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The fear of death. A policy that oscillates between community and immunity

El miedo a la muerte. Una política que oscila entre la comunidad y la inmunidad

ABSTRACT:

The main theme of this text is the inherent and fundamental fear found in the modern State. We have dealt with T. Hobbes's *Leviathan* because we believe that it is a political theory that makes fear the original characteristic of the State. This fear of dying a violent death at the hands of anyone in the state of nature is what forces men to move towards a new fear: that of the sovereign's sword. In other words, the thesis of the article consists in demonstrating that fear does not disappear, on the contrary, that it is the heart of the state of nature and the motor of the political State. Having identified that the object of fear is death, we also resort to R. Esposito's concepts of community and immunity to show that the Leviathan protects the lives of its subjects through its immune strategy. However, just as the subjects stay alive, the price they pay is the death of the community. What survives in Hobbes is the body politic, a body that does not die because it is used to living with the death that lives within it.

KEY WORDS:

Hobbes; Esposito; fear; power; sovereignty; immunity.

ABSTRACT:

El tema principal de este texto es el miedo insito y fundamental que se halla en el Estado moderno. Nos hemos ocupado del Leviatán de T. Hobbes porque creemos que es una teoría política que hace del miedo la característica originaria del Estado. Este miedo a morir de muerte violenta en manos de cualquiera en el estado de naturaleza es lo que obliga a los hombres a desplazarse hacia un nuevo miedo: el de la espada del soberano. En otros términos, la tesis del artículo consiste en demostrar que el miedo no desaparece, por el contrario, que es el corazón del estado de naturaleza y el motor del Estado político. Habiendo identificado que el objeto del miedo es la muerte, recurrimos también a los concepto de R. Esposito de comunidad e inmunidad para mostrar que el Leviatán protege la vida de los súbditos a través de

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su estrategia inmunitaria. Sin embargo, así como los súbditos se mantienen con vida, el precio que pagan es el de la muerte de la comunidad. Lo que sobrevive en Hobbes es el cuerpo político, un cuerpo que no muere porque está acostumbrado a convivir con la muerte que habita en su interior.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Hobbes; Esposito; miedo; pode; soberanía; inmunidad.

1. Introducción

Throughout his text *Immunitas. Protection and negation of life* (2002), Roberto Esposito¹ proposes the immune paradigm as a hermeneutic key to understanding our present. Indeed, it suggests that the category of immunity acquires greater interpretative value because it is capable of transversally cutting specific languages and redirecting them to the same horizon of meaning (cf.: Esposito: 2002, p. 3).

In this way, immunity is presented in apparently heterogeneous planes such as the fight against a virus, a discourse that has been strongly embodied in the recent outbreak of Covid-19 that gave rise to the pandemic that began in 2019 and has not yet ended, the opposition to the request for the extradition of a head of state accused of human rights violations, Esposito thinks of the example of the Chilean dictator Pinochet, the reinforcement of the borders to prevent clandestine immigration, the computer viruses that have recently been put in check to more than one international company making it lose millions of dollars. Only in Latin America can we think of the cyberattacks against Mercado Libre, the bank BR Partners, etc. Therefore, Esposito maintains, the horizon of meaning to which all these security practices that seek to restore order in the face of risk lead are intertwined in the immune paradigm.

Thus, a first approach to the concept of immunity is to understand it as the requirement to rebuild a balance that has previously been broken. However, in political terms we must say that the community forms that have occurred throughout history have had an immune system. In other words, and to say it with Esposito, it is not possible to think of some kind of community that dispenses with all immunity.

Now, if this is so, what is the characteristic of our present? Why resort to the immune paradigm as an interpretative key to our present if it can be extended as an analysis throughout history?

2. Immunity and the risk of contagion

From the examples we have taken from Esposito, we can be sure of one thing: both a disease and a violent intrusion, whether on the level of the individual or the common, always occurs in the realm of the body. The body is the place where the threat is located, but the body is also the limit between the interior and the exterior, between the individual and the common (cf.: Esposito: 2002, p. 4).

