

At-Issue

State Absolutism and Moral Agency in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli: Implications for Eritrea

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Abstract: In the progression of Western political philosophy from Aristotle to the Enlightenment, even the most statist thinkers such as Hobbes and Machiavelli, who saw organized society as a necessary evil, never accepted the notion of absolutism that sucks man's free development. Central to Hobbes' conceptualization of the state is that an artificially created sovereign is owed the total submission of his subjects who are faced with an immanent existential threat. Subjects, nonetheless, exist as individual moral agents whose values of justice and liberty—the products of social thought and common conviction—are realized in civil society of the Commonwealth. With Machiavelli's principality, by contrast, while the success and survival of the state is closely tied together with that of the prince and his subjects, the political community could still be judged in terms of moral committal to the civic virtues of prudence, legitimacy, and order, constituting a venerated political and social force contributing consequentially to individual development. This article entails a comparative study of moral agency in light of Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Machiavelli's *The Prince* and examines its implications for Eritrea against the backdrop of its downward spiral into totalitarianism. It argues that both proponents of absolutism offer a critique of the state particularly pertinent to Eritrea where individual development is embedded on a single supreme moral authority. While notions of real or imagined existential threats, which affords regimes to roll state-society into one, enabled Eritrea to maintain a semblance of national unity, its flip side, the exercise and preservation of personal power through sheer repression, has subjected the state to idiosyncratic political attributes that militate against free agency: a nihilistic image to which neither Hobbes' sovereign nor Machiavelli's prince would wish to subscribe.

Key words: state-society relations; state absolutism; free agency

Introduction

This study seeks to examine the relationship between state absolutism and individual moral agency against the backdrop of Eritrea's downward spiral into totalitarianism. By drawing inspiration from Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the paper argues that even the most statist thinkers such as Hobbes and Machiavelli—who saw organized society as a necessary evil—would offer a critique of the state particularly pertinent to Eritrea, where the singularity and ultimacy of the morality of the state has resulted in the stunting of free agency. Specifically, while notions of real and/or imagined existential threat, which affords regimes the opportunity to lump together the state and the national society into one monolithic political entity, seems to have helped

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the Eritrean regime maintain a sense of national unity, its anti-thesis, the exercise and preservation of personal power merely through repression and violence rather than the rule of law, has subjected the state to idiosyncratic political attributes that militate against individual moral agency: a nihilistic image to which neither Hobbes' sovereign nor Machiavelli's prince would wish to subscribe.

By way of introduction, the common analytical threads that cut across Hobbes and Machiavelli are comparatively addressed. These pertain not just to their extreme iconoclastic and pessimistic views of human nature and the concept of the "political" that lent itself to dislocate classical and medieval beliefs and intellectual paradigms: philosophical views which marked them out as the pioneers of modern political thought. But perhaps one of the most important aspect of their political theory or at least valuable in the analysis of moral agency is their recognition, albeit understood and analysed in their separate ways, of the political and social space that is needed for individual agency and civil society.

Thus, for example, Hobbes, who took individual members as his unit of analysis, saw subjects as a polity of equals endowed with liberty and freedom, albeit liberty is construed as a negative right and a necessary evil, opening, nonetheless, the possibilities for the realization of "unbounded and disparate desires of individuals."¹ Further, despite Hobbes' pessimistic and egoistic view of human nature, individuals can discover irrefutable universal principles by exercising the right reason as the ultimate guide and basis—over passion—for making binding covenants and contracts out of which the *Leviathan* or the *Commonwealth* is constituted.² Although the will of the collectives is subsumed in the artificially created person—the sovereign—in Hobbes' absolutist state, subjects exist as individual free agents and their values of justice and freedom—the effects of positive law and social discipline—are only produced or realized in civil society of the commonwealth.³ The Commonwealth thus provides the intersection point at which the rational aims of the individual—his capacity for volition and autonomy—and the collectives encapsulating "that which they desire to attain, namely their own good, which is the work of reason" are harmonized.⁴

On the one hand, is individual desire to escape from what Hobbes called "the fear of death and wounds" which epitomises the 'state of nature' where self-preservation becomes of surpassing interest. Self-preservation is partly informed, legitimated and propelled by divine reason, although largely governed by passionately selfish and inexorable existentialist human nature.⁵ On the other hand, is the desire of the collectives to live "in peace and security" by ceding their individual natural rights for self-preservation, and hence, instituting, in exchange, over them an artificially created sovereign through collective agreements that are founded on naturalist and externalist law-based moral conduct as opposed to humanist-internalist moral order.⁶ Once at the helm, the sovereign, who holds, in a manner of speech, a metonymic sceptre with one hand, and a sword with the other commences "to keep them all in awe."⁷ Brought forth by the midwifery of the social contract, the state of nature metaphorically gives birth to a political society, producing at one and the same time, the office and the person occupying it—the sovereign; he symbolizes the ultimate embodiment of the state itself without which: "there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain...no Society; which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."⁸

Of course, subjects are tied to kings and princes who justify their authority by the moral principle of property-rights, where "continuous use has given them something more than the exercise of authority: it has given them ownership of authority; and their subjects are thus tied to them, and to the authority which they own, by the necessity of respecting ownership and all the

rights which it carries.”⁹ And yet, Hobbes' early modern state was also characterised by an immense economic, social, and moral space in which individuals live in an atmosphere of liberty, where free agency and personal capacity is cherished and developed. In other words, the state maintains, at least in principle, a degree of political distance from private social life of subjects in such areas as the economic market, family life and religious sphere, if not in ecclesiastical matters.¹⁰ Indeed, Hobbes' concept of the state was formulated against the backdrop of liberty and free agency where the state of nature has endowed individuals with natural rights and powers that enabled them to preserve their lives and properties.

