Early modernity witnessed the emergence of a new concept: the state. This notion had to fulfill vital and potentially conflicting, functions. Its primary objective was to serve as an abstract locus of power separate from both the people who composed it and the sovereign who acted on its behalf. In addition, it needed to operate as an independent agent within the realm of global politics. Finally, it was expected to represent the people and gather support from them.

Scholars have contended that this conception was achieved through its construction as a juridical or moral person. However, I argue that the state should be regarded as the result of a personification – a rhetorical or graphic device that translates an idea into a concrete form. Drawing on insights from literary studies and art theory, I delineate the principal features of this figure. I then demonstrate how personification assisted Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s republican state in tackling the challenges that the newly minted concept of the state faced. Specifically, I show how it allowed the abstract and complex nature of the state to be rendered as something tangible, endowed with will, speech, and action, and capable of receiving recognition and approval from the people.

I. A tradition in the history of ideas: early modern state persons

The idea that the state began to be conceived as a legal or moral person in the early modern period enjoyed considerable consensus among jurists on the fringes of the twentieth century. Otto von Gierke is credited with laying the groundwork for this belief. According to Gierke “theorists of Natural Law” gave form to “the modern state” through the “conception of the
single personality of the state.” Following that lead, Georg Jellinek argued that “since Hobbes, the state has been understood... as the person in which society reaches its perfection.”

Alluding to the English case, Frederic Maitland remarked that “the state” was a “late comer” “little known until after 1650” and that it presupposed the introduction of “a person” not “recognise[d]” by the Common Law. Maurice Hauriou reconstructed the genealogy of the post-revolutionary French state as “an organization that marches towards personification [personnification].”

This appreciation decanted into intellectual historians. Ernst Kantorowicz touched upon “the fictitious person which the continental State became during and after the sixteenth century.” On the Italian side, Alessandro Passerin d’Entreves thought that it was not until Hobbes that the state was treated as an “abstract entity, distinct and personified.” Reinhart Koselleck breaks it down into a two-tier process. The “baroque theory of the state” cast it as a “moral and juridical person,” while it was during “the late Enlightenment that the state became a person in a real way.” Lucien Jaume deemed Hobbes’s “creation of a collective person” or a “fictive people” as an “extremely bold definition” “insightful for any reflection on modernity”. David Runciman claimed that the concept of “personality” was up to the 20th century “the key to a complete understanding... of the state,” and that we owe this breakthrough to Thomas Hobbes. All in all, the most comprehensive account of the development of this conceptualization, i.e., the state as a person, is Quentin Skinner’s. Indeed, Skinner underscores Hobbes’s “epoch-making moment” proclaiming “the person of the state” as a category distinct “not merely from the figure of the sovereign” but also from the “unity of the multitude over which the sovereign rules.”

---

4 Maurice Hauriou, Précis élémentaire de droit constitutionnel (Paris: Sirey, 1930), 69.
5 Ernst Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies (Princeton: PUP, 1957), 382.
6 Alessandro Passerin d’Entreves, The King’s Two Bodies (Princeton: PUP, 1957), 382.
9 David Runciman, Pluralism and the Personality of the State (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 4-5.
Hence, a significant number of European intellectual historians have identified the person of the state as an early modern emergent, with Thomas Hobbes as its first advocate. My article aims to build on this tradition but to supplement it with a different construal, considering the state not simply as a juridical or moral person, but as a personification. That is, focusing on the operation that made possible the attribution of personhood and agency to the state. In keeping with a Hobbesian inflection, we might say that, like the Christian Trinity, the concept of the state needs to fulfill sundry, almost impossible, tasks.\(^{11}\) Firstly, the state is an achievement of abstract reasoning, a separate entity abstracted from both the ruler(s) and of the people. Harvey Mansfield captures this succinctly: “to realize the impersonality of the modern state it is not enough” to “distinguish between person and office… The state as a corporation must be radically abstracted.”\(^{12}\) Moreover, the state implied, as its name betrays, “static” and passive traits.\(^{13}\) Niccolò Machiavelli famously spoke of it as something to be “maintained.”\(^{14}\) But, at the same time, the state cannot be reduced to mere fantasy or abstract speculation. It must be perceived as acting in the world of real politics as a real agent. According to Walter Ullmann, this is precisely the great early modern invention, “a concept of the State as an entity that was autonomous, independent, self-sufficient, and lived on its own norms.”\(^{15}\) It therefore needs a will, a voice, and the capacity to act. Lastly, the state must act as a representative of the people, garnering a minimum level of consent and remaining attuned to its audience’s needs. As Elías Palti suggested, a characteristic of early modern political theory is that “the figure of the public is internalized into the system of representation.”\(^{16}\) To put it in John Searle’s terms, though made of “just words,” the state can “get away with it to the extent that” “other people… accept it.”\(^{17}\)

---

\(^{11}\) I base this assertion on Arash Abizadeh, “Hobbes’s conventionalist theology, the trinity, and God as an artificial person by fiction,” *The Historical Journal* 60(4) (2017), 915-941, at 918.


Personification, a rhetorical or graphic device that endows an abstraction with a human form, is the key to meeting the exacting needs of the concept of the state. First, it creates a person which is no one and everyone at the same time, securing its distinctiveness. Second, it transforms an excessively abstract political concept into an agent. Third, it facilitates its lasting impression on the public. It is no accident then that figures such as Britannia, the French Marianne, Germania, and Venetia, emerged alongside the concept of the state. Rather than attributing this phenomenon to an “allegorical tendency of the Renaissance,” as proposed by Carl Schmitt, I will provide a systematic account on the relation between the modern concept of the state and its personification. To unpack the notion of the state as a personification we need a fitting toolkit. My initial task will be to describe the device of personification and its main traits. Later, I will examine how they relate to the nascent concept of the state as developed by arguably the two main theorists of the person of the state: Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

II. State personifications: new wine, old wineskins?

The practice of personifying political concepts is very old. Personification has been labelled a “form of Greek thought” by means of which people in antiquity took “hold of things which suddenly appear startlingly uncontrollable and independent.” The Greeks called this figure prosopopoeia. Namely, the act of producing (poiein) a face or mask (prosopon) in an inanimate thing. Fourth century BCE rhetorician Demetrius offers an example: “imagine that your ancestors, or Hellas, or your native land, assuming a woman’s form address… reproaches to you.” The range of things susceptible to being personified were variegated: from virtues and vices to meteorological events, emotions, dead people, and political institutions. Socrates, for instance, is famously represented in Crito discussing his plight with the personifications of “the laws and the commonwealth”. They, in turn, scolded him for “intending to destroy us laws and your country.” In medieval times, the interest in personifications persisted. They were thought of as “machines of the mind,” to use Katharine Breen’s terms, which served “as a
critical tool for self-formation” “to achieve moral, political, or spiritual ends.” The Christian believer’s encounter with a personified virtue could signal his or her moral uplifting and conforming to divinity. This is the argument of Piers Plowman, an allegorical poem of the English Middle Ages, whose protagonist, Will, has personal contact with a heterogeneous array of personifications.

