

Social Function of the Renaissance Concept of Honour: An Introduction

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In his *Histoire de la philosophie*¹, Emile Bréhier points out and analyses the moralists' generalized feeling of mistrust in the spontaneous forces of nature in the xviiith century (639-41). Consequently, where a God-inspired natural course of events fails, activities leading to substitute an unifying voice for this partially decaying ideal arise, both in countries where the Reformation had succeeded and in those fighting it back. One of the most impressive attempts to produce this unifying voice is, undoubtedly, Hugo Grotius's *De jure belli et pacis* (1625)², a text in which natural law is introduced as the ultimate authoritative expression, intended to make all different discourses eventually cohere. In Grotius's exposition, natural law combines powerful intellectual elements such as human reason (one and immutable along human history) and the nature of the rational being, in order to sanction certain practices considered essential for the welfare of the community. The suprahuman essence of such a concept is stressed by means of its relation to the highest notions: this norm is not subordinated to any other rule, not even to divine ones, since it is based on natural facts established by God itself. But Grotius's main achievement lies in his linking of this unquestionable natural order to positive law, definitely a human creation but elevated thus to a privileged empowered position: positive religion is established again directly by God, and positive civil law by the absolute monarch; besides, positive law mustn't interfere with natural law, and as long as this is so, natural law compels us to obey positive legislative dispositions. Thus, the system elaborated by Grotius leads Renaissance man to respect the constituted powers, and prevents him from questioning many of the prevailing social relations: private property, punishment, taxation, church³ etc ...

Francis Bacon's division of sciences in his *Instauratio magna*⁴ can be read as an attempt to achieve one kind of unity, and it is there that Bacon rejects previous individualistic theories (product of the Renaissance *structure of feeling*)⁵. This rejection is not only based on scientific premises, but

¹ Bréhier, E. 1938: *Histoire de la philosophie*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France (1988: *Historia de la filosofía*. Madrid, Tecnos).

² Quoted in Bréhier, 639-52.

³ This process is reflected in the most interesting religious controversies of the age in Europe: religious tolerance (that leads either to natural religion, a comprehensive concept that tries to overcome particular religious differences, or to free Biblical interpretation, that will eventually lead to a sort of unauthoritative catholicism) or state religion (both in Catholic countries or in those where the Reformation triumphed). Interestingly enough, both positions run after the same thing: some sort of unity - based on rational or authoritative grounds- strong enough to contain any attempt to subvert the established system (Bréhier, 639-71).

⁴ The general plan of this ambitious and unfinished work appeared for the first time in Bacon's preface to *Novum organum* (1620); he prepared some of the parts (in an order different to the one advanced) such as *De dignitatis et augmenti scientiarum libri IX* (1623) (latin version of *Of proficience and advancement of learning* -1605); the *Novum organum sive indicia vera de interpretatione naturae* (1620); and the *Parasceve ad historiam naturalem et experimentalem* (1622). See F. Bacon. 1960: *The New Organon and Related Writings*. New York, F. H. Anderson.

⁵ I borrow this concept from the British philosopher Raymond Williams; for its overall significations see Williams, R. 1977: *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford, OUP (esp. ch. 9). Related concepts are those of *social characters* and *dominant social*

on the philosophical belief in the beneficial role played by order in opposition to the chaos created by the innate actions of the individual, assimilating, Bacon -roughly speaking-, the forces which maintain order to power. In fact, what is being argued here is common to many societies in Europe in this century: the idea of man's necessary subjection to some laws, not only bigger than the individual but as important as kingly authority, although this doesn't guarantee the ultimate government of citizens. But these conceptualizations, when they are based on some kind of essentialism, are far from being unanswerable; Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*⁶ (1650) highlights the conventionality of concepts as central to the new communities as justice and injustice, in a difficult but balanced compromise between the social contract and the necessity to empower absolutism. And it is here that we have an interesting reference to honour and related concepts, introduced in a more general theory of the modes of practice of the social order in English society: Hobbes envisages, in the first place, a new image of law that is not based on a reference to a God-given social order which it has to preserve. In fact, this rejection of such a construction (in vogue at the beginning of the xviii century) arises from Hobbes's reflection on a community ruled by the existence of a single belief-system, unquestioned by particular "knowledges" and imposed (more or less fluidly) by a certain exercise of power. As a matter of fact, he finds that the most important threat to the laws of a community comes not from the nature of social relationships but from one aspect of the nature of man that Hobbes identifies as pride:

Hitherto I have set forth the nature of Man (whose Pride and other Passions have compelled him to submit himselfe to Government); (*Leviathan*, 362)

Considering that Hobbes attaches the greatest relevance to wisdom as the collective road to that wished-for single belief-system, the existence of some "Passions" that may alter this faculty is strongly feared. Hobbes identifies the source of this pride as vain-glory, and he even distinguishes two fundamental aspects of it: that arising from wealth or friends, and that which is a consequence of man's false conception of his own worth (341). Jon Stratton carefully separated these two concepts in "Law and the Ideology of Order: The Problem of Knowledge in Th. Hobbes's *Leviathan*", but he has not gone a step further to explain the actual relevance of that differentiation: Hobbes is handling two familiar concepts for the Renaissance reader, namely those of reputation, or fame, and *megalopsychia* that leads to honour as virtue.⁷

However, if for some authors Hobbes's arguments may seem totalitarian and individualistic⁸, it is important to stress his anti-essentialist and, again, demystifying approach to politics, morality and divine prescription, which he differentiated. Both Hobbes and Bacon (together with Montaigne, More or Machiavelli) underline the ways in which social institutions form human nature, denying essentialist claims, decentering Man and pre-figuring the philosophy of praxis⁹. But, strange as it may seem, honour is successful, unlike other similarly constructed concepts and along all this historical period, to hide its ideological and ultimately conventional nature to become one of the most largely unchallenged ideas of the xviii century. Only a valuable function can justify such an immunity to the anti-essentialist claims, more or less overt, of Hobbes or Bacon. An analysis of the ideological elements contained within the symbolic orders is needed to discover the real structure of

characters, also used by Williams in his elaboration of cultural materialism; see Williams, R. 1961: *The Long Revolution*. London, Chatto & Windus.

⁶ *Leviathan*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968. See also: Jon Stratton. 1981: "Law and the Ideology of Order: The Problem of Knowledge in Th. Hobbes' *Leviathan*". F. Barker ed. 1981: *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*. University of Essex: 258-73.

⁷ It is outside the scope of this paper to explore the ways in which these two concepts emerged from Classical Antiquity (basically Aristotle and Cicero) to appear in the Renaissance (basically through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero's *De Officiis*, two essential handbooks for the Renaissance scholar). On these and other related topics see C.B. Watson's *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honour*, Princeton: U.P., 1960. See also my PhD Dissertation *Estudio comparado del concepto del honor en Othello de W. Shakespeare y los dramas de honor de P. Calderón de la Barca*, Microfilm ed., Universidad de Jaén, 1997: c.1, and c. 2, esp. pp. 139-154.

⁸ Not for Jon Stratton, who suggests that Hobbes "wished to see the withering away of the state" (272).

⁹ On this, see Jonathan Dollimore. 1989: *Radical Tragedy*. London, Harvester; pp. 18 *et ff.* & c.16.

this social code of conduct, or, in other words, to “examine how structures of signification are mobilised to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups”, as A. Giddens has put it¹⁰. A similar proposal is offered by the Spanish historian of the xviiith century J.A. Maravall, who, in *Poder, honor y élites en el siglo xvii* explains the process of legitimation maintaining semi- absolutist monarchies:

La voluntad divina funda en la naturaleza un orden social objetivo, del cual derivan deberes y virtudes, derechos y valores, que asume el rey y, como fuente que no cesa, comunica, en su propia condición, a la nobleza.¹¹

Obviously, and as Maravall points out, there is a covert attempt at hiding the unstable nature of all those structures that maintain a certain power equilibrium, privileging certain positions of power. This essentialism needs, for its existence, to support a transhistorical account of human constructions, creating the illusion of an autonomous subjectivity and avoiding the problematizing of basic situations in a given community, so as to maintain certain hierarchies and privileges. This is very obvious (not only for cultural materialist or new historicist approaches) in the case of the function of laws and religion in the xviiith century, to the point that many essayists of the period tried to make it explicit: Machiavelly, Hobbes or Montaigne wrote with astonishing insight on this matter; for Montaigne:

Lawes are ...maintained in credit, not because they are essentially just, but because they are lawes. It is the mysticall foundation of their authority; they have no other, which avails them much: they are often made by fooles; more often by men, who in hatred of equality, have want of equity (...) There is nothing so grossly and largely offending, nor so ordinarily wronging, as the Lawes. (*Essays*, III, 331)¹²