Hobbes contention that the collective will of individuals is subsumed in the office of an artificially created sovereign can indeed be considered ground-breaking in so far as Hobbes' “collectivization” allows society “a private sphere, which is regulated by the common law, and which escapes the direct power of the state.”¹¹ This is true, especially when weighed against the ramifications of the exercise of absolute power both in early modern England and France, where kings claimed to be the state itself, but also in contemporary totalitarian systems, albeit differently, where the state has come to be conceived as an organic entity or a corporation sole, where the private sphere has shrunk to form a single Hegelian “ethical totality” rather than Hobbesian “*persona civilis*.”¹² After all, the values of *liberte*, *egalite*, and *fraternite* that were championed during the early modern period were not mere rallying revolutionary slogans but principles and moral claims against the state criticised for its failure “to act in the course of its general function of providing for its members the conditions of their personal development.”¹³

Machiavelli, on the other hand, whose key thesis – which sought to assert and articulate man's rational capacity to promote unity, security and national integration – reflected in the mirror of statesmen of a bygone era (such as Moses, Solon, Lycurgus, and Cleomenes) who founded not just empires with mere territorial and military organization but also built well-ordered and long-lasting political, legal and social institutions. Although such historical figures were “great and wonderful,” yet they were only men, as Machiavelli would put it “and each one of them had no more opportunity than the present offers, for their enterprises were neither more just nor easier than [liberating Italy from the barbarians].”¹⁴ Having taken on a life of their own, these political institutions eventually became vehicles for the expression of individual interests, individual development and free agency, creating, in a word, civilization. As the site and vehicle for the manifestation of cultural and social identities, civilization has not only accustomed men “to living with their fellow men in a *civitas* [but also taught them] the meaning of justice and to distinguish between their particular good and the common good.”¹⁵ Machiavelli appeared to have driven home the notion of republicanism, which anchored the restoration and regeneration of self-governance in which elected chief magistrates, quasi-permanent officials and prominent citizens were active partners in the city council of the city-state.¹⁶ But he also went so far as to suggest the need to foster, albeit exogenously the political space required for free agency and self-realization, which is developed through engagement in political and civic life within the framework of citizen participation, representation, and sharing of power – key ingredients for republican self-government.¹⁷

Seen from the perspective of the uncompromising consistency with which Machiavelli's prince had to conduct himself in order to realize the twin objectives of glory and his version of the common good or *summum bonum* Machiavelli “fundamentally rejects Christian ethics, but advocates religious practices that strengthen civic virtue...without any fixed conception of right or wrong.”¹⁸ Indeed, for Machiavelli, “the law is one arm in the armouries of princes, and it is certainly not the means by which a prince in a newly acquired state should begin to make his new

people feel the force of his rule.”¹⁹ In a hostile and uncertain political environment that was riddled with fraud, intrigue, plots, conspiracy, assassinations, racket, rivalry, and invasion, where mere survival much less warding off foreign invaders had become the sole *raison d'être*, the prince of Machiavelli's forming must not shy away from committing crimes in order to consolidate his hegemony over his territory.²⁰ In his bid to command subjects' absolute obedience to his orders, however, the prince must ensure that “crimes go further,” cementing his grip on the reins of power by creating a lasting impression of a feared, if not a loved prince.²¹

And yet, “Machiavelli was not indifferent to the effects, which morals and religion, in the masses of mankind, have upon social and political life.”²² In a social ambience where morality and politics are separable, and where political and social processes are demystified, Machiavelli's moral realm is one embedded not on “foundational” grounds but on pragmatic heuristics that are “subject to clinical analysis ...without any moral or sentimental judgement impinging.”²³ At the heart of this moral diagnostics is political necessity (*necessità*)—rather than moral reflection—governed by the principle of the common good (*patria*).²⁴ These two seemingly opposing ideals are achieved by balancing what Machiavelli called the two diverse humours—the *grandi* and the *popolo*—“the people desire neither to be commanded nor oppressed by the great, and the great desire to command and oppress the people.”²⁵

