

---

---

## *An Ideal Vital Center?*

**Paul Gottfried**

*Elizabethtown College*

**Hobbes and Human Nature**, by Arnold W. Green. *New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1993. 257 pp. \$32.95.*

This newest book by Arnold Green has two indisputable merits. One, it is clearly and felicitously written; and two, it is by an outstanding academic sociologist now retired from the University of Pennsylvania. As a volume of political opinion, it might be passable without being particularly insightful; but as a study of Hobbes, or the application of Hobbes' political theory, it is inadequate. Green's references to Hobbes contain misleading statements: e.g., that Hobbes intended the sovereign to have "total control" over all human activity and that this Hobbesian project leads naturally into socialism. Even a cursory reading of *Leviathan* or *De Cive* should indicate that Hobbes was interested in a government that protected life and curbed violence to facilitate "commodious living." He did not envisage a collectivist reorganization of the economy for the purpose of reconstructing human nature. Green, who cites Michael Oakeshott in his bibliog-

raphy, would do well to read Oakeshott on Hobbes for a fuller statement of this interpretation

Green deals less with Hobbes and political theory in general than with that which irritates him about contemporary American politics. There are people out there, whom he calls "utopian socialists," who do not appreciate the good reforms he and other progressives of his generation pulled off. Feminists, civil rights advocates, gays, and workers should all be grateful for the progress in equality and social justice that Arnold Green and others have made possible by their moderate liberal politics. Alas, these ingrates are pushing too far, and Green chastises them for not recognizing how much has already been done for blacks, homosexuals, women, and other approved victims. Like the neo-conservatives, Green assumes that social and cultural revolutions should and can be turned off when they have ceased to please him and his friends.

---

---

But if in “comparative terms” the civil rights movement and its offshoots and the expanding American welfare state have achieved the positive results Green attributes to them, it would be proper to allow these forces even freer rein. It is unclear, furthermore, why Green and those who agree with him are entitled to occupy an ideal vital center: with those on their right being depicted as bigots and with those on their left being condemned as “utopian socialists.” Surely there can be different but tolerated prudential judgments about what constitutes enough or too much change!

The most problematic aspect of Green’s book is his self-satisfied contempt for the past. Thus he looks back at American history in showing how far we have moved from racism, social oppression, and systemic injustice. Never does Green allow an early American leader to escape his carping scrutiny. He insists that George Washington was “an unmitigated snob whose personal integrity was protected by his social status at the top of the heap.”

On the basis of undisclosed evidence, Green asserts that as a general Washington gorged himself on fine foods, while allowing his soldiers to go hungry, “without the slightest twinge of guilt.” Green cannot stand the thought that, in the words of Forrest McDonald commenting on America’s founding, “giants once strode the earth and forced us to be free.” Political scoundrels born into our happy age, e.g., the compulsively womanizing John F. Kennedy, manage

to avoid Green’s eccentric moral judgments. On the other hand, there is nothing about the bad, old times, with their starved, oppressed peasants and socially insensitive elites, that Green’s reader would believe is worth saving. Alien to him are both the humanist vision of Matthew Arnold and Irving Babbitt and any appeal to past generations as the source of civic virtues. It is hard to take from Green’s pervasive presentism, which is the kind of thing that Ortega y Gasset might have had in mind when he spoke of the vertical barbarian, any cumulative notion of civilization. For Green as for Marx, history up to the present must be viewed as “prehistory,” the nasty childhood of a world that has just now become mature and decent. Green does express many sensible judgments about the world; e.g., denying that Louis XVI was a tyrant as opposed to a weak king; preferring Hobbesian cynicism to Rousseau’s search for beauty through politics; and reiterating Babbitt’s critical remarks about the utopian mentality. He also correctly observes about the putative triumph of the free market in the wake of communism’s disintegration: “Nothing could have been more naive. Nothing was really settled (it never is), there or here, nor will such a triumph ever occur. The progressive as well as socialist vision of perfected man in a perfected world will always, from time to time, challenge Hobbes’ gloomy conclusions.” Too bad these judgments are overshadowed by a smarmy view of the present breaking through all too often.