1/ The translations of R. Esposito's texts reproduced by way of quotation were made by Constanza Serratore, unless otherwise indicated.

Immunity is, then, the response to the intrusion of something that penetrates our body from the outside —individual and/or collective— and transforms it, alters it, modifies it, corrupts it. Now, while it is true that communities have always given their own immune forms to protect themselves, it is also true that the characteristic of our contemporary times is the fear of contagion from an evil that can spread through all the ganglia of life. It is no longer a precise, punctual attack, but the fear of contamination that puts the whole body at risk of devastation. The fear of contamination, of contagion, the accelerated and generalized nature of the disease in the body at the same time, is what confers a special requirement on immunization.

This is the reason why Esposito explains immune modernity in two stages or two moments, without this implying the exclusion of one by the other. In philosophical-political terms, the first modernity is the one that was born with Hobbes and is understood as the elaboration of conditions of refractoriness of the body to eliminate disease. It is enough to think of the Hobbesian model proposed in *Leviathan*, in which it is clearly evident that what concerns the author of the s. xvii is the chaos, the civil war understood as disease, and not the excess of order. For Hobbes the dilemma is Leviathan or anarchy and, put in bio-medical terms, it is important to neutralize or eliminate all possibility of the disease; if this does not work, the death of politics follows.

Between the s. xviii and xix, science has made substantial advances in terms of the passage that Esposito points out between a natural immunity and an acquired immunity that characterizes this second modernity. Indeed, Jenner's discovery of the smallpox vaccine or Koch and Pasteur's experiments open up a new stage in the hands of medical bacteriology that completely changes the meaning of the concepts of disease and cure. To put it clearly, Esposito maintains that it is about the passage from a passive condition to an active condition in which non-lethal doses of the evil from which they want to preserve it are introduced into the body.

Esposito affirms that if for Hobbes it was about eradicating the disease, in the sense of at least momentary elimination, in this new conceptualization of immunity; it is about introducing the infection in an attenuated and preventive way.

The passage within modernity put in terms of natural immunity to acquired immunity generates some effects of meaning that are interesting to explain. In the first place, acquired immunity appears as the reaction of a force that is inoculated to prevent another force from developing. Secondly, this immunity mechanism assumes the existence of the disease that it must counteract.

Third, immunity reproduces in a controlled manner the disease that it sought to eradicate in the other model. In this sense, Esposito maintains that «life fights against what denies it, but not according to the strategy of a frontal confrontation» (Esposito 2002, p. 10). In this way, we understand that the poison is defeated when it is part of the organism and not when it is eliminated. In clearer terms: what kills also cures, and this is the double meaning of the old term *phármakon* that indicates what can be translated as poison or as a remedy.

3. Hobbes and fear in the state of nature

The first chapter of *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità* (1998) is entitled by Esposito «La paura», fear, as that central element of modern politics. Indeed, Elías Canetti in his text *Die Provinz des Menschen* (1973) maintains about Hobbes:



«As a thinker, you really are on your own. In later centuries there are few psychological currents that could not claim him as their predecessor. As I have said, he was very afraid and he spoke as openly about this fear as about everything else he faced» (Canetti: 1982, p. 85).

Fear is the center of Hobbes' political theory and of his own biography. So much so that Hobbes writes: «My mother gave birth to twins: myself and fear» (Hobbes: 1839, vol. I, p. lxxxvi). From the perspective indicated by Canetti and Esposito, Hobbes is the author who has used fear as the central tool both from the analytical and from the prescriptive point of view at a time when fear was considered a negative value.

From our reading, we consider that Hobbes's *Leviathan* suggests an intermediate path between the two modernities that we have indicated so far. Indeed, Hobbesian fear is not what comes from outside only but what is always within us, it is what disposes us in an internal struggle that can reach the point of conquering us completely. To say it with Esposito «What Hobbes teaches us is the courage to be afraid» (Esposito: 1998, p. 4). What attracts, then, both Canetti and Esposito is the courage of Hobbes, a man full of fear who is capable of telling us openly that humanity is nothing but fear.