The inference from this postulate is twofold. On the one hand, Machiavelli suggests “[s]ince states must acquire, they must yield to, nay incite, the desire for glory in those men of a princely nature who most evince that desire,” on the other “the people must be conciliated and their desire for security satisfied when possible, if only to maintain the glory of princes and princely leaders in republics.”²⁶ To this end, Machiavelli contends that “[i]f a common good is sought between princes and peoples, it must accommodate their diverse but complementary desires for glory and security” because the “*stato* won by collective selfishness has no moral superiority over that acquired by individual selfishness.”²⁷ Although Machiavelli appeared to be “above the morality to be enforced” over subjects, he was ever so committed to the absolute necessity of a moral order that animates “private virtue and civic probity and devotion that renders popular government” possible, and which act together as a buffer to counteract “all sorts of licence and violence, great inequalities of wealth and power, the destruction of peace and justice, the growth of disorderly ambition, disunion, lawlessness, dishonesty, and contempt for religion.”²⁸ In so doing, he “unites politics to pagan morality and that his considered moral position was a version of tribal, act consequentialist.”²⁹ In so far as human nature remains the same across time and space, as Machiavelli seemed to assert, “Machiavelli was assuredly a moralist, though of a peculiar sort, and this is what makes him, as he has been well called, a contemporary of every age and a citizen of all countries.”³⁰

Like Machiavelli, whose radical and extremist political thought represented a break with conventional thinking, Hobbes, by contrast, appeared to be even more radical with his assertion that man is endowed only with nature's mechanical, materialist and geometrical force rather than with an inherently and necessarily organic feature of consciousness by which he could reason out moral rights and wrongs.³¹ It was this one-sided, naturalistic and cynical view of human nature that led Hobbes to place a particular emphasis on the need to channel man's self-interest by “bridling” his passions and imaginations, which he saw as the greatest causes of ruin of men in a society.³² Indeed, it was against the backdrop of preventing “the war of all against all” (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) that Hobbes stipulated the need for the instalment of a sovereign and endowing him with absolute authority in order to ensure escape from the dreaded “state of nature” into the Commonwealth, which guarantees what Hobbes called a “commodious living” of

security and even “contentment of life.”³³ His insistence for a sovereign with absolute authority, however, was not left unquestioned, and indeed reinforced the argument as to whether Hobbes could not fairly be “characterized as a propagandist of absolutist government.”³⁴ A common counter-thesis is that “his fierce determination to think for himself....from a dual perspective, at once speculative and practicalearned him the suspicion of both royalists and republicans, and the outright enmity of some ...[and] the only reason [he] was 'spared the hemlock' was that his 'friends were more powerful than were those of Socrates'.”³⁵

Unlike Hobbes, however, Machiavelli – who rejected monarchy in well-founded and stabilized states in favour of Aristotle's the mixed regime or the “polity” – describes how the sum total of good personal qualities, such as prudence and self-restraint required of a prince, together with that of the law abidingness of his subjects would act to preserve and increase the glory of his principality, with the knock-on effect on peace, security and free agency.³⁶ The counter argument or rebuttal is that even if the prince could, in the interim, maintain some semblance of unity by sheer force, in the long-run, there is every potential likelihood that his newly-founded state would be thrown into disarray and confusion. In other words, the mere acquisition of power and territory short of winning the allegiance of people would lack moral weight: a condition that undermines the legitimacy of the prince's claims as the embodiment of the national polity, and the extent to which individuals would identify both with the prince and with one another as a national community.³⁷

This paper attempts to show how both Hobbes' and Machiavelli's political thoughts regarding individual liberty stand in sharp contrast to the nature, structure and purpose of the current Eritrean state. Viewed principally through the prism of moral agency rather than the grand spectrum of mainstream Western liberal democratic thought, it is argued here that political institutions and processes in Eritrea do not rest on a dual moral code: for the state and for society. A logical explanation of the implication of the existence of an absolute moral code is the total rejection of the notion of natural law, which depends entirely on the assertion and reification of the moral capacity of each and every individual to *ipso facto* secure the development of their individual potentialities without restraint. The individual, to all intents and purposes, is not construed to have been possessed with natural rights or even human rights: a set of rights, which are commonly understood and indeed regarded to have stemmed from natural laws, and hence seen as the ultimate embodiment of individual persona. In short, the Eritrean state appears to have neither recognized nor accepted a system of rights. As such, the political system cannot necessarily be one of a legal association, developed and founded on the notion of what Hobbes called the social contract, where natural laws are its defining feature. Nor is state authority anchored in what Machiavelli called “new modes and orders” where civil order and the attendant individual freedoms and endowments for capacity, status and action to preserve their lives and/or promote their interests are conceived of as moral ends.

Eritrea's Nation-building Challenges and its Slide into Totalitarianism

In what is perhaps an ironic commentary of Carl Schmitt's description of 'the political' Eritrea's nation-building process predicated the content of politics not just on the internal peculiar linguistic, religious, and ethnic dimensions of diversity and community that must be harnessed into national consciousness in such a way as to address both society's and its individual members' claims for autonomy and moral agency.³⁸ But rather, it was to be achieved by imagining and eliciting perceived notions of existential threat that are fostered by a deep sense of historical betrayal by the “international community” (which in this context largely refers to the stance of the United States of

