



# Subverting the Leviathan: Reading Thomas Hobbes as a Radical Democrat

By James Martel

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In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes's landmark work on political philosophy, James Martel argues that although Hobbes pays lip service to the superior interpretive authority of the sovereign, he consistently subverts this authority throughout the book by returning it to the reader.

Martel demonstrates that Hobbes's radical method of reading not only undermines his own authority in the text, but, by extension, the authority of the sovereign as well. To make his point, Martel looks closely at Hobbes's understanding of religious and rhetorical representation. In *Leviathan*, idolatry is not just a matter of worshipping images but also a consequence of bad reading. Hobbes speaks of the "error of separated essences," in which a sign takes precedence over the idea or object it represents, and warns that when the sign is given such agency, it becomes a disembodied fantasy leading to a "kingdom of darkness."

To combat such idolatry, Hobbes offers a method of reading in which one resists the rhetorical manipulation of figures and tropes and recognizes the codes and structures of language for what they are—the only way to convey a fundamental inability to ever know "the thing itself." Making the leap to politics, Martel suggests that following Hobbes's argument, the sovereign can also be seen as idolatrous—a separated essence—a figure who supplants the people it purportedly represents, and that learning to be better readers enables us to challenge, if not defeat, the authority of the sovereign.

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### Editorial Review

Review

Compelling... [An] excellent book... Highly recommended.

(CHOICE)

*Subverting the Leviathan* is a fascinating study.

(Theory & Event)

Review

James Martel offers a powerful, fresh, and compelling interpretation of Hobbes's major work.

(Victoria Kahn, University of California, Berkeley)

*Subverting the Leviathan* offers a highly intelligent and innovative interpretation of Thomas Hobbes, one that will provoke much thoughtful discussion. In my judgment, James Martel's scholarship on Hobbes is of very high quality. Martel clearly knows the field. He brings to his analysis a deep knowledge of classical rhetoric—his discussions of how Hobbes is simultaneously invoking, criticizing, and stretching rhetorical devices known since Aristotle are excellent.

(Jane Bennett, Johns Hopkins University)

About the Author

James Martel is associate professor of political theory at San Francisco State University. He has also taught at the department of rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Amherst College and Wellesley College. He is the author of *Love Is a Sweet Chain: Desire, Friendship, and Autonomy in Liberal Political Theory*.

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