The great advantage of personification is that it is “adaptable to any narrative situation.” Albeit fictitiously, it puts abstractions in the form of characters on a par with real human beings and facilitates their interaction. This plasticity might have motivated the renewed appeal of the figure in early modernity. Thomas Hobbes, arguably the inventor of the concept of the person of the state, was well aware of the potential of classic personifications. After enumerating many lifeless objects which “gentile” “poets feigned to be inanimated [i.e., animated],” he claimed that by this poetic device “there was nothing” they could not “introduce as a person in [their] poem[s].” Hobbes considered personifications as useful fictions, conducive to the upholding of political power. “God[s] and divell[s]” served to “keep the people in obedience.” As we shall see, Hobbes’s state, a mortal god, shares a fair amount of characteristics with these ancient beings. Overall, there is an allure in this phenomenon that transcends time. Jakob Burckhardt asserted that personifications and abstractions are interconnected as they both represent “something general.” It appears, therefore, that “allegory can no more be removed from art than general expressions from language.” Jorge Luis Borges masterfully captured the automatic nature of personification stating: “allegory is an aesthetic error. (My first intention was to write ‘it is nothing but an error of aesthetics,’ but then I noticed that my sentence entailed an allegory).”

The main purpose of this article is to prove that the referents of two important traditions of modernity, absolutism and republicanism, conceived of the state as a personification. In the

---

24 As James Paxson, The poetics of personification (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 127, explains, “Will meets personified characters face to face” which entails the “experience of another being’s phenomenal constitution.”
28 Hobbes, Leviathan, 176.
following section, I will identify the essential features of personification using insights from literary and art theory. These features will then be applied to those accounts of the state.

II.1. Vivid abstraction

The first characteristic of personification is its ability to transform the abstract into concrete. James Paxson provides a formal definition: “the material translation of one quantity (often ideational or abstract) into another (usually a person).”\(^{31}\) With greater synthesis power, Maurice Agulhon referred to it as the “mannequin of an abstraction.”\(^{32}\) In like fashion, Gordon Teskey claims that the “problem of personification” is “the problem of the presence of abstraction in the world.”\(^{33}\) Manifestly, the starting point of personification is an abstract concept. But the presentation or translation operated by it does not boil down to a simple embodiment. Personifications are “dynamic rather than static... because they can be imaginatively manipulated.”\(^{34}\) They are dynamic in the Aristotelian sense of the term, since they encompassed a movement towards what ancient rhetoricians called energeia, namely, the actualization or the bringing to life, through language, of beings that remained only a potentiality.\(^{35}\) Hence, personifications are vivid abstractions, they give a “sort of life to intellectual conceptions” as stated by Angus Fletcher.\(^{36}\) This aspect of the figure in particular was highly valued by early modern rhetoricians.\(^{37}\) In *A Brief of the Art of Rhetorique*, Hobbes translated Aristotle’s term energeia as “animation” and specified its usage: “when the actions of living Creatures are attributed to things without life; as when the Sword is said to devour.”\(^{38}\) In a nutshell, personifications are vivid, energetic, and animated abstractions. This takes us to the next point.

II.2. Borrowed voices and demonic agency

The second property of personification is the creation of agency. This involves “the invention” of a “character as an agent in a narrative world,” thereby expanding the population of agents.\(^{39}\) Personified abstractions acquire agency through the attribution of a voice and a will.

---

34 Breen, *Machines*, 3.
35 This claim is supported by Monica Westin, “Aristotle’s rhetorical Energeia: An extended note,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 20(3) (2017), 252-261, at 358.
Traditionally, the figure has been defined as the foisting of speech upon inanimate things. In his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian already claimed that thanks to personification “cities and peoples may find a voice.” The classical handbook *Rhetorica ad Herennium* also typified the corresponding figure of *conformatio* as “giving voice or form to a speechless or amorphous thing, and attributing the faculty of speech to it.” Renaissance rhetoricians such as Francesco Bonciani brought attention to the “impossible things” achieved by prosopopoeia, claiming that the trope “assembles different natures, attributing speech and discourse extracted from human beings to the brutes or...things without visible form.” Contemporary literary theorists, too, have highlighted this trait. According to Paul de Man, the *prosopon* in prosopopoeia is a “speaking face, the locus of speech,” and Gavin Alexander defines it as the “creation of a speaking voice” and, through it, “of a moral character.” Personifications are not only loquacious, but also imbued with “volitional energy” that allows them to set events into motion. They display an intentional, willful quality that propels action. For example, in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the personification of Sin is the actual driver behind Satan’s transgression and sinful behavior. The *Iconologie*, a collective masterpiece on emblems of eighteenth-century France, posits that personifying consists in “constantly putting morality into action.” Overall, words, intentions, and actions are the accepted currency of personified abstractions.

Through the sedimentation of this process, personifications also attain a degree of autonomy. As outwardly projected representations of human volitions and ideas, personifications “assert [their] independence” in the fashion of “separate agents.” Moral and political ideas that motivate human action can be seen in this light. In their personified renditions, they animate real human beings and therefore participate in the execution of the action. As suggested by

---

48 Escobedo, *Volition’s Face*, 75.
François Cooren, they “make us do things... as much as we make them do things.” Yet, the agency these things are capable of is “constricted,” to use Angus Fletcher’s lexicon. Constriction means that the personification acts “mechanistically,” as if “possessed by a daemon” or as a “robot,” “frozen into an eternally fixed form.” Whereas these machines of the mind expand “prosthetically” the possibilities of action, as Breen asserted, they also entail limitations. Personifications cannot perform complex actions, nor are able to sustain rich psychological states.