America on Eritrea and Ethiopia's continued, albeit muted coastal and/or territorial claims) that helped reproduce the idea of a perpetual enemy against whom national identity is to be forged.³⁹ As such, political pluralism has been short-changed not just by the symbolic acknowledgement of cultural diversity but also by state existentialism. In practice, this would be achieved partly by militarising society through drafting the youth into a long-drawn-out state military and national service campaign, and partly by sustained media propaganda playing, albeit wrapped in a patina of development and social progress, with the notions of national security threats and the readiness to defend the nation from real or imaginary enemies.⁴⁰ Indeed, the raising of the flag of existential threat in which Ethiopia and the USA were deemed to be Eritrea's historic arch-enemies would be exploited to such an extent that war propaganda and the whipping of the masses in a constant war hysteria had until recently become a regular occurrence, functioning as much to socialize them into a mindset of a potentially dangerous world as to seal them off from it.⁴¹

The nation-building process, whose main plank it is the collectivization and regimentation of society into a single, undifferentiated and corporately atomized political community—under an overarching canopy of the nation-state—depends for the most part on national service mobilization. Blandishments of military panache and war preparations, which pervade every aspect of public and private life appear to play a significant role not only in shaping the day-to-day experience of individuals but also, and by implication, in shaking the collective moral fibre of society. In the name of nation-building, men and women of urban and rural communities have had to enlist in mandatory national service, which is followed by forced labor with no end in sight. This drastic and sweeping nation-building exercise has deprived households of primary breadwinners and caregivers, subjecting, in the process a large number of women to assume the double burden of breadwinning and child rearing.⁴²

Rural communities, especially those located in the western as well as eastern lowland escarpments had to give up agricultural land—sometimes entire hamlets where seasonal weather variations have allowed farming and livestock grazing opportunities—for use by the military, for large-scale commercial agriculture, and for forced population resettlements.⁴³ Urban dwellers have been evicted from public housing units, while people in the suburbs have had their housing units razed apparently to give way to government-sponsored housing projects and schemes. Urbanites who make a living from employment in small enterprises, involving handicrafts, cottage industries, and workshops have had to close down business in order to sign up for national service. All secondary level students have to finalize their final school year in the military camp of *Sawa*, with their time divided between study, military training and indoctrination.⁴⁴

Dodgers and absconders have been harshly penalized by sending evaders into the farthest reaches of the country, where soaring temperatures, physical punishment, privation and gruelling labour would make survival extremely difficult.⁴⁵ While women conscripts have the added jeopardy of being subjected to rape and systematic physical and sexual abuse, all conscripts have suffered constant and systematic physical violence and torture.⁴⁶ The list of abuse is immense, and yet, it is always about nation-building. If this process has inexorably buttressed, and indeed inspired the militarization of society, it has also raised its sceptre: the waging of incessant border wars and proxy conflicts against neighbouring countries, leading to the abandonment, in the process, of whatever pretence of democratic reforms there might have been.⁴⁷ The onset of the Ethio-Eritrea border war of 1998-2000, for example, was seen by many commentators as a pretext by President Isaias Afwerki to “indefinitely postpone the implementation of the 1997-ratified constitution in order to cling to power for as long as possible.”⁴⁸

At the heart of the militarization of civil life always lies the nurturing of a political culture,

which is characterised by a relentless emphasis on the narrative of the liberation struggle.⁴⁹ By concentrating on the legendary accounts of the war of independence that eulogized the heroic deeds and sacrifices of the masses in the past, the regime calls on them to uphold their fidelity and readiness to national duty in the present. Indeed, this mythologization, which encapsulates the values of heroism, gallantry, valour and strength to succeed “at any cost,” “in all situations,” “against all odds” has become, as it were, a continuously streaming paragon of political virtue that must be embraced by current and future generations. Alternately, the demystification of anything that tastes of tradition, religion and individualism—a practice that was considered a necessary and indeed a quintessential component of the liberation struggle that had made military victory a forgone conclusion—is the other side of the same coin on which the process of identity formation is to be stamped. This process of political socialization is apparently dedicated to the construction of a new national identity and seeks to transcend what the regime saw in the inherited features as plagued by sub-nationalism. Seen from the citadel of the moral high ground of the virtues of unity and self-reliance, the regime was not hard put to jettison what it called the social vices of lethargy, dependency and lack of work ethic: “negative” political cultural legacies, which it felt have quenched patriotic fervour.⁵⁰

Obviously, policy approaches that lay so much emphasis on a sense of citizen duty and obligation are likely to be geared towards a wholesale social transformation, obviating, by and large, the imperatives of nation-building from below. But, they also provide the rationale for the legitimation and justification of state encroachment into the social sphere and its corollary—the top-down incorporation of society into the arms of an all-embracing, if not, liberating, political community of the state. The impending danger in such a system is that citizenship is always accompanied by the litmus test of loyalty that impels individuals to prove their “worthiness” to the state and its causes. Whereas those who speak most approvingly of the regime or perhaps prefer to keep their thoughts to themselves will in some ways be out of harm's way, those who voice the negative effects of government policy, such as the open-ended nature of the national-service, or worse yet, fail to take part in it, are likely to be faulted as sub-nationalists and hence subjected to forced disappearance or detention.⁵¹ By thus narrowly defining citizenship, loyalty to the state is equated with unconditional support to the government, its policies, and its leaders. So does the restrictive definition of nation-building, where all forms of identity necessarily—and quite stubbornly—revolve around the nation-state. This has resulted not only in purges but also in the disenfranchisement of ordinary people who do not share the regime's conception of nation-building from engagement in economic and social activities, much less from tapping into state public services and opportunities that provide access to “rights of licence, visa, land tenure, and the rights to work.”⁵²