The strong opposition to the questioning of any of these concepts (Calvin made something similar with established Church) has to do with the interconnections existing among them, to the extent that the deconstruction of any of them would bring about the questioning of the rest. Of course, this is Miguel Servet or Galileo’s crime: his inversion of the Universe cannot be allowed because it would imply the possibility of other subversions of more serious consequences: conventionalities mustn’t be exposed. Fear of generalized subversion is explicitly stated by many essayists of the period; thus, Lodowicke Bryskett, although accepting “pittie” as a Christian virtue, states that “yet, must not this pittie extend so farre for any particular compassion, as thereby to confound the universall order of things”¹³. And a very similar notion, although now directly related to honour, is presented by Robert Ashley in his very influential work *Of Honour* (1600); Ashley sees very clearly the positive implications of this concept for the maintenance of order in a community: “by honour are cities kept, famelies preserved, the societie of men quietly and peaceably continued, the common wealth defended”¹⁴. And, consequently, the disappearance of this notion leads to the most catastrophic situation, which, for a xviiith century moralist, is disorder:

Magnanimitie will perish, fortitude, moderacion, and decencie will decay, the observaunce of lawes and lawes themselves wilbe neglected, offyces of honour despised, magistrates contemned, discordes arise amongst Cittizens, and every one dare to do each foule and wicked deed. (30)

Ashley calls “beasts” those who dare question honour as a natural and essential concept, pointing at its conventional origins; paradoxically, it is his account of those evils produced by the expansion of *contumelia* what more clearly indicates what structures are interested in the maintenance of this fiction. It is, of course, Ashley’s interest in evading this aspect what I find of interest here, especially since other essayists were not so skilful: Gervaise Markham explicitly associates honour not with

¹⁰10 *Central Problems in Social Theory*, London: MacMillan, 1979; p. 187.

¹¹11 Maravall, J. A. 1979: *Poder, honor y élites en el siglo xvii*, Madrid, Siglo XXI; p. 43.

¹²12 Montaigne M. 1965: *Essays*. London, Dent (trans. J. Florio).

¹³13 Bryskett L. 1970: *A Discourse of Civill Life*. (T. E. Wright ed.) San Fernando, Ca, San fernando Valley State College; p. 28.

¹⁴14 Ashley, R. 1947: *Of Honour*. (V. Heltzel ed.) San Marino, Ca, The Huntington Library; p. 30.

Christian virtue (one of the excuses of the age), moral behaviour or braveness, but with the unconscious subordination to those in power¹⁵. Ashley, on the contrary, opens his essay with an unambiguous adscription to divine nature: “I fetch the beginning of Honour from God” (27), and continues:

I am of this opinion, that not only the desire of honour ys geven vs of nature, but that the same nature hath not bestowed any better or more necessary thing vpon vs. (31-2)

It is a social and political content that best explains its success at escaping every attempt at deconstruction by anti-essentialist writers of the age; in Maravall’s words:

El honor es el principio del orden, porque es la sublimación de ese principio, en virtud del cual cada cosa, cada individuo, está en su lugar. Por eso, podemos añadir, es un eje central de la sociedad jerárquica, y si no puede dejar de debilitarse cuando ésta se transforma en una estructura diferente, mientras aquélla permanezca se estimará como su más sólido sostén. Con ello la organización establecida para su conservación tendrá que ser una materia fundamental en la vida de la sociedad. (137)

A subject acquires and keeps honour by means of his obedience to the king; this fundamental subordination is placed far above any other obligation a given individual may have, and thus a son’s duty to his father gives way to his duty to the king; it is, obviously, not a blunt at the right of inheritance of property but a reinforcement of it since the king governs the kingdom in the same way than a father rules his family. James Cleland, in *The Institution of a Young Nobleman* (1621)¹⁶, narrates, in laudatory terms, how the king of Aragon paid homage to his own son, Fernando king of Castile, in a clear proof of the superiority of kingly over fatherly authority; otherwise, writes Cleland, the situation would have resulted in dishonour leading to “confusio, & disorder” (182).