II.3. Play to the audience
Lastly, personifications presuppose an audience according to which they are designed. Quintilian already placed among the essential abilities of an “ideal orator” not only putting “words into mouths of inanimate objects,” but more significantly setting “forth topics in such vivid language as almost to present them to the very eyes of his audience.” Indeed, the concrete forms conveyed by personifications are intended to cause an effect on real human beings, to affect us. As Walter Melion and Bart Ramakers argue, their characteristic “vitality” is not gratuitous, but “expended on viewers or readers.” Speaking of monumental personifications, Jakob Burckhardt emphasized “the battle of the eye which is inevitably involved” in their contemplation. Personifications impinge upon us and evoke emotional responses (fear, anger, humility, hope, etc.). Furthermore, these figures served a mnemonic purpose, their attributes meticulously codified and intended to be interpreted in unique ways. In her seminal work, Frances Yates expounded how the personifications of the seven liberal arts along with their inscriptions functioned as “memory images” that granted access to a complex system of knowledge. This had a special relevance vis-à-vis political or moral concepts that needed constant legitimation and acquiescence on the part of the public. As Thomas Maissen has shown, personifications helped “in the 16th and 17th centuries to convey

50 Fletcher, Allegory, 55.
51 Interestingly, the attribute “crudely robotic” has been used by Philip Pettit, “Groups with minds of their own,” in Social Epistemology: Essential Readings, ed. Alvin Godman and Dennis Whitcomb (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 242-70, at 262, to describe the sort of agency that corresponds to groups.
52 Breen, Machines, 3.
53 Quintilian, Institutio, IX.1.41-45, 371-73.
complex aspects of sovereignty to a broader population.” They did so “through the emotional language of family relations.”

Due to their fundamental link to an audience, personifications serve as a means of building communities “by connecting individuals to collectivities, as well as to the ideas in whose name they act.” This is precisely what is depicted in the famous painting *Liberty leading the people* by Eugène Delacroix: a personified idea assembling and leading a group of people. James Flagg’s poster, featuring Uncle Sam as the personification of the United States and his famous address “I Want You for the US Army,” generates a similar effect in fostering unity and togetherness. Carlo Ginzburg ventured that “the imperatives conveyed by those posters” had an actual impact and “acted like authority” motivating an increase in recruitment. When we as an audience start attributing words and actions to an abstraction, we recognize an agent capable of interacting with us, we acknowledge its clout on us, and we open the door to identifying with it.

Personifications belong to a wonderful genre of artifacts. A genre that, along with José Burucúa, we may aptly categorize as “poetic iconographic.” The above cited *Iconologie* suggests that these allegorical figures speak “a language universal to all nations by dint of being clear, expressive, and eloquent.” They make abstract things tangible, giving them human forms, a voice, a will, and agency. As agents, they enjoy a sort of autonomy but also suffer from constrictions. Moreover, they are designed to produce effects in an audience. This enumeration constitutes the heuristic model that will allow us to navigate two conceptions of the modern state as personifications: Thomas Hobbes’s absolutist model and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s republican regime. In investigating these two theories, it will become clear that the figure of personification offers a vantage point to observe what Maitland described as the “stately stuff into which old thoughts and new are woven.”

58 Breen, *Machines*, 12.
61 Gravelot, Cochin, and Gaucher, *Iconologie*, x.
III. The state stuff woven into personification

Before putting my model into play, we need to explore how the concept of the person of the state originated. Otto von Gierke takes pride of place in this discussion, as he identified a dual genealogy that involves two abstractive processes. On the one hand, Thomas Hobbes “wrested a single state-personality from the individualistic” power of the monarch and converted it “into mere naked power.”63 On the other, Jean-Jacques Rousseau eliminated the ruler and collapsed “the personality of the state,” with the “sovereign community of individuals.”64 Thus, “the word state” simply “denote[d] the personified people.”65 In essence, they “exaggerate[ed]” “either the personality of the ruler or of the people,” to abstract the personhood of the state.66 As we shall see next, Gierke’s classification still carries weight. Both Hobbes and Rousseau endeavored to conceptualize new forms of political order: an absolutist commonwealth and a popular Republic, respectively. They achieved this by endowing the state with personhood. It is from this starting point that I develop my interpretation of these two distinctively modern concepts of the state as personifications.

III.1. Hobbes’s Leviathan: a demonic power

III.1.1. Have a Seat

Hobbes opens his Leviathan with a word of caution: “I speak not of the men, but (in the Abstract) of the Seat of Power.”67 As Luc Foisneau pointed out, Hobbes’s subsequent reference to the “impartial creatures” that defended the Roman Republic, reinforces his notion of a state as a “neutral space.”68 That abstract seat of power is, of course, the state, dependent on the intervention of the representative(s) for its existence and activity, but different from it and from the type of government that animates it: “the power of sovereignty is the same in whomsoever it be placed.”69 According to Hobbes, the “abstraction of terms” is a procedure

63 Gierke, Natural Law, 61.
64 Gierke, Natural Law, 53-4.
65 Gierke, Natural Law, 54.
67 Hobbes, Leviathan, 4.
69 Hobbes, Leviathan, 280.
“more or less necessary for the teaching of causes.”

Indeed, to gain a comprehensive understanding of political order, including its creation, preservation, and dissolution, a new level of abstraction is required. Remarkably, Hobbes comes up with something that no “other philosopher hitherto hath put into order.”

Hobbes chastises Cato for not realizing that the “Roman people” was “a sort of beast [de genere bestiarum]” as “predatory” as monarchical power. Sovereign power has wolflike traits, no matter what regime animates it. This pure notion of the state is a “truth of speculation,” a part of the “theoremes of morall doctrine,” “derived from the principles of naturall reason.”

In the context of his discussion against the Parliamentarians, Hobbes claims that the state is “the collective body” understood “as one person, which person the sovereign bears.” He repeatedly refers to the state as a person, mainly with the syntagma “the person of the commonwealth.” To analyze this person, we should break it down into: (a) the process by which it is constituted; and (b) the product of this process. To begin with, this person is an entity classified by Hobbes among the “things personated” and constituted “by fiction.” In this regard, I align myself with what has recently been labelled the “fictionalist interpretation” of Hobbes’s theory of the state personhood. This entails the claim that the state is not a person in its own terms, a “natural person,” because it cannot really “own” the “words and actions” we attribute to it. Hence, it is “personated,” a person is externally fit into it. The category of things personated includes also other “feigned persons” “as a church, an hospital, and a bridge,” “children, fools, and madmen,” “idols,” or even the “true God.” As referred above, the state is generated in the same way poets used to constitute “the gods of the heathen,” that is, by the introduction of a person into an inanimate thing. Hobbes’s state is, after all, a “god,”