Free Agency in State-totality “Continuum”: Implications for Eritrea

In what seemed to capture the *zeitgeist* mood of Machiavelli's Renaissance Italy or that of Hobbes' metaphorical picture of “the state of nature,” the history of Eritrea over the past sixty years has been a crucible of seemingly endless accounts of war, mayhem and collective tragedy that has befallen communities and national societies. From the analysis of the structural, institutional and personal dimensions of political power vis-à-vis the nation-building process and its effects, one could reasonably draw the conclusion that there is an inherently fundamental paradoxical tension between moral agency and state absolutism, encapsulating state-society relations in Eritrea. This is largely due to the conjoining of the state with society using the rhetoric of existential threat and its natural concomitant, the militarisation and mobilization of society as the ultimate justification for

the development of an all-embracing state, where the sphere of individual moral agency and external state power have intermeshed. This has led to a situation, where the state has become inexorably unable or unwilling to bolster its authority and legitimacy by facilitating some form of legal association in what Hobbes called a “covenant” or a social pact. As the foundation of a political system, the social contract—which conveys some faint notions of modern day parliamentary government and even constitutional sovereignty—is made by the consent of the parties involved and one from which a national society morphs itself into a body politic, thereby signifying the concurrent (not the solitary) existence of unity and duality in state-society relations.

Nor does the Eritrean state attempt to resolve the perennial tensions surrounding state-society relations using what Machiavelli called *ordini*: “good arms and good laws,” which promise to realize simultaneously the civic-republican and humanist ideals of glory and security. The prince’s “flexible disposition” enables him to combine realist and pragmatic (*necessità*) strategies with the dynamic and uncontrollable set of chance circumstances (*fortuna*) thereby adapting and varying the free-will of power politics (*virtù*) “as fortune and circumstances dictate.”⁵³ Indeed, the Eritrean state appears to employ violence, all the same, as the ultimate instrument of politics not only in vanquishing real or apparent enemies but also in shaping national consciousness. If the state has appeared so dogmatic about the use or threat of coercion, it also goes so far as to avoid anything resembling in the remotest way of “mutual accommodation,” lest it be construed as an admission of weakness. But even still, the state has never been able to functionally differentiate, much less celebrate the two spheres of political and social action as Machiavelli would have counselled his prince to do so: securing some levels of political and social interstices—liberty so to speak. This is indeed what sustains the development and reproduction of individual capacity, both deontologically (free agency as a general principle) and rule consequentially (free agency as an instrument of government) in order to secure what Machiavelli again called the enjoyment of “a true, free and civil life” (*vero vivere civile e libero*).⁵⁴ It is difficult to speculate what Machiavelli might have meant beyond what he outlined when he brought out this to the attention of Lorenzo de’ Medici in such a poignant and personal way: “God is directing you...The rest you must do yourself. God does not do everything, so as not to take from us *free will* (emphasis added) and part of the glory that pertains to us.”⁵⁵

Machiavelli’s views in this corollary strongly agree with Hobbes, who repudiated the Greek idea of man as a political animal, rather considering man to be a solitary being endowed—as a creation of nature (rather than society)—with absolute natural right, which obliges him to do whatever is necessary to preserve and defend his life, liberty and property.⁵⁶ As such, both Machiavelli’s principality and Hobbes’ monarchical state had a liberal essence, albeit not in the 19th century notions of liberal democracy, but nonetheless in the sense that neither Hobbes’ king nor Machiavelli’s prince existed as a corporation sole in himself and by himself as embodying the metaphorical head-body politic expression of a unified whole. Rather, in both cases, each one is conceived of as representing a corporate national society in which, and through which, each is only the head. This characterisation immediately suggests that there is an ineluctable difference between the two entities: state and society, and to ignore this duplet is “to be guilty of the grossest of all confusions, which completely bars any understanding of either state or society.”⁵⁷

The insights gained by the conceptual reflections do not correspond to the empirical assessment of the political, structural and institutional variables, in general, and the *raison d’être* of Eritrea’s nation-building programme, in particular, which has become so introspective and autarkic—out of contemporary social life, and the logic of economics and modern state politics it underpins. As such, it inhabits, as it were, a solitary world of absolutes: exclusively governed and

dedicated to the preservation of absolute power and absolute identity pushed to the utmost. Herein, then, lies the root cause of Eritrea's political crisis: not just a lack of political will to frame a scheme of government primarily defined by a system of rights and duties—commonly described as the rule of law—but also by its total rejection of the duality of morality both for the state and the individual. Instead, the expression, reflection and reification of established norms, common convictions and common will of the political community must bow to the absolute moral code of the state. In essence, this absolute moral code is none other than the *de facto* expression of a one-man will and power, whose concept of nation-building is a mere 'social engineering' that must be imposed *fait accompli* over ordinary citizens.⁵⁸ Having become the author and source of its own moral authority, and hence the moral-circular rationalization of its own actions and motives, the state has not only forestalled what Barker called “the highest possible development of all the capacities of personality in all of its members” but has also stunted the organic growth of its own personality.⁵⁹

