to the author, namely, a power that is not liable and, at the same time, is neither demandable nor revocable.

The concept of representation, so regarded, is fundamental to conceive the origin of both the State and the people from the multitude. Put this way: it is the principle which identifies the people with the State; but, at the same time, it is the principle of separation between them, since the representative does not take on an “imperative mandate”, but just the function to represent the other party, legitimating his power only by the fact of possessing it. Here, then, the meaning of representation as an expression of popular interests, or as a form of the *res publica*, just does not apply. The people will always be obligated, whereas the representative will be freed from all obligations.

It is from this premise that the role of Leviathan emerges. While on chapter 17 we find the definition of the State as a person, where the multitude is invoked, chapter 16 provides then the argumentative ground of such definition, precisely in invoking the concept of representation.

A Multitude of men, are made *One* Person, when they are by one man, or one Person, Represented; so that it be done with the consent of every one of that Multitude in particular. For it is the *Unity* of the Representer, not the *Unity* of the Represented, that maketh the Person *One*. And it is the Representer that beareth the Person, and but one Person: And *Unity*, cannot otherwise be understood in Multitude.¹⁶

It can be seen that Hobbes repeats here arguments which he had already presented in *De Cive*. The key difference this time is that the weight of the argument rests on the concept of representation. The *person* we hear about in *De Cive* turns into the *representative* in *Leviathan*, “because the Multitude naturally is not *One*, but *Many*; they cannot be understood for one; but many Authors, of every thing their Representative faith, or doth in their name”.¹⁷

Hence, when Hobbes was concerned in *De Cive* by the seditious consequences entailed by failing to distinguish the multitude from the people, trying there to work out the passage from dispersion to unity of a person, it becomes more clearly established now that the person is regarded as a political mechanism which shows more powerfully Leviathan’s unifying role.

Perhaps this could be better appreciated if one bears in mind that the increasingly noticeable intention to make use of the principle of representation’s unifying and organizing role becomes more visible in showing the other

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

side of the coin, namely, the seditious and disintegrating role that the multitude carries with it. In *De Cive* there is already reference to the seditious effects that take place by not distinguishing the people from the multitude. But it is in *Leviathan* where the phantom of sedition reaches its climax. The point is not about a group of individuals as those that might be at the public square turned into a market. The concern actually appears when “the Rage of the whole multitude”¹⁸ arises. The multitude is here thought of by its essentially seditious, subversive, disobedient, tumultuous, fragmented and at the same time strained condition, in short, an exemplary case of the so called state of nature.

In principle, Hobbes in *Leviathan* makes use of the term multitude to refer to the passion of panic, regarded as that fear which spreads when men are part of the multitude. But he uses it, above all, when referring to the madness men are driven to when they conspire and collectively express their rage. The consequence of this collective madness might come to be expressed in the denunciation, the offense and even the sacrifice of that who had been the protector of everybody. That is why Hobbes asks himself: “For what argument of Madnesse can there be greater, than to clamour, strike, and throw stones at our best friends?”

To which he answers and adds the following:

Yet this is somewhat lesse than such a multitude will do. For they will clamour, fight against, and destroy those, by whom all their lifetime before, they have been protected, and secured from injury. And if this be Madnesse in the multitude, it is the same in every particular man. For as in the midst of the sea, though a man perceive no sound of that part of the water next him; yet he is well assured, that part contributes as much, to the Roaring of the Sea, as any other part, of the same quantity: so also, though we perceive no great unquietnesse, in one, or two men; yet we may be well assured, that their singular Passions, are parts of the Seditious roaring of a troubled Nation.¹⁹

Abolishing the monarchy, Hobbes says, is to “return to the confusion of a disunited multitude”,²⁰ just as the division of power “reduces the multitude into the condition of war”.²¹ To put it this way: Hobbes is thinking no longer

¹⁸ Ibid., 54.

¹⁹ Ibid., 55. *Behemoth's* first dialogue is emblematic, as Hobbes refers there to the period between 1640 and 1660 in England as an expression of disobedience, sedition and madness. Hobbes, Thomas, *Behemoth or The Long Parliament*, Edited by F. Tönnies (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1969).

²⁰ *Leviathan*, 122.