---

70 Hobbes, Leviathan, 1174.
71 Hobbes, Leviathan, 574.
74 Hobbes, Leviathan, 574.
75 Hobbes, Leviathan, 280.
76 Hobbes, Leviathan, 138, 228, 289, 376, 414, 424, 496.
77 Hobbes, Leviathan, 244.
78 This label is used by Johan Olsthoorn, “Leviathan Inc.: Hobbes on the nature and person of the state,” History of European Ideas 47(1), 17-32, at 18-22, who, despite his disagreement, offers a fair summary of the position advocated by Quentin Skinner, David Runciman, Mónica Brito Vieira, and others.
79 Hobbes, Leviathan, 244.
80 Hobbes, Leviathan, 246.
81 Hobbes, Leviathan, 248.
82 Hobbes, Leviathan, 246.
albeit “mortal.”\(^8^3\) Where “naturally” there “is not one, but many,” a “multitude” of disarrayed individuals, personification enables the generation of a single, encompassing, person.\(^8^4\) To be sure, what determines the formation of this person is the authorization of a representative: “a multitude of men are made one person when they are by one man, or one person, represented.”\(^8^5\) The “multitude so united in one person is called a common-wealth” and “this is the generation of that great Leviathan.”\(^8^6\) It is only through a representative that “words and actions” can be “attributed” to the person of the state. A triadic relation is therefore articulated: a multitude of individuals authorize a representative to speak and act on behalf of them as a commonwealth, that is, as a person that conforms “a real unitie of them all.”\(^8^7\) The figure used to achieve this feat is none other than personification or prosopopoeia. Hobbes’s familiarity with prosopopoeia can be further corroborated by his correspondence with Henry Stubbe. In a letter send the 25\(^{th}\) October 1656, the physician told the philosopher he was planning “to make by way of Prosopopoeia a Speech to Dr Wallis as if hee had come to ye congregation whereof I should bee a member.”\(^8^8\)

This brings us to the second point: what is the product of this personification? To illustrate this, Hobbes adds a theatrical metaphor. The newly formed entity is constituted as a “persona” or “mask” akin to a character “counterfeited on the stage,”\(^8^9\) appearing “as well in tribunalls as theatres.”\(^9^0\) An abstract and fictitious entity, however, it suffers from a fundamental passivity. On the one hand, its authority is susceptible to being tarnished. For instance, “robbery and violence are injuries to the person of the state.”\(^9^1\) But it can only respond to that affront through its representatives or actors: “the common-wealth is no person, nor has the capacity to doe any thing, but by the representative (that is, the sovereign).”\(^9^2\) As mentioned earlier, insofar as the state is a fictitious entity, it depends on actual human beings who speak and act in its name.\(^9^3\) Hobbes’s state, therefore, fits the model of traditional personifications. It is an abstract concept, and its intangibility makes it susceptible to being personified. But to acquire a

---


\(^8^9\) Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 244.

\(^9^0\) Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 246.

\(^9^1\) Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 228.


\(^9^3\) Sean Fleming, *Leviathan on a Leash* (Princeton: PUP, 2021), 62, alerts: “if the state had a will of its own... [it] could act independently of the sovereign and the subjects could object that the sovereign has misrepresented the will of the state.”
concrete form, the state needs a representative, the “artificial soul,” in charge of “giving life and motion to the whole body.” When this condition is met, as we shall see next, a new character comes into play. The sovereign is the catalyst of a mechanism that brings to our eyes the personification of the state. When the representative speaks and acts, it is Leviathan who is speaking and acting. Although other scholars have advanced interpretation of Hobbes’s state as personification, none has delved into the traits traditionally attributed to this figure and their impact into the concept of the state.

III.1.2. A visible power: being seen like a state

If the newly minted concept of the state was supposed to exert influence in the world of real politics, it must surpass the status of a “meer figment” that Hobbes reserved for “idols” or “gods of the heathen” (L XVI, 248). It certainly needed to be perceived as having a concrete form, including a will, a voice, and agency. Construing the state as a personification, “that great Leviathan,” allowed precisely for that. Indeed, the generation of Leviathan is tantamount to the apparition of a new will. The “multitude so united in one person” “reduce[s] all their wills... unto one.” The tangible manifestation of the state will are the laws. Indeed, “the law is a Command,” i.e., “a declaration, or manifestation of the will,” and “lawes” are the “artificial” “will” of Leviathan. Interestingly, Hobbes clarifies that “the name of the person commanding” the laws is not the contingent holder of the sovereign power, but the “person of the commonwealth” itself. Hobbes even suggests a connection between legislation and spoken word through a simile about the “artificiall chaines, called civille lawes,” “fastned at one end to the lips of... the sovereign power, and at the other” to the people’s “ears.” Laws are in this regard highly persuasive words. They conform the state’s lexicon. “Publique ministers” tasked to “instruct or judge the people” are the ones who articulate and make that discourse resonate. They serve as the “voice” of the commonwealth. The salience of a public voice in establishing the presence of the state in people’s lives is ratified by Hobbes’s notion of the “the silence of the

94 Hobbes, Leviathan, 16.
96 Hobbes, Leviathan, 260.
97 Hobbes, Leviathan, 422.
98 Hobbes, Leviathan, 16. See also Leviathan, 1090: “the law, which is the will and appetite of the state.”
100 Hobbes, Leviathan, 328. As Quentin Skinner, Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 390, has shown, Hobbes is alluding here to eloquence and the power of persuasion.
101 Hobbes, Leviathan, 382.
law” as the sphere of “liberty of the subjects” in which they may act at their “own discretion.”

The state is, therefore, an eloquent entity.

In like fashion, Hobbes postulates state actions. “[E]very act [public ministers] do” with authorization of the sovereign “is the act of the common-wealth.” Conversely, there are actions that cannot be attributed to the “person of the commonwealth,” such as a cession of sovereign prerogatives as a result of extortion by a powerful subject which should be “incident to the sovereign power... in his naturall person.” Thus, the Hobbesian state is an entity to which a collective will, “words and actions” are “attributed” “by fiction.” Although it needs a human sovereign to be set into motion, Leviathan stands on its own as an autonomous being, able to speak and act in the real world. It is, in our author’s own terms, an “automat[on].” In brief, it fulfills the characteristics traditionally assigned to a personification. In accordance with the tradition of books of emblems, Leviathan status as a personification is reinforced by its display in the frontispiece, with a heading highlighting its extraordinary quality: non est potestas super terram quae comparatur ei. As Partick Boucheron claims, “between the titulus and the allegory there is an organic bond.”

The ambiguity of Hobbes’s concept of the state, consisting of both something abstract, a mechanism, and the demonic Leviathan, a seemingly autonomous subject of words and actions, has puzzled Hobbes’s interpreters. Carl Schmitt considered Hobbes’s run to myth as a proof of the weakness of his theory, and compared him to a “magician” who can no longer control the “forces” summoned with “this famous symbol.” Similarly, Roberto Farneti accuses Hobbes of negligence in his mythopoeia and suggests that his “theological enemies” “took revenge” on his “ingenuity” reinvesting the “symbol with the full weight of its mythical substance.” Skinner argues that identifying the state with a biblical monster “supplies Hobbes with more meaning than he needs” and that he might “have had a reason for regretting his choice.”