Having politically disenfranchised the masses, the Eritrean state has, in effect, seemingly negated any moral claim to the allegiance and loyalty of its members, while leaving national identity, and the state itself, on an insecure footing. Considering the country's continued descent into war, poverty, refugee exodus, and economic collapse that are compounded by gross human rights abuses and possibly crimes against humanity, the role of the state as the champion of citizenship and the attendant principles of the spontaneous development of free agency have been turned topsy-turvy as the instrumental value of the state has inherently and indeed explicitly become an end in itself.⁶⁰ It comes as no surprise, then, if this political experiment has inflicted unprecedented damage on generic institutions, especially those representing education, health, agriculture, industrial, commercial and infrastructural development, leading to the withering of individual and social life, and indeed much of professional skill and intellectual capacity to engage in what Hobbes called the “faculty of invention,” which is fundamentally “acquired, and increased by study and industry.”⁶¹

Conclusion

If Hobbes' metaphorical picture of “the war of all against all” and Machiavelli's cold and calculative reflection on the inevitability of war and violence can be seen as an integral part of human nature, it would still remain tragic in so far as all wars, conflicts and revolutionary cataclysms are tragic. But it is far too tragic when the state turns itself into one enormous command structure, and wages “war” against its own population as its standard *modus operandi* of enforcing loyalty, discipline and compliance. With the campaign approach to nation-building as the sole mechanism of social transformation, Eritrea is still saddled with onerous baggage from its revolutionary past, which, like many existentially constituted revolutions did not necessarily impinge on, or even culminate in, the achievement of the nation-state.⁶² This legacy has continued to shape national identity through the threat and use of violence, which has never been far from the surface, and indeed allowed to become an end in its own right.

What has unfolded from the foregoing analysis of state-society relations in Eritrea is not just the ways in which the preservation of personal power through a drawn-out processes of social regimentation and militarization has become the sole basis and *raison d'être* of a colossus state. Rather, it has allowed us to see the bigger picture of the seamless fusion—not the coexistence—of a state and society into one integrated polity that is playing out on a political terrain that has, in effect, set Eritrea on a gradual yet sustained transformation into a totalitarian state, or at least one that behaves as such and hopes for total control. The nation-building process of Eritrea, which has

been fiercely devoted to the pursuit of a gaudy dream of creating an “egalitarian, self-reliant utopia” has certainly been plagued by a systemic regime failure.⁶³ This can indeed be seen as interwoven with the inevitability of state failure in so far as there is no mechanism providing for the establishment of legitimate state institutions of the rule of law in the form of a legislative organ (or some equivalent institution) that could reproduce, express and reify common convictions and the will of society. Or, better still, through a constitution an aspect of immediate sovereignty in mediating state-society relations not only in defining the use of power and containing or settling social conflicts but also in propelling the state towards the promotion of the idea of law. The extent to which the natural law elements of moral agency require to be acknowledged and decodified into positive legal instruments in such a way as to harmonise them with the demands of the social context within which they are to be realised is what in the end makes the appeal to the idea of constitutional government of central importance.⁶⁴

With neither institutional nor constitutional safeguards in place to check state power, Eritrea has eventually wound up as “one of the most unapologetically repressive countries on Earth.”⁶⁵ The political system has indeed morphed into an unrivalled political hegemony of an absolutist state, which so much depends upon a highly personalised polity, devoid of any “logic of difference,” much less a system of rights: except the sovereign's right that so much rests on the strength of will and iron. Partly driven by utopian and egoistic ideals of creating the indomitable state, whose inspiration lies in the firm conviction of the rightness of its leaders, and partly by exploiting ordinary citizens' nationalist sentiments, whose roots lie in existential fear, Eritrea's nation-building technocrats seem to be fanning Schmittian metaphorical flames that “purge away” enemies in the process of “refining” friends.⁶⁶ This is indeed a nihilistic image of the state, which is most congenial to the narrow partisanship of “an exclusive cult, repelling the members of other groups in the act of attracting to itself the members of its own.”⁶⁷ While they may indeed be oblivious to the accumulation of corrosive social backlash, which is likely to countervail their statist ambition, their actions, nonetheless, serve as a chilling reminder of Calicles' ideal man (the *Superman*) that meets his doppelganger in Nietzsche's (the *Übermensch*) who feels more at home with the morality of might makes right.⁶⁸ This is essentially and indeed solely the 'morals of an immoralist' who stands out and bears himself up, as he does, not only against the weaker members of society but also against anything that tastes of metaphysical or even ontological and cosmological reasoning.