²¹ Ibid.

of the people when he imagines the road that leads to anarchy, that is, when he thinks of the crisis of the State and its dissolution. In this case there arises -so to speak- the leading role of the multitude: "For the death of him that hath the sovereign power in propriety, leaves the multitude without any sovereign at all; that is, without any representative in whom they should be united, and be capable of doing any one action at all".²²

Thus, when Hobbes thought of the eloquence of those who are capable of weakening the State by means of dissuasion and exhortation, he did so precisely by considering the echo that their words have within the multitude, "because when the speech is addressed to one, he may interrupt him, and examine his reasons more rigorously, than can be done in a multitude; which are too many to enter into dispute, and dialogue with him that speaketh indifferently to them all at once".²³ Likewise, he referred to the reputation that "popular" individuals use to gain "amongst the multitude", allowing them to "take courage to violate the laws, from a hope of oppressing the power, to whom it belongeth to put them in execution".²⁴ The emergence of "inspired" leaders, with the ability of persuasion to conspire, is only possible within the multitude²⁵. Hence the centrality of the role of the representative, and of a system of representation that allows organizing obedience in terms of peace²⁶.

We can see, in short, that Hobbes, concerned by the confusions revolving around the concepts invoked to justify the State, and determined to make use of a distinctive meaning of the concept of representation in the face of the parliamentarianism of his time, gives a two-fold use to the concept of multitude. Between *De Cive* and *Leviathan* one can notice, on the one hand, the use of the concept of multitude from the perspective of contractualism, inspired by the idea of providing the concept, and the image, of the State as an institution. This perspective turns the multitude into a part of a procedure from which the creation of the State is theoretically grounded. A procedure which

²² *Ibid.*, 136.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23. Later on Hobbes says: "it is easier to gull the multitude, than any one man amongst them" (*Behemoth*, 38).

²⁴ *Leviathan*, 205.

²⁵ Concerning the causes of people's corruption during civil war, Hobbes refers, among others, to religious groups and eloquent leaders, capable of dragging the Parliament, who praised the "popular government", see *Behemoth*, 1-4.

²⁶ The importance of the concept of representation can be appreciated not only through the figure of the prince, but also through the whole institution of society. Concerning this, see the decisive value attributed to the representative in considering society, regarded as a system. (*Leviathan*, II, Chapter 22).

reaches its climax in *Leviathan* through the centrality, and the peculiar meaning, that Hobbes attributes to the principle of representation. It is, so to speak, a theoretical existence, hypothetical at bottom, and above all temporary, for the multitude, viewed as an aggregate of individuals, vanishes at the moment of its unification, in order to give way to the steady existence of the State.

On the other hand, we have seen that, at the same time, Hobbes gives a different meaning to the concept of multitude. The clear remark pointed out in *De Cive*, according to which failing to distinguish the concepts of people and multitude is a source of sedition, precisely entails criticism to the possibility of socially conceiving multitude as people and, therefore, as a political subject capable of demanding rights before the creation of the State. Thus the multitude is not a merely theoretical matter, but a historic political reality to which, precisely in historical terms, Hobbes will later give an explanation in *Behemoth*, although in *Leviathan* one can already clearly see the multitude's historical existence, when it is emphatically associated to the phenomenon of sedition and civil war. Now it turns into a sign of zealotry and superstition, turned into the subject of an "agitated nation". From such a condition its constitution as a person cannot be thought of, nor do the representatives that emerge from it have any legitimacy. It is a "bad multitude".

This is why we could say, in short, that Hobbes' skill to gradually position this concept as a key part of the State's creation was not independent from the need he had, at the same time, to think of it as a phantom which nurtured the vehemence of his political thought. To go back to our introductory remarks, it would be appropriate to point out that the fact that, through the concept of multitude, Hobbes had been able to interpret sedition, and to offer a radical answer to the political problems of his time, allows to suggest that that concept, in his hands, took on a theoretical fecundity surely very different from that which it had taken in Spinoza's work. However, it was the one that, all in all, was able to prevail at diverse moments of modern political thought. This is perhaps a fundamental motivation for the strong inclination that some contemporary political thinkers have had to reject Hobbes.