---

102 Hobbes, Leviathan, 340.
103 Hobbes, Leviathan, 382. These are “actions of the common-wealth it selfe” (Hobbes, Leviathan, 1090).
104 Hobbes, Leviathan, 496.
105 Hobbes, Leviathan, 244.
106 Hobbes, Leviathan, 14.
However, this surplus of meaning of Hobbes’s state is not a bug, but a feature of his theory. In order to accomplish its goal of establishing social order, the state – an abstract and passive notion – must be perceived as an entity capable of speech and action, a “visible power to keep them [all] in awe” (L XVII, 254, my emphasis). Personification is the only device that can do the trick, but it entails a by-product: it turns the personified entity into an autonomous being. This is the demonic aspect that underlies all personifications and Hobbes is keenly aware of it. In the same way that “there was nothing which a poet could introduce as a person in his poem which they did not make either a god or a divel,” the person of the state introduced by Hobbes acquires the status of a demon or mortal deity. Hence, the choice of a demonic creature to represent the state should not be dismissed as a careless mistake, but rather explained as the deliberate use of a rhetorical figure that attributes words and actions to a seemingly independent agent. To be sure, the selection of the title “Leviathan” brought with it peculiar traits that have been highly contested. But in general terms Hobbes’s state is a fairly conventional demon and acts in a constricted and predictable way: terrorizing its subjects and opponents. It is “by the terror thereof, i.e., obtained from its “authoritie,” that “he is inabled to conform the wills of them all.” As Horst Bredekamp suggested, Hobbes’s “visual strategy” wields Leviathan as a “sign” that “directs action” through “an apotropaic formula,” employing terror to terrify terror itself. In fact, this is what personified entities in antiquity were supposed to do according to Hobbes: “founders and legislators of commonwealths amongst the gentiles” aimed at keeping “the people in obedience” by taking “hold of their fear.” Besides, human beings “are enclined to suppose, and feign unto themselves several kinds of powers invisible, and to stand in awe of their own imaginations.” Ultimately, Leviathan has succeeded in consolidating itself as an archetype of political power, lingering in our mind’s eye, perhaps too conspicuously. According to Robert Fredona and Sophus Reinert, its pregnancy impedes focusing on “relations of sovereignty” beyond the state for which we should fashion

111 Hobbes, Leviathan, 172.
113 Hobbes, Leviathan, 260.
115 Hobbes, Leviathan, 176.
another monstrous metaphor. At any rate, Leviathan’s success may be ascribed, in part, to Hobbes’s masterful employment of the figure of personification.

III.1.3. Through the theater glass, darkly

A state personification is not merely the concrete version of a concept expressing a collective will, voice, and agency. Rather it only fulfills this role if there is a relevant audience ascribing words and actions to it. In Hobbes’s case, this dependence on an audience is evinced by his theatrical approach. As we have seen, the state is like a dramanis persona, a character “counterfeited on the stage.” The enactment of the will and the articulation of the voice of this persona is executed by the human sovereign(s). For this impersonation to work properly, “every one” belonging to the people must “owne and acknowledge himself to be author whatsoever he that so beareth their person shall act or cause to be acted.” As the frontispiece of Leviathan shows, the Hobbesian state is a personification with the audience imbricated in it. Mónica Brito Vieira describes the situation of this “modern audience” as a “double experience”: they are “inside, drawn into the scene, at the same time as they stand outside, watching it, separated from (state) action by a fourth wall.” Eva Odzuck illustrates the point haptically, by claiming that the citizens are attached to the person of the state as a “massive tattoo.” Since words and actions attributed to the state are owned up by the people contained in its person, when the public looks at the eyes of the state, they see themselves as other. Or, as Christopher Pye put it, “the spectator... is subjected by the terror he feels before a form which represents his power and agency” transfigured. The personification of the state is the “phantasm” of the people in a “looking glasse.” It is their reflection as a distinct and external agent. Yet, the autonomization of the personification of the state is never definitive, because in it the people recognize the power they themselves constructed in an independent character. In this sense, the frontispiece of Leviathan, exhibits more than a dramatic persona. It “performs an impossible task,” staging the person of the state represented by a monarch both

---

118 Hobbes, Leviathan, 244.
119 Hobbes, Leviathan, 260.
123 Hobbes, Leviathan, 166.
facing and containing its audience. The theatricality of the argument is underscored by the curtain that holds the name of the author and the title of the book. Hobbes encourages us to peek into the mechanism that sets in motion the artifice of the state. *Leviathan* is, as Carl Schmitt suggested, “a political allegory through and through.”

This game of glances that features a personification, a human sovereign, and an audience, could have taken inspiration from a historical antecedent: the *King’s Entertainment at Welbeck*, a masque composed by Ben Jonson to amuse Charles I during his visit to Welbeck in 1633, and in which Hobbes might have done a cameo. The play commences with Love and Doubt personified praising the sovereign, and then proceeds to a lengthy oration by a gentleman embodying the British nation, who thanks “sister Scotland” for “giving us this King.” The allocution underscores the ruler’s mortality and the persistence of his lineage: “whilst he himself is mortal, let him feel nothing about him mortal in his house.” The character concludes with a Machiavellian appeasement to another personification, Fortune, urging her not to exert too much power over “Charles,” and calling her to be the “ever to wait bondwoman to the GENIUS of this state.” The speech strikes a chord with Hobbesian ears. It anticipates Hobbes’s distinction between the natural and the political person of the sovereign, and his argument of the “civill power” as “the soule of the common-wealth.” Furthermore, the ambivalent position of the king, placed among the audience but simultaneously gazed upon and addressed by the actors, advances a configuration reminiscent of the frontispiece of *Leviathan*. To a large extent, Hobbes inhabited a world where social encounters between prosopopoeias, sovereigns, and the public were conceivable. In fact, representations of states vis-à-vis human sovereigns were quite common in the 17th century, as detailed by Ellen Welch’s research.