Notes

- 1 All references to *Leviathan* are taken from Hobbes 2004. See also Hampsher-Monk 1992, p. 67; see also Germino 1972, p. 112; Gatti 2015, p. 4; Zagorin 2009, pp. 76, 84. It is important to note the fact that Hobbes' deductive epistemology of arriving at universal principles is different from that of Aristotelian inductive structure in which an object is defined by “its universal aspect...by examining any particular case of that object. This is indeed the structure of Aristotle's syllogistic logic: All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Socrates is mortal. In Hobbes, however, the universals are not derived from the particulars as ordinarily understood. Hobbes's universal principles are rather applied to individuals. The categories of *prima philosophia* predetermine what individuals can be from Hobbes' vantage point; and Hobbes' *prima philosophia* is, like Bacon's, a theory as to what body is.” Roecklein 2014, p. 120.
- 2 Gert 2001, pp. 73, 98; Hampsher-Monk 1992, p. 30. D. Germino observed that although Hobbes

appeared to be less pessimist in the *Leviathan* than in the *Behemoth*, “throughout his life Hobbes maintained an extremely negative attitude towards democracy” Germino 1972, p. 112. Similarly, H. Arendt noted that “[F]or Hobbes the individual possesses no inherent dignity worthy of respect; instead, worth is dependent upon power, which is determined solely in the eyes of others” Arendt, cited in P. Birmingham 2006, p. 38. We also find in Machiavelli a soured, albeit idiosyncratic view of human nature when he stated that men are not only “wicked” but also that they “never do anything good except by necessity.” Gilbert 1989, p. 201.

3 Plamenatz 1963, pp. 119-20.

4 Hobbes 1969, p. 15.

5 Plamenatz 1963.

6 Rutherford 2015, pp. 219-44; Hampton 1992, p. 333. For a more detailed analysis and interpretation on the nexus between human motivation and moral judgement, and in particular on the theme of what motivates individuals to act morally and whether such motivations are internal or external to morality, see among others, works by Nagel 1970; Frankena 1976.

7 Hobbes 2004, p. 107; p. 90. It is common nowadays, as it was in ancient times, to depict the state or segments thereof, especially the institutions of justice using the emblem of a personified figure in the form of a blindfolded woman holding a balance with one hand and a sword, with the other, not so much to inspire awe in the hearts of citizens as to instil in their minds the ideals of justice, fairness and impartiality. Barker 1951, p. 170.

8 Hobbes 2004, pp. 91-92.

9 Barker 1951, p. 188.

10 Hobbes 2004, p. 431.

11 Bobbio 1993, p. 193.

12 The famous statement commonly attributed to Louis XIV (1643-1715) - “*L’etat c’est moi*” (I am the state) captures the *Zeitgeist* mood of the times in which absolutist monarchical decadence and aristocratic excesses plunged the French society into conflict and violence. The same could be said of Henry VIII, whose tyrannical rule was described to have had an aura of the Kremlin under Stalin. Ridley, 2002; and to a lesser extent of James I of England, who boastfully declared in Parliament in 1610: “kings have power to exalt low things and abase high things and to make of their subjects like men at chess—a pawn to take a bishop or a knight; and to cry up or down any of their subjects as they do their money.” MacFarlane and Thompson 1861, p. 318. Bobbio 1993, p. 69.

13 Barker 1951, p. 162.

14 Machiavelli, 2016, p. 57.

15 Germino 1972, p. 41.

16 The idea of city-state and self-government was indeed a prominent feature of Italian city-states' constitutional tradition, which “represented a complete repudiation of the familiar Medieval principle of lordship and hereditary rule.” Skinner 1991, pp. 121-42.

17 In response to the concept of liberty set forth by both Machiavelli and Hobbes, political scientists make a distinction between two forms of liberty: positive and negative. Whereas positive liberty denotes to the presence of enabling internal and external conditions for self-realization, negative liberty on the other hand, denotes to the presence of adverse conditions that hinder one from realizing their potentialities. Thus, for example, Giorgiani who identifies “Three visions of liberty: John Stewart Mill, Isaiah Berlin and Quentin Skinner” noted that

whereas “Mill's view of liberty as absence of constraints in self-regarding actions has been hailed by Berlin as the quintessential notion of 'negative liberty' (an expression originally coined by Samuel Pufendorf and then used by Jeremy Bentham). On the other hand, Skinner has emphasized Mill's belief that a minimum level of interference from the government, together with a maximum of social tolerance, was needed to promote 'individuality' and 'eccentricity.’” Giorgini 2013. See also, Strauss 1952, p. 2.

