

Hobbesian Liberalism: A Study of Proto-Liberal Ideas in *Leviathan*

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Thomas Hobbes advocated for a strong government that centralizes power and maintains law and order. His government quells the notions of freedom of speech, religion, press, and association in its attempt to achieve law and order. Many think that Hobbes's political theory stands in stark contrast to the liberal views of his fellow Englishmen, John Locke. However, Hobbes is more liberal than many would suppose. A careful study of his conceptions of human nature, society, and liberty reveals his proto-liberal ideas. This paper demonstrates Hobbes's proto-liberalism as found in his work *Leviathan*. Evidence in support of my thesis includes Hobbes's idea that government is based upon the consent of the governed, as well as his conceptions of equality and individualism. These liberal ideas constitute the foundation for Hobbes's political theory as found in *Leviathan*.

In order to better understand Thomas Hobbes's political theory, one must examine the historical context of the time. Hobbes was born in 1588 and was 54 when the English Civil War broke out in 1642. He published *Leviathan* in 1651, at the end of the war

(Williams 2005). This was the most brutal event Hobbes had ever lived through. With this in mind, it is understandable to see how he could write a book that portrays an authoritarian government as the best way to achieve stability and peace. This time period greatly influenced what Hobbes thought of the nature of humans.

Hobbes believes humans are naturally “going through the motions” of survival, controlled by self-interested desires for self-preservation and indulgence. Humans will seek out resources to sustain life, as well as things that they deem pleasurable, and avoid situations they see as harmful. In other words, human desires are the root of, and consequently control, their behavior. Conflict comes from the economic idea of scarcity. There are never enough resources to satisfy every human desire, thus they will fight among each other to obtain what is necessary to survive. Hobbes sees this kind of conflict as a common (almost continual) occurrence which leads to human life being “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1997, 70). In response to this idea of human life, Hobbes outlines a “law of nature” in his theory, but it is not the type of natural law that most would suspect. Like John Locke, many people would assume the law of nature to be a set of moral principles all can apprehend through logical reasoning (Tuckness 2012). Hobbes would agree that his law of nature is derived from logical reasoning, but it is not a moral principle. His idea is simply that the fundamental law of nature is for humans to seek out an end to their suffering in the state of nature.

This idea has an important impact on Hobbes’s theory of human society. Since the fundamental law of nature is for humans to seek an end to the misery of the state of nature, they will naturally gravitate towards peace and stability and hence come to the conclusion that they are better off under a government. Hobbes

imagines that as people decide to come together and leave the state of nature, they will form contracts to hold each person to the bargain being struck. This is the beginning of the idea of a social contract. Hobbes defines a contract as a “mutual transferring of right” (Hobbes 1997, 74). He feels that all parties in the contract must give up all of their rights to one “sovereign” in order to achieve their goal of security and stability. Hobbes defines the “power of a man” as “his present means to obtain some future apparent good” and argues that “the greatest of human powers, is that which is compounded of the powers of most men, united by consent, in one person ...” (Hobbes 1997, 48). This sovereign commands all of the power in the contract in order to have more power than its subordinates and maintain peace and security. It must be able to suppress the power struggles that are inevitable when power is the scarcest yet most desirable resource. The sovereign has the power to decide what is important to the society’s well-being and make laws accordingly. It decides whether or not to go to war, what doctrines can be taught in the society, and the rewards and punishments for behavior. Hobbes also gives the sovereign the sole power of adjudication, and remarks, “The sovereign[’s] actions cannot be justly accused by the subject” (Hobbes 1997, 98). In Hobbes’s mind, the “subjects” cannot logically find fault with the sovereign because they created it, and there is nothing that could ever make them want to return to the state of nature. It is worth noting, however, that Hobbes does allow for a few freedoms for the subjects of the sovereign. For example, in Chapter XXI, Hobbes allows the citizens freedom from self-incrimination against their will. He also claims that the people are not bound to hurt themselves. Moreover, Hobbes argues that when the sovereign is no longer able to uphold the contract and maintain law and order, the subjects are no longer bound to obey it.

Hobbes writes of individualism, liberty, and equality as well. Since everyone is against everyone else in the state of nature, they must come together to form a social contract. This means that the individual comes before the society or government. In other words, the parts come before the whole. This belief forms the roots for the famous idea that government is created by the consent of the governed. Democratic governments today, especially in the United States, use this idea as a stepping stone to create their own constitutions. Hobbes has a strong sense of liberty in his writing. He defines liberty as the “absence of external impediments of motion” (Hobbes 1997, 72). This means that someone has liberty if he or she is able to do what they want, when they want, provided they are capable. Hobbes believes in a very strong negative notion of liberty which focuses on “freedoms from” certain actions and situations. This is similar to the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution which includes the freedom from unlawful searches and seizures. For Hobbes, the question of liberty is more concerned with what does not happen to the people rather than what does happen to them, hence his social contract focuses on protecting people from themselves and others instead of focusing on controlling what freedoms and rights the subjects have. If the sovereign does not make a law or mandate that prohibits an activity, the citizens are still free to participate in that activity. Hobbes calls this idea the “silence of the law” (Hobbes 1997, 120). Therefore, in some areas of life, people will have more or less liberty than they would in other areas depending on the discretion of the sovereign.