The impossible trinity of tasks that the concept of the state had to fulfil is thus completed. Firstly, the state is envisaged as an abstract seat of power. That is, it is not reducible to the

---

126 This possibility has been contemplated by Aloysius Martinich, “Thomas Hobbes in Ben Jonson’s *The King’s Entertainment at Welbeck,*” *Notes and Queries* 45(3) (1998), 370-372.
129 Jonson, “Entertainment at Welbeck,” 137.
sovereign, nor to the people. Secondly, the state is not an entity of reason, passive and insignificant, but a player with a strong presence in the real world and behaves as an independent agent, having words and actions attributed to it on a regular basis. Thirdly, the relevant audience needed to give its assent to the personification of the state is integrated in it. In these terms, Leviathan is a full-fledged personification. The preceding discussion lays the groundwork for my examination of the Rousseauian conception of the state and how it fits within the frame of personification.

III.2. Rousseau’s public person as the form of the Republic

III.2.1. My name is nobody

In the same vein as Hobbes, Rousseau considers the state to be an abstract seat of power. Both in the so-called Geneva Manuscript (1758-60) and in his Letters written from the Mountain (1764), he describes it as having an “abstract existence” and as an “abstract and collective being.” In his Social Contract (1762), he alludes to the state as a “being of reason” in charge of enforcing the “law of reason.” Through this portrayal, Rousseau highlights the intellectual sophistication inherent in the very concept of the state. As emphasized in the Second Discourse, there was a time in which human beings achieved “the language of authority and government.” Though wary of the idea of progress, Rousseau found evidence of the cultivation of reason in “the natural and political laws when they are considered by abstraction,” as stated in a 1767 Letter to Mirabeau. If contemporary states did not attain a “constant and regular form” it is because they are the “product of chance.” Norberto Bobbio termed this account the “theory of the rationality of the state,” which “constructs the state as an entity of reason par excellence, the only setting where human beings can realize their rational

---

139 Rousseau, Second Discourse, 175.
nature.” Thus, the process of “rationalization of the state becomes the statization of reason.” Moreover, the Rousseauian state operates through an intangible general will, an abstract concept described as “always constant, unalterable, and pure.” Viewing the state as a refined abstraction allows Rousseau to grasp a “precise notion of sovereign authority.” Notably, he takes abstraction and impersonality to a higher level than Hobbes by relying on the ambiguity of the French term personne, which means both person and nobody. The Republic or “public person” is born out of the “alienation” consisting in “each one of us put[ting] in common his person and all his power”. In this way, “each giving himself to all, gives himself to no one [personne]” by means of which a “common self [moi commune]” is constituted. John Rist aptly terms this phenomenon the “depersonalization of the human individuality” “submerged” under the general will. For Jean Starobinski, oscillating “between ‘each’ and ‘everyone,’” Rousseau joins “antinomic terms, polarly opposed: everybody-nobody.” The Letters from the Mountain insist on this trait of anonymity concerning the public person, which “binds the contracting people together without subjecting them to anyone [personne].” The Discourse on Political Economy further emphasizes the paradoxical nature of this contract: “How can it be that they obey and no one [personne] commands?” Within Rousseau’s framework, the state holds a dual position as both a person and, like Odysseus presenting himself to Polyphemus, as “nobody.” In a well-known episode, Ulysses deceives Polyphemus, his captor, by telling him: “nobody is my name.” By blinding the Cyclops, he manages to escape because, when calling for help, Polyphemus disingenuously shouts “nobody, friends, is... aiming to kill me.” This Homeric metaphor holds significance insofar as Rousseau refers to the tranquility of Ulysses’ companions “in the Cyclops cave awaiting to be devoured” as a gloomy example of the peace found in a despotic state. The pathway to liberation, naturally, lies in the “nobody” state. Given that the state is no-one, it is not surprising that Rousseau emphasizes its passivity: the

141 Rousseau, Social Contract, 121.
143 Rousseau, Social Contract, 50.
144 Rousseau, Social Contract, 50.
147 Rousseau, Letters from the Mountain, 232.
150 Homer, Odyssey, IX.408, 200.
151 Rousseau, Social Contract, 45.
“public person,” “when it is passive, it is called by its members state, and sovereign when it is active.”

By and large, Rousseau’s Republic fits the traditional model of a concept susceptible to being personified. It is an abstraction that cannot be identified with any of the parties that compose it. Since it results from an act of alienation directed at the community as a whole and towards no one in particular, the state needs a concrete form to be recognized as a political agent. Robin Douglass rightly argues that “if the general will amounted to... an abstract precept of reason, it would never be of any force.”

This is why the state is a “moral and collective body” with personal features: a “common self, a life, and a will,” and even a “public sensitivity.” As Jean Starobinski has demonstrated, Rousseau was conscious of the implications at play in the figure of “prosopopoeia.” In the First Discourse, by “invoking the shade,” of Fabricius, a consul “recalled to life” to represent “the countenance” of the Roman Republic, Rousseau scolds the morals of his time.

This, according to Pierre Fontanier’s 1827 renowned taxonomy (which incidentally exhibits a Hobbesian flair), is “one of the most beautiful examples of prosopopoeia by fiction [par feinte].” Furthermore, in Émile (1762), Rousseau “paints” “Sophie,” a “model” spouse for his pupil, as an “imaginary object whose sensitive features give to it a great air of truth.” He argues that if the pupil “is happy with the image, he will soon wish there is an original,” and he labels this rendition of the imagined character into a concrete person “personify[ing] the model.” We should expect a similar operation concerning the state.

III.2.2. A state of one’s own

152 Rousseau, Social Contract, 51.
160 Rousseau, Émile, 657. I do not cite Allan Bloom’s translation because it does not render the term “personnifie” as personify.
Devoid of the branding inventiveness of his English predecessor, who furnished us with a god, a monster, a demon, and a person all in one, Rousseau opted for a plainer character called “the public person.” Throughout his works, the state is consistently treated as a person. He refers to it both as a “moral person” and as a “public person.” As Judith Shklar put it, these are all “personifying metaphors, and very conventional ones.” Unlike Hobbes, however, Rousseau emphasizes the collective character of this person: “the sovereign power,” he argues, “is in fact a collective being,” a “collective body,” and “can only be considered collectively.” In his Letters from the Mountain, Rousseau even makes explicit the rhetorical device that gives shape to this collective entity. What he calls “the Sovereign” is a “personified rule” or “order.” The main personal quality of this personification is its will, the general will. Sovereignty simply amounts to the “exercise of the general will.” So, the public person of the state is personified notably by means of its characteristic general will, which “directs the forces of the state.” In the words of Raymond Carré de Malberg: “the state is a person insomuch as it is the subject of the will of the collectivity.” A faculty germane only to the common self, this will is what sets in motion the state’s “machine.” The unfathomable “abyss of politics” revolves around the interaction of the general will, acting as the “soul” of the body politic, and its influence on the exertion of public force.