Now, one of the questions that we ask ourselves in this article is: what is the place that fear occupies in Hobbes's political theory? The answer is simple, fear is in the first place, it is original insofar as what we fear is precisely our condition as mortals. In other words, the fear that runs through us and constitutes us is neither more nor less than the fear of death.

In chap. XI of the «Of Man» section of *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that «a first natural inclination of all mankind (is) a perpetual and unremitting desire for power after power, which only ceases at death» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 87). After this affirmation he maintains that humanity has certain essential dispositions to achieve power. For example, he points out that competition is a disposition that leads humanity to achieve more power with the consequence of antagonism, enmity and war: «Because the way a competitor achieves his desires is by killing, supplanting or rejecting the one who competes with the». Now, he continues, man can not only kill but also die, «the fear of death and of being wounded carries a similar predisposition».

The fear of dying is at the origin of humanity because we are all equal and free in the state of nature. Indeed, in chap. XIII of the same section, Hobbes maintains that men are equal in the faculties of body and soul: «the difference between man and man is not so appreciable as to justify an individual claiming for himself any benefit that another individual cannot claim with equal right» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 105). And continues:

«From this equality in faculties arises an equality in the hope of achieving our ends. And, therefore, if two men desire the same thing that cannot be enjoyed by both, they become enemies; and, to achieve their end, which is mainly their self-preservation (...) they insist on destroying and submitting to each other» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 106).

In relation to freedom, in chap. XIV of the same section, Hobbes argues that this must be understood as the lack of external impediments. In this way, a man who lives in the state of nature without being subjected to any power that restricts his potentialities, is free. Thus, according to the natural right of the state of nature, each man has the freedom to do what he pleases for the preservation of his own nature, of his own life. In other words, each man



can do what seems best to him to achieve the end he pursues —happiness is, as previously indicated, what is defined as the desire for power after power.

Now, in the equality and freedom of the state of nature, Hobbes maintains that we live in a condition of war between each man and each man and that war does not refer exclusively to the present situation but to the will to violent confrontation that it is latent at all times in which humanity lives without any other security than the one provided by its own strength.

It is in this sense that happiness, initially understood as the desire for power after power that only ends with violent death, transmutes into great suffering when it is understood that the subject of death is not only the enemy but that it can also be us. The discovery of our condition as mortals— and mortals under violent death, not due to illness or old age —is what puts us in the situation of dissatisfaction typical of those who find themselves incapable of «living with others where there is no superior power capable of to frighten them all» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 106). «(...) there is no society. And, worst of all, there is constant fear and constant danger of dying a violent death. And the life of man is lonely, poor, unpleasant, brutal and short» (Hobbes: 1994, pp. 107-108).

Thus, what is seen is that the fear of death is what pushes humanity to agree to enter the civil state. Now, what we must underline in this article is that the fear of the violent death of each man with each man does not disappear but is transmuted into the fear of the sovereign's sword. Before going into the movement from one state to another, Hobbes points out that «the passions that incline men to seek peace are the fear of death, the desire to obtain the things necessary to live comfortably, and the hope that, with their work (*industry*), they can get them» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 109).

Unlike natural law, Hobbes argues that natural law is the general rule discovered through reason that prohibits humanity from doing what is destructive to life. The general rule of reason, contrary to the natural law according to which each one is governed according to his own reason, indicates that «every man must seek peace to the extent he has hope of achieving it» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 111).



4. Hobbes and fear in the political state

The passage from the state of nature to the political state is, as we well know, symbolic insofar as Hobbes presents it as a working hypothesis without supposing that this moment has occurred in the history of humanity. In this way, the contract would imply a theoretical-political beginning but not a historical-temporal one.

