Hobbes and the Wolf-Man: Melancholy and Animality in Modern Sovereignty

*Homo homini lupus*, man is a wolf to man remains one of the most well-known and often quoted dictums in the tradition of political theory. Political theorists, but also political scientists across sub-fields, take this phrase by Thomas Hobbes in the Epistle Dedicatory of *De Cive* to illustrate the brutish, anarchical, and violent condition of man in the natural state, prior to the establishment of a civil government. This assimilation of Hobbes’s dictum to a state of war of all against all may be well grounded, but it can also conceal the obvious. Contrary to conventional wisdom, I suggest that this brief passage directs our attention to two neglected yet interrelated topics in Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty: The question of the animal and melancholy.

Hobbes’s scholars have remained inattentive to a somewhat bizarre, but still theoretically substantial, articulation of melancholy and animality in Hobbes’s time: lycanthropy. Lycanthropy was a peculiar kind of melancholic syndrome that Hobbes’s contemporaries (but also psychiatrists today) described as the delusional experience of turning into an animal –often, but not exclusively, into a wolf. Scholars in literary studies alert us that in Late Renaissance and Early Modern Europe the belief in the possibility that human beings overwhelmed by passions might turn into beasts was sustained by physiologists and moral theorists alike. Erica Fudge, for instance, helps us see the importance of forms of inner government for the stability of the human condition. Fudge draws on Robert Burton, a clergyman Oxford fellow expert on melancholy, and contemporary to Hobbes, to argue that it was crucial to keep “ferall passions” at bay as “[w]e are torn in pieces by our passions”.

Thus, I propose to think of Hobbes’s argument in *The Elements of Law, De Cive* and *Leviathan* as comprising three overall claims: 1) humans are animals; 2) animals are not
political; and 3) human animals *can be* political by the use of words, which is to say that being human is a process: the precarious and unstable result of humanization. 1) Humans are animals because Hobbes challenges human exceptionalism in the Christian sense by depriving human-animals from any exceptional faculty (spirit, reason, and free will) that would distinguish them from non-human animals. It is only by “Speech, and Method”, namely, by the use of words and by regulating mental discourse, that human animals can distinguish themselves “from all other living Creatures” (L: 23). 2) Animals are not political because Hobbes questions Aristotle’s encompassing notion of politics in *The History of Animals* that groups human beings together with bees, wasps, ants and cranes. Hobbes holds that ants and bees, as well as other animals, should not be termed political because “their government is only a consent, or many wills concurring in one object not (as is necessary in civil government) one will” (DC: 168; L: 119). Moreover, since contracts cannot be made with beasts, non-human animals cannot access Hobbes’s only path towards politicality (DC: 128; L: 97). 3) Then, human animals *can be* political through the use of language because, as Philip Pettit recently argued, they use words to ratiocinate, personate and incorporate.

This explains why Hobbes proceeds by, literally, putting words in our mouths in the form of an utterance in which everyone would say “I authorize and give up my right of governing my selfe, to this Man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, an authorize all his Actions in like manner” (L: 120). However, since humans never cease to be animals themselves they continue to carry the non-political *in* and *with* them. In this context, the lycanthrope reminds us, stubbornly, that incorporating by means of *logos* has to sacrifice other ways of incorporating which, when negated, will recur with more violence and a
voracity that is indefatigable. It is in this context that the recurrence of the figure of a wolfish voracity in Hobbes’ argument should be understood.