In Rousseau’s view, the person of the state not only possesses a will, but also a distinctive “public voice.” Voice is what distinguishes a person from an automaton. In his Essay on the origin of languages (1781), Rousseau examines the insufficiency of instrumental music and stresses the indispensability of the singing voice. Unlike “the automaton flute player” made to play by a “mechanic, who measured the wind and made the fingers to move,” a “voice announces a sensitive being.” When individuals give themselves entirely and submit to the

---

162 Rousseau, Geneva Manuscript, 95; Social Contract, 50, 61, 82, and 100; and Émile, 840.
164 Rousseau, Social Contract, 57. See also Letters from the Mountain, 232.
165 Rousseau, Social Contract, 50.
166 Rousseau, Social Contract, 84.
167 Rousseau, Letters from the Mountain, 232, my emphasis.
168 Rousseau, Social Contract, 57.
169 Rousseau, Social Contract, 57.
171 Rousseau, The State of War, 170.
172 Rousseau, Geneva Manuscript, 88. Translation slightly modified.
174 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Essay on the origin of languages in Collected Writings, Vol. VII, ed. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: UP of New England, 1998), 325. The example of the automaton flute player mentioned by Rousseau refers to a device built in 1737 by Jacques de Vaucanson, which is also addressed in the
general will, they create “a moral and collective body made up of as many members as the assembly has voices.”\textsuperscript{175} Indeed, a voice is what defines civic participation in a Republic. However, it is granted with conditions. Rousseau tells us in the Preface to the \textit{Social Contract} that no matter how “weak” his public voice as a citizen of Geneva is, it “imposes” the duty to “learn about public affairs.”\textsuperscript{176} As the transition from state of nature to civil state takes place, “the \textit{voice} of duty succeeds physical impulsion.”\textsuperscript{177} Resembling a vocation that demands to be heard and obeyed, a “celestial voice dictates the precepts of the public reason to every citizen.”\textsuperscript{178} Patrice Canivez, has keenly underscored the interplay between incommunication and public voice, likening the “voice of the general will” “in the political order,” to “the voice of conscience in the moral order.”\textsuperscript{179} Thus, the voice put into play within the sovereign assembly is not an aggregate “number of voices,” but the voice of the public person that expresses “the common interest which unites them.”\textsuperscript{180} Certainly, this accomplishment does not arise spontaneously. Citizens have to be “adequately informed” and must have no “communication among themselves”\textsuperscript{181} during their deliberations so that when the general will is “consulted, it always replies.”\textsuperscript{182} Guided by the voice of the Republic, citizens give tangible form to this general will. Conversely, when those conditions are not met and the “particular interests” begin to be felt, the general will becomes “mute.”\textsuperscript{183} The state loses its voice to an assembly that emits a cacophony of deafening noises.

To give voice to the public, Rousseau envisions a figure similar to ancient poets who breathed life into civic divinities: the Legislator. Acting as a \textit{deus ex machina}, or – to use Rousseau’s terms – as the “mechanic that invents the machine,”\textsuperscript{184} the Legislator solves the problem of instituting “the conditions for civil association” for a nascent “public that wills the good” but still “cannot see it.”\textsuperscript{185} The legal code drafted by the Legislator is afterwards sanctioned by the

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
sovereign assembly. Significantly, this character achieves the feat without any legislative or executive power. Instead, it wields “an authority of a different order,” which rallies “without violence” and persuades “without convincing.” Indeed, “it would require gods to give laws to men.” Left with only the panoply of rhetoric, Rousseau’s “extraordinary individual” resorts to prosopopoeia to put “decisions” “in the mouths of the immortals” so that they express the true interests of the Republic. Much like the virtues in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Allegory of the Good Government, the gods thus animated would function as personified tutors, guarding the personification of the state.

Agency is the last feature that a state personification should possess according to my model. It is Rousseau himself who asks: “how does this abstract and collective being act? Through laws.” Laws are “the authentic acts of the general will.” As we have seen, the sovereign assembly is concerned with a specific scope of action: “law combines the universality of the will and that of the object” and “no particular application can distort the universality of the law.” This means that the state, in its actions, does not make particular considerations that could benefit or harm a specific segment. Its field of intervention is the people in general. This is what Rousseau calls a “Republic,” namely, “any State ruled by laws, whatever may be the form of administration.” Apart from its scope of application, state action has also format restrictions: it operates as an agent of liberation of its citizens. Indeed, the “credit of the civil state” is the “moral freedom” that allows individuals to be “truly the master” of themselves. As Robert Derathé proposes, the sole means of attaining “moral personhood” for individuals resides within the framework of a Republican state. Citizens are free insofar as freedom is to “obey the law one has prescribed to oneself.” Like any other personification, Rousseau’s

---

186 Though, as Bonnie Honig, “Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory,” American Political Science Review 101(1) (2007), 1-17, at 6, warns, “the problem of how to know and/or generate the general will has not been solved; it has been shifted.” The people must still decide who is the legitimate lawgiver.
188 Rousseau, Social Contract, 69.
189 Rousseau, Social Contract, 71.
190 Rousseau, Letters from the Mountain, 232.
191 Rousseau, Social Contract, 110.
193 Rousseau, Social Contract, 125.
197 Rousseau, Social Contract, 54.
state activity is constrained: it liberates in all its actions. Even the imposition on those refusing to comply with the dictates general will is tantamount to “forcing” them “to be free.”

The unmistakable imprint of Rousseauian ideas in the French First Republic is evident in the conception of the state as an agent of freedom. In fact, the state would be represented as liberty itself. The establishment of an official personification was decreed on September 25, 1792. The new seal of the state would present “France under the features of a woman... holding with the right hand a pike surmounted by the Phrygian cap.” Maurice Agulhon refers to this as “a double allegory, that of liberty, the eternal virtue, and of the Republic, the new regime.” The influence of Rousseau in this specific context was acknowledged in the National Assembly in November 1790, where he was hailed as the “precursor of this great revolution.” Credited with having taught how “to form men for liberty,” he made “a free people of the French.”

Also, an anonymous 1791 pamphlet called *The Prosopopoeia of J.J. Rousseau*, extolled, in the mouth of a young militant “zealous for freedom,” “Jean-Jacques... the man who rendered us free from the cradle.” In a beguiling rhetorical feat, Rousseau’s personification of the state is juxtaposed to his own personification: “if only you could see, my friend, an entire nation, the true sovereign, the general will of the French, building a statue for you.” And is then signed: “free France to J.J. Rousseau.” The free state, free even from its creator. From beyond the grave, Rousseau not only corroborates the autonomization of the public person of his own making, but he ends up being personified himself. This fervent exhibition of allegory might have been overwhelming even for dedicated activists of the time. A chronicler of the 1793 Festival of Reason and Truth, for instance, asserted that the prevalent “inclination to concretize abstractions and to personalize moral beings” had degenerated into a “mania” that distanced the people from “the pure worship of Reason.”