Indeed, the first warning that Hobbes gives us in Chap. XIV of the section «Of Man» is that the resignation and the transfer of power are not the same. Giving up the right to equality and freedom —that is, to kill— does not imply the passage to the political State for various reasons.

In the first place, this is because resignation is an individual act in which a subject decides not to act in a particular way without taking into account the person to whom this benefit will result. Secondly, it is because the resignation of a subject does not impede the impediment of the other subject to limit his actions. Thirdly, it is because renouncing is nothing more than enabling the other to act on the renouncing in the way he pleases and, ultimately, following

the law of reason of self-preservation, the renouncing must defend himself so as not to lose his life. In this way, the resignation is ineffective because the resigner will have to kill again.

Thus, resignation is not the way to build a political State but transfer:

«By transferring a right, it is intended that the benefit falls on a particular person or persons. And when a man has abandoned or ceded his right in one of these two ways, it is then said that he is obliged not to prevent those to whom this right has been granted or left from benefiting from it (...)» (Hobbes: 1994, p.112).

However, the reason that justifies the transfer of rights is none other than personal security. Transferring rights —freedom and equality— implies first of all conserving one's life: «Lastly, the reason and purpose that make a man renounce and transfer his rights is none other than his personal security in this life, and to provide the means to preserve it and not get bored» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 113)

As can be seen, it is not the waiver but «the mutual transfer of a right that men call a contract» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 113). The difference between the promise to comply with a certain act and the agreements that are made out of fear is that the latter are binding. In other words, the promise does not include the possibility of using force, while what is transferred to the sovereign is precisely the possibility of killing, which reads as follows: «I will no longer be able to kill, but you can do it in my name».

Thus, along with the transfer of power to the sovereign, we must take into account that the contract also requires:



«When a man has abandoned or ceded his right (...) it is said that he is obliged not to prevent those to whom that right has been granted or left from benefiting from it; and that he must, and it is his duty, not to annul that act of his that he has carried out of his own free will» and he continues a few lines below «And these are the ties that bind and oblige men; bonds that do not have a force derived from their own nature —for nothing can be broken more easily than the word of a man—, but from the fear that its rupture will give rise to some bad consequence» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 112).

Norberto Bobbio argues that in the Hobbesian contract there are two instances that occur together but that it is essential to distinguish them for the purposes of understanding the force of this theory: in the pact there is a moment of transfer and another of submission or obligation (see: Bobbio: 1991).

However, it must be emphasized that both instances also suppose the distinction between the persons of the actor and the author. Indeed, in chap. XVI of the first section, Hobbes refers to the etymology of the concept of person² using both his Greek term *προσωπον* and the Latin *persona, ae*, pointing out that in both languages these terms refer to the external appearance of a man that performs a representation on stage and, other times more specifically, that refer to the mask that serves to cover the face and amplify the voice at the same time.

In this way, Hobbes maintains: «to personify is to act or represent oneself or another. Whoever represents the role of another is said to assume the person of the latter, or to act on

2/ On the etymological analysis of the term *persona* and its consequences in the political philosophical sphere, see Esposito, 2007 and 2001.

his behalf» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 134). Therefore, to the theories of transference and submission we must add that of authorization³ according to which:

«Of the artificial people, some speak words and perform actions that belong to those they represent. And then the person is the actor, and the owner of those words is the author». A few lines below, Hobbes goes on to say that «(...) we call the right to carry out an action authority. In such a way, that by authority is always understood a right to carry out an act; and made by authorization means made by commission or permission of the one to whom the right belongs» (Hobbes: 1994, p. 135).