Ashley’s honour is a compound of many of Aristotle and Cicero’s notions, elaborated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Officiis*, respectively. Ashley includes both all those references relating honour to virtue, that is, those that consider honour as an intimate condition, depending solely on us, and those that refer to the outside “opinion”; his examples of the former (“testemonie of vertue”, “reward of vertue” “spurr vnto vertue”), and of the latter (“glorie”, “reputacion”, “dignitie”) show how he is able to maintain the balance between a quality that supposedly stems from our own behaviour exclusively, and yet depends on the will of others to bestow it on us. Honour is, then, a question of “Iudges”, and these imply power and hierarchies in the highest degree (honour is always about precedence), as well as socio-cultural constraints¹⁷. From Bryskett, Cleland and others, it seems reasonably clear that honour is actually a reward, but not “of vertue”, as they pretended, but of a certain behaviour that our community esteems useful for the maintenance of its main structures of power. As Maravall states in relation to the xviii century, “el honor es una compensación que la sociedad concede a aquellos que asumen la carga principal en la conservación de su orden” (61). In fact, by means of honour, individuals are accepted into the group, or, if they fail to accomodate their actions to the strict code of conduct demanded by honour, they are alienated from it.

The ambivalence already mentioned earlier is the last reference of interest in this introductory study. Honour has to be controlled by those who bestow it; its excess leads to vain glory, excessive pride being the cause of many paradigmatic falls of great princes, as moralists tell us with examples from classical antiquity. And the analysis of this excess proves to be of the highest significance; the unifying voice anxiously strived after in the period demands that the potentially subversive individual disappears, being its place occupied by the group. Absolutism is not a question of an individual governing a community but rather a social function, an exercise of power unanimously assented by

¹⁵ Quoted by Barber, C.L. 1957: *The Idea of Honour in the English Drama 1591-1700*. Goteborg, Gothenburg Studies in English; p. 8.

¹⁶ Cleland, J. 1948: *The Institution of a Young Nobleman*. New York, Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints.

¹⁷ In this sense, for J. G. Peristiany, honour is “the reflection of the social personality in the mirror of social ideals” (Peristiany J. G. ed. 1967: *Honour and Shame*. London, The Trinity Press; p. 9.).

the ruling élites. In this context, it is interesting to go back to Hobbes and his account of how social relations must be controlled by the imposition of power; as we saw, he identified pride as the cause of this subversive threat, but differentiated two elements, which I characterized as reputation (Hobbes's pride from wealth or friends, that is, external things) and honour-virtue (pride from wisdom). I consider that an ideologically monological community works by means of the acceptance of an unifying voice, and so it is not the action of an individual carried away by the praises of his equals what this community fears; after all, honour is left in the hands of the community, who freely bestows honours, fame or military glory, as a means to control particular behaviours. If honour is especially useful as an intellectual weapon against transgression, it is not in the classical version of the Aristotelian *megalopsychòs* or magnanimous man -a figure so close to Nietzsche's super-man in his self-sufficiency, defiant attitude and independence- but in the domesticated image of the individual tyrannized by others' opinion.¹⁸ Thus, Hobbes is right when he fears pride as a subversive element, but his comments are especially relevant and significant when he points at the most dangerous kind of excessive honour: as a consequence of his distinction between what I have called reputation and honour-virtue, he separates two different kinds of consequences and identifies where the main danger comes from. Thus, if the consequence of the actions of a man driven by his confidence on an enormous reputation is the potential violation of the laws, the consequence of the actions of the *megalopsychòs* is of a different nature, and poses a real threat to the maintenance of the social order. The former arises from a new type of unified social organization, and although it causes a momentary disorder, this violation actually implies an acceptance of the new situation, and by its very nature can be controlled, or contained, by the community; the hypertrophied honour that causes the latter is quite a different matter: it comes from the past, as a remnant of a different kind of community, defies the laws of consensus and questions the system. As Hobbes knows, these individuals do not break the laws, but rather refuse to recognize them, since these "men with a great soul",

have a great and false opinion of their own Wisdome, take upon them to reprehend the actions, and call in question the Authority of them that govern, and so to unsettle the lawes with their publique discourse, as that nothing shall be a Crime, but what their own designes require should be so. (341)

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¹⁸ As Spanish heroes from the so-called *dramas de honor* know too well ("las leyes tiranas del mundo"). I have elaborated on this point in much more detail in my PhD thesis *Estudio comparado del concepto del honor en Othello de W. Shakespeare y los dramas de honor de P. Calderón de la Barca*. [Microfilm ed.] Universidad de Jaén, 1997.