---

201 *Archives Parlamentaires de 1787 à 1860*, J. Mavidal & E. Laurent (eds.), Première série, t. XXI (Paris : Librairie Administrative P. Dupont, 1885), 128. This motion promoted by the representative A.M. Eymar on November 29, 1790, led to the decree establishing a statue in honor of Rousseau and the maintenance of his widow on December 21, 1790.
204 *Prosopopée de J.-J. Rousseau*, 6.
205 *Prosopopée de J.-J. Rousseau*, 7.
206 This account was published in *Les Annales patriotiques et littéraires de la France, et Affaires Politiques de l’Europe*, ed. Louis-Sébastien Mercier and Jean-Louis Carra, 316, Brumaire 22, Year II (November 13, 1793), 1467.
III.2.3. We the public, face to face

“Sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated.”

Rousseau sought to justify a political organization that would preserve citizens’ freedom by requiring their participation in all binding decisions of the political body. As he asserts in his *Political Economy*, “one has to be free in order to will.” So, the expression of the general will requires that each one of the members of the “collective being” must be present in the flesh. This participative stance impacts on the relation established between the personification of the state as a public person and its audience. Actually, Rousseau intends to bridge the gap between the stage and the audience. In contrast to Hobbes’s mirror that offers the people an external (and transformed) reflection of themselves in a state represented by a sovereign, there is no exteriority in Rousseau. The public and the sovereign are the same person. This is why he introduces a new specimen in political taxonomy: the “public person.” Even if the syntagma “publique person” already featured in medieval political thought to signify the sovereign’s office, Rousseau’s employment is unprecedented. Indeed, in his notion of a public person he collapses two elements: the state as a person, on the one hand, and the public in the sense of an audience, on the other. The personification of the state becomes the personification of the public. To emphasize this idea, he repeatedly refers to the state with the shorthand of “the public.” It is the public now that takes the stage. But if the public is the protagonist, there is no stage anymore. Since the public person lacks representatives who play its part, its relations with the audience cannot be understood through the model of the fractured theater. As Rousseau tells us in the Dedication to his *Second Discourse*, he yearns for “a state where,” everyone having the “gentle habit of seeing and knowing one another,” nothing can escape “the Public’s gaze and judgment.” In a well-functioning Republic, citizens’ identities are realized in their participation in collective life. To use our author’s words, they “carry the self into the common unity.” Similarly, in the *Geneva Manuscript*, he claimed that “the private self

209 John of Salisbury, for instance, alludes in his *Policraticus*, ed. Cary Nederman (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 31, to the “public persona” of the monarch as the supreme judicial authority.
211 Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 114, my emphasis.
212 Rousseau, *Emile*, 249.
extended to the whole is the strongest bond” of “the state.” Bruno Bernardi even suggests that Rousseau is thinking of a process akin to a “chemical” “mix” between individuals.

But where could this democratic panoptism of “seeing and knowing each other,” this mingling of selves into one common self, occur? In the sovereign assembly and in popular festivals, where the public gathers without intermediaries. The festival serves as Rousseau’s model of commonality. Unlike the theater, where we see through a glass, darkly, in the festival we see one another face to face. In his Letter to D’Alembert, Rousseau explains that the “spectacle [spectacle] in a Republic” consists of “the people assembl[ing]” “with liberty.” “Nothing is shown,” because it simply “let[s] the spectators become the spectacle, [it] make[s] them the actors.” Similar to the sovereign assembly, in a festival “each one sees and loves themselves in the others.” As Starobinski put it, for Rousseau “the collective festival accomplishes” an “epiphany of transparency.”

Through this analogy, the relation between the personification of the state and the public is entirely reformatted. Enacted by actors who simultaneously are its spectators, the public person acquires the status of a “happening” as defined by Allan Kaprow. That is, an artistic performance where “visitors are commingled with the event,” eliminating the “separation of audience and play.” When everything is in place, along with the will, voices, and actions of the citizens, emerges, as a superimposed entity, the public person. This personification is not something to be seen but experienced. As André Charrak argues, Rousseau progressively commits himself to the justification of political order in a “non-analytical” way, as a lived “experience of order.” The citizens who animate it are made free by their own autonomous behavior. Incipit vita liberata: the exercise of their sovereign right is a liberating in itself. Or, otherwise considered, it is a return to the original moment of the constitution of the public person, when each one of us “puts his person and his full power in common.”

Through personification, Rousseau successfully provides an account of the state that fulfils the difficult task of delivering an abstract locus of power and, simultaneously, an entity capable of

---

213 Rousseau, Geneva Manuscript, 114.


216 Rousseau, Letter to D’Alembert, 344, translation slightly modified.


218 Allan Kaprow, Essays on the blurring of art and life (Berkeley: UCP, 2003), 17.


willing, speaking, and acting. Like other personifications, the Roussean state enjoys
independence vis-à-vis its creators and its audience but is also constrained in its actions. On
the one hand, the public person must maintain a universal scope, legislating on matters
concerning the political body as a whole and avoiding involvement in particularities. On the
other, the state operates as an agent of freedom: all its actions are expressions of the citizenry
imposing norms on themselves. Rousseau’s innovation lies in his conflation of the state and the
public, blurring the lines between representatives of the state and its audience. Ultimately,
citizens both participate in animating the personification of the state and are affected by it.

IV. Conclusion
My goal in this article has been to demonstrate that the modern concept of the state, in its
absolutist and republican formats, can be construed as a personification from its inception. A
novel and sophisticated artifact of abstract reasoning, the state suffered from a fundamental
intangibility that prevented its identification with any of the traditional participants of public
life, be it the ruler or the individuals that conform the people. This begs the question: how can
an impersonal abstraction intervene in political affairs? It is the device of personification that
gets the job done. The ancient rhetorical figure has the features needed to bring to life an
elusive concept as the state. To illustrate this point, three functions of personification are
explored: the figuration of an abstraction, the creation of an allegorical agent, and the ability to
impact an audience. Subsequently, the theories of Hobbes and Rousseau, two emblematic
cases, are analyzed to exemplify how personification was effectively utilized to construct their
conception of the state. By means of it, they were able to isolate an independent locus of
power; to attribute voice, will, and agency to the state, and ultimately, to reconfigure the place
of the public as an essential component of political organization. It seems, after all, that old
wineskins can preserve new wines and even infuse them with precious notes.