In conclusion, Hobbes argues that the only way humanity can live in community is by transferring all power to individual forces and submitting all wills to one man. This man is called sovereign and embodies the civil or political state. This political State will not only prevent its subjects from killing each other, but will allow them to live off the fruit of their labor and have satisfied lives (cf.: Hobbes: 1994, chap. XVII). The sovereign represents the subjects being the actor of the acts of which the subjects are the authors. Hobbes sums up the unity reached by the agreement of each man with each man as follows:

«I authorize and grant the right to govern myself, giving that authority to this man or this assembly of men, provided that you also grant them your own right in like manner, and give them that authority in all their actions. Once this is done, a multitude thus united in one person is what we call a State, in Latin *Civitas*. Thus is generated that great Leviathan, or rather, to speak with greater reverence, that mortal god to whom we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and security» (Hobbes: 1994, pp. 144-145).



5. The rationalization of fear

From Hobbes's reasoning we can deduce that there is a displacement of the original fear — which is manifested in the war of each one against each one— towards an inoculated fear embodied by the State that protects as long as it has the power to sanction. Furthermore, Hobbes claims that communities are held together not so much by mutual benevolence as by mutual fear. This affirmation, from the philosophical point of view, completely changes the register of positive anthropology of the Aristotelian matrix (cf.: the Aristotelian definition of man as *zoon politikon* or *zoon koinonikón* in Aristotle: 2005) according to which man is social by nature.

Contrary to Aristotle, Hobbesian thought opens the doors to the modern consideration that sustains that humanity agrees to escape initial and indeterminate fear, thus introducing itself into a secondary and determined fear. Esposito maintains that political power consists in the legitimization of fear, that is, in organizing the conditions for the rational stabilization of fear (cf.: Esposito: 1998, p. 8). Hobbes's discovery, therefore, resides precisely in the idea that the State does not have the function of eliminating fear, but of giving it certainty. In other words, the modern State takes fear as its foundation and uses it as its engine. Indeed, Benjamin following —perhaps— Hobbes maintains that the modern State carries in its heart an indelible imprint of violence (cf.: Benjamin: 1995).

3/ On the question of Hobbes' theory of authorisation and decision, see: Carl Schmitt: 2003.

Now, the Hobbesian position according to which life can only be ensured at the cost of the life of the other, the idea of the war of each one against each one according to which peace is nothing more than an exception, puts us face to face with the situation of affirming that the relationship that unites humanity is that of the enemy and the enemy. In this way, Leviathan is nothing other than the management of enmity. Esposito maintains that Hobbes's position, his specular inversion of the state of nature in the political state, is the form of the infinite crisis or the destruction of the relationship itself between humans. This is so because in order to flee from mortal contact, men are obliged to dissociate themselves, establishing the sovereign as the one with whom all are related vertically without the need to relate horizontally to each other.

Esposito's thesis —which we share— consists in affirming that the Hobbes contract is at the same time a constitutive and dissolving act: the State is the dissolution of the community bond. Thus, the contract that Hobbes thinks of in a 'positive' way to build a community rejects, eliminates, drives away, displaces and immunizes the evil of the death of individuals. This is, in effect, what organizes a large part of the modern political project (cf.: Esposito: 1998, p. 13).

Now, we return to the point from which we started. The initial thesis tried to think about the Hobbesian project in terms of immunity. Indeed, the interpretation that we have proposed involves thinking about the immune barrier that allows a community to be constituted, and the Hobbesian response is the State. However, we have seen in the preceding paragraphs that the proposal of the Leviathan State is at the same time the construction and the dissolution of the community.

Leviathan is the third party that mediates the direct relationship between life and power. In this way, it is essential to understand that Hobbes' speech falls within the great metaphor of political philosophy that thinks of the State as bodily configuration or organic type representation. For this reason, Leviathan is the mortal god within which the immune intention of politics is exercised.

As we have seen, the purpose of the Leviathan State is to keep humanity from violent death or, to put it affirmatively, to keep it alive. Thus, the more life is threatened, the more it must be included in the limits of the body. However, this discourse is perfectly reversible and, although the body is the privileged place for the unfolding of life, this is also the place where death occurs. The Leviathan is, therefore, that artificial body in which the life and death of humanity is at stake. Hobbes reminds us that Leviathan is mortal because he knows that it is the space in which the battle between life and death is fought. The important thing, then, is to keep the State alive because it is within it that the immunizing intention of modern politics is exercised.