- 18 Although Machiavelli might appear to be the propagator of “worldly glory” as the *summum bonum* – or the ultimate end, “such glory is surely a sham and a deception ...but perhaps as the *Discourses* would seem to indicate, he was more aware of this than most of his detractors believed him to be.” Germino 1972, p. 30. Rees 2004, p. 18.
- 19 McClelland 1996, p. 281.
- 20 Germino 1972, p. 35.
- 21 Plamenatz 1963, p. 42.
- 22 Sabine 1961, p. 340.
- 23 Rees 2004, p. 18.
- 24 Landon 2005, p. 30.
- 25 Mansfield 1985, p. 39.
- 26 Mansfield 1966, pp. 291-92.
- 27 Ibid., p. 292.
- 28 Sabine 1961, pp. 341-43.
- 29 Belliotti 2015, p. 64.
- 30 Ebenstein 1957, p. 175.
- 31 Sabine 1961, pp. 457-85; Jones 1969, pp. 87-89. According to L. Strauss, Hobbes method of political philosophy, which was inspired by the physical analytical methods of “resolutive compositive” employed by Galileo in which: “the given political facts (the disputable justice or injustice of any particular action, or the current conception of justice in general, or the State itself, which as the primary condition of justice is the political fact *par excellence*) are analysed, reduced to their elements (the 'individual wills'), and then, *converso itinere*, starting from those elements, the necessity and possibility of a 'collective will' is developed *evidentissima conexione*, by a completely lucid deduction, and what was at first an 'irrational' whole is 'rationalized.’” Strauss 1952, p. 2; see also Sabine 1961, p. 459; Hampsher-Monk 1992, pp. 23-26.
- 32 Cahn 2002.
- 33 Hobbes 2004, p. 93; p. 259.
- 34 Harrington 2005, p. 1; see also Sabine 1961, p. 456. This is apart from the usual charges of paradoxes and inconsistencies in Hobbes' theory in which he allegedly fails to acknowledge that “while all order proceeds from the unquestioned authority of the sovereign, the permanent and settled institution of sovereignty itself depends upon a recognition of the scientific truths of morals and politics as set forth by him.” Dewey 1974, p. 23. We find similar inconsistencies in relation to Hobbes' notion of reason, where, on the one hand, he seems to argue that “an individual's natural reason cannot be right ...that one cannot discover the truth by reason alone....On the other hand, Hobbes' claim that right reason is based on indubitable principles....that an individual can discover true principles.” Finn 2006, p. 171.
- 35 Germino 1972, p. 91.
- 36 Aristotle's mixed regime or what he called the polity is composed of three “pure” forms of

government: monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Machiavelli's preference for a republic over a one-man principality is that because republics "afforded the opportunities for popular participation in government and thereby advanced the common good of the commoners."

Germino 1972, p. 51.

37 Sabine 1961, pp. 346-47.

38 According to Schmitt 2008, p. 26: "'the political' is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy groups. According to S. Smith, the irony of Schmitt's description of "the political" is that "a politics of unremitting war and preparation for war would have to be self-defeating even in Schmitt's own terms....Why should war be something that takes place only between states and not within them, as the logic of bitter rivalry and partisanship cuts all the way down into our domestic affairs?" Smith 2011, p. 136.

39 Iyob 1995, p. 96; Tronvoll 1999, p. 1037; Reid 2009, p. 218; Kibreab 2009, p. 42; Ogbazghi 2015, p. 2.

40 Connell 2011, p. 420; Ogbazghi 2015, pp. 9-16; Kibreab 2009, p. 43.

41 Ogbazghi 2015, p. 15.

42 Hedru 2003; Tesfagiorgis 2011, pp. 54, 120.

43 Naty 2002, pp. 7-14.

44 Amnesty International 2013; Ogbazghi 2015, p. 10.

45 Kibreab, p. 57; Connell 2011, p. 422.

46 Tronvoll 2009, pp. 82-87, 94; Human Rights Watch 2009, p. 46.

47 Abbink 2003, p. 410.

48 Reid 2009, p. 218; Habte-Selassie 2010, p. 76; Ogbazghi 2015, pp. 9-10.

49 Reid 2009, p. 220; Ogbazghi 2015, p. 6.

50 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/1753310.stm>

51 Kibreab 2009, p. 57; Connell 2011, p. 422.

52 Kibreab 2009, p. 57; see also Dorman 2003, p. 10.

53 Skinner 1978, p. 138.

54 Machiavelli had not only "a high opinion both of the virtue and the judgement of an uncorrupted people, [who] are both more prudent and more sound in their judgement than a prince" but also a high "esteem for liberal and lawful government." Sabine, 1961: 347-8. The reason why Machiavelli "believed that the people must be independent and strong, [is] because there is no way to make them warlike without giving them the means of rebellion." Sabine, 1961: 347. Viroli 1992, p. 155.

55 Gilbert 1938, p. 94.

56 An ironic twist to Hobbes apparent rejection of Aristotelian doctrine is that he may well be more Aristotelian than one might anticipate from his extreme viewpoint as L. Strauss attempted to show: "the break with Aristotle was completed only in connexion with Hobbes' mathematical and scientific studies and even then by no means immediately in all rigour." Strauss 1936, p. 33. Similarly, despite his "contempt for medieval philosophy, and all its works, Hobbes somewhere acquired both a perfect mastery of logic as an instrument and a trust in the power of rational thought so sublime that it would have done justice to a St Thomas." Jones 1969, p. 86.

57 MacIver 1926, p. 5.

58 Reid 2009, p. 217.

59 Barker 1951, p. 123, 207-08.

60 OHCHR. "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea". 9 May, 2016.

<https://www.ohchr.org/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coieritrea/a_hrc_32_47_aev.pdf> See also: 'Eritrea Report: United Nations inquiry finds crimes against humanity in Eritrea', OHCHR, 8 June, 2016. <<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/EritreaReport.aspx>>.

61 Hobbes 2004 pp. 10-14.

62 Reid 2009, pp. 217-20; Bozzini 2011, p. 106; Ogbazghi 2011, p. 9.

63 McCrummen 2009.

64 Laski, 1970, p. 339-40; see also Barker 1951, p. 215.

65 McCrummen 2009.

66 Schmitt. 2008, p.26.

67 Barker 1951, p. 166.

68 Copleston 1962, pp. 247-48.

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