Or better, as Esposito affirms «the body is not compatible with death. Their encounter is only momentary: dead, the body does not last. To be a body, it must be kept alive» (Esposito: 2002, p. 135). No one understands better than Hobbes the deadly precariousness of the body politic and the way in which it is subjected to violent pressures. Seditions, civil wars, revolutions, are the diseases that kill the body politic; for this reason, it is necessary for the State to preventatively stay away from what threatens it even through excessive order. The sovereign's sword is the immune strategy against the fear of violent death, not only of citizens but especially of Leviathan:

«If the causes that expose the political body to the catastrophic possibility of its dissolution are not of a natural nature but rather the result of human error, they can be faced through a type of order that takes into account in advance the risks involved” (Esposito: 2002, p. 137).



6. By way of conclusions

The artificial body that constitutes the Leviathan, artificial insofar as it was created voluntarily by the subjects at the time of the establishment of the pact, works as a metallic armor whose function is to keep the body alive beyond its own natural potentialities. This does not mean eliminating death or deferring the death of subjects unlimitedly —on the contrary, the fear of death is at the heart of the Leviathan State. What it is about is thinking about the body politic in the light of the immune paradigm, as it emerges from the frontispiece of *Leviathan* already present in the first edition of 1651 in London and drawn by Andrew Crooke. As we know, in this image we see a great man made up of little men who wears a crown on his head, a sword in his right hand, and a staff in his left. On this artificial man the motto that says «There is no power on earth that can be compared to you» can be read.

Now, that Leviathan that keeps the subjects alive is at the same time the one that feeds on their death. That is to say, we believe that it is a question of establishing a functional relationship between the living beings who inevitably die because their bodies are natural, and the duration of the artificial body of the State that must be ensured/immunized through sovereign power.

Immunization is what keeps the *Leviathan* body alive, which not only survives the death of its members, but also draws its productive energy from these deaths. The immunity that we read about in *Leviathan* is for us what inaugurates the modern political model because it early theorizes the way in which organisms —and the State is only one of them— are initially nourished by life but later also by the death of who compose it.

In short, throughout the text we wanted to show that *Leviathan* carries the fear of death in its heart. This fear of dying a violent death at the hands of anyone is what forces men to move towards a new fear: that of the sovereign's sword. As we have seen, fear does not disappear, on the contrary, it is the heart of the state of nature and the engine of the political state. However, throughout the text we also identify the object of fear: death. The Leviathan protects the lives of minions through its immune strategy, the sword. However, just as the subjects stay alive, the price they pay is the death of the community. What survives in Hobbes is the body, a body that does not die because it is used to living with the death that lives inside it.

With Hobbes, we find ourselves facing what Esposito calls the oscillation proper to the *communitas-immunitas* dialectic, an oxymoron for us, which can be formulated as follows: «if *communitas* determines the breaking of the protective barriers of individual identity, *immunitas* is the attempt to rebuild it in a defensive and offensive way against any element that comes to threaten it» (Esposito: 2009, p.17).

The truth is that both the need and the risks are latent and implicit in the concept of immunity. However, what we want to emphasize is that while immunity is necessary for all life, if you push it beyond a certain threshold, you end up denying it. Indeed, *protezione e negazione della vita* is the subtitle of Esposito's *Immunitas*. There it is pointed out that with the excess of immunity not only is life locked up —individual and collective— and ~~in these words, the actual meaning of the concept of community resides in the~~ the fact that it is at the same time what safeguards the body and what prevents its development. This contradiction between protection and denial of life is present in the medical process of immunization. Let us



remember that vaccination —acquired immunity— is neither more nor less than the inoculation in non-lethal doses of the disease from which the body is tried to be saved or, in other words, it is the way in which life tests small death dose. Thus, what we conclude with Hobbes is that the relationship between community and immunity depends on the doses that can either save the body or sacrifice it.

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