Hobbes also believes that humans are inherently equal. In *Leviathan* he comments, “And as to the faculties of the mind ... I find yet a greater equality amongst men, than that of strength” and “[f]rom this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the

attaining of our ends” (Hobbes 1997, 69). He admits that humans are not literally equal, but across the entire population traits such as intellect and athleticism even out and overall people are equal. Again this shows that instead of attacking liberal ideals, Hobbes actually agrees with them. Regardless of the fact that he is advocating for a sovereign with supreme power, these statements demonstrate that it is only to maintain a secure and peaceful environment. Unlike other theories of absolutist rule in which the ruler has special characteristics or gifts, this idea means that the sovereign is no better than the subjects; it simply has the combined power of all of them in order to provide for their security in seeking out their fancies. It is evidence that Hobbes was planting the seeds of classical liberalism. Today, we are taught that everyone is equal in the opportunity to achieve their goals. Is this not established by Hobbes? I argue that it is.

Hobbes is most comparable to John Locke who was also an Englishman. While there are many differences between Locke and Hobbes, there are some basic similarities. Major differences include ideas of the state of nature, law of nature, and social contract. Locke sees the state of nature as a peaceful yet inconvenient place ruled by a moral law of nature (Friend). This law of nature is ignored by many people, thus creating the need to form a government. The people in the state of nature create the social contract out of convenience instead of necessity as it is with Hobbes. The social contract for Locke is based upon the protection of property rather than life. There are other differences as well, but more important are the similarities between the two. Both Hobbes and Locke base their theories on their ideas of human behavior in a state of nature with laws of nature. Both agree that people move from a state of nature into a society by forming a social contract. These social contracts

take power from the people and give it to the government. These basic ideas stand with the basic ideas of classical liberalism, yet Hobbes's liberalism is largely unknown while Locke's is well known.

When Hobbes writes of an unlimited, unchecked power, many take issue with him. As J. A. Thomas wrote in his brief collection of some contemporary critiques of Hobbes in 1929, "The supreme achievement of Hobbes was to lay hold of the weapon usually employed to defend a democratic theory of government, and to wield it in the interests of an unqualified, unrelieved, despotism." Thomas also makes a noteworthy point when he brings up Sir Robert Filmer's writing on Hobbes' theory. Filmer agreed with Hobbes's absolutist ideas, but disagreed with how they should be attained. He believed that instead of a secular contract, power comes from God through Adam (Thomas 1929, 187). This demonstrates a secondary reason why some contemporaries disagreed with Hobbes; the Divine Right of Kings Theory. Divine Right Theory has been used to justify the rule of absolutist regimes by arguing that a god or gods granted power to the ruler thus making his or her rule the only legitimate rule. This theory explains political power as a gift of God passed through the descendants of Adam and was used to justify many monarchies in Hobbes's time. People who believed like Filmer did would have been offended that Hobbes did not agree.

To return to the topic of absolutist despotism, some have argued that without his theory of human nature, Hobbes would have no way of justifying his theory of human society. This opens the door for the criticism that he may be wrong about the state of nature. J. A. Thomas articulates this best when he writes:

"If the need for political authority springs from the inescapable vice of men ... then a case can be made out for

despotism. If, on the other hand, the state of nature is a pre-political rather than a pre-social state – if, that is to say, man falls easily and naturally into the habit of living with his fellows without being compelled to become a ‘social animal’ by any authority external to himself – then, assuming that the purpose of the state is to secure social peace, the all-important need for unlimited state authority is not so obvious.” (Thomas 1929, 190)

If the state of nature is not as brutal as Hobbes claims, there would be no reason for such a powerful government and Hobbes’s theory would no longer make logical sense. A noteworthy critic of Thomas Hobbes is Judith Shklar. She writes:

“Liberalism does not in principle have to depend on specific religious or philosophical systems of thought. It does not have to choose among them as long as they do not reject toleration, which is why Hobbes is not the father of liberalism. No theory that gives public authorities the unconditional right to impose beliefs and even a vocabulary as they may see fit upon the citizenry can be described as even remotely liberal” (Shklar 1989, 24).

She does not believe Hobbes should be considered liberal in any way. Her opinions however, are based upon a more modern sense of the term “liberalism”. Hobbes may not be the “father” of liberalism, but he had a significant impact on many of its principles. Classical liberalism was focused more heavily upon a government being created by the people while modern liberalism focuses on rights and freedoms of the citizens as a determining factor for liberty. Hobbes actually stands in line with a basic tenant of classical liberalism which is “the government is fundamentally a creation of

all the people who willingly transfer to it their authority for self-government for the explicit purpose of maintaining the peace and securing the validity of their contracts" (Kahl 1995).

Today, many parts of the world are democracies and thus the idea of an absolutist regime seems especially preposterous. Most of the recent writing finds fault with Hobbes, but then admit that Hobbes was correct in most of his assumptions. One major example is David Van Mill who began his work with, "Perhaps the most enduring criticism of Hobbes's political philosophy is that it provides for an absolute sovereign that poses a great threat to individual freedom" and then goes on to refute that very phrase (Mill 2002, 21). Nonetheless, Van Mill does quote a few critics of Hobbes' political theory. One such quote was from Benjamin Barber who wrote, "Liberals rightly pall at the idea of Hobbes as a liberal predecessor because his fear of anarchy leads him to embrace an authoritarian conception of the state incompatible with limited government" (Barber 1989, 261 in Mill 2002, 21). Another is, "Hobbes was no liberal in his conclusions, advocating an absolute rather than restrained state" from Susan Moller Okin (Okin 1989, 257 in Mill 2002, 21). One example found that does attempt to refute Hobbes is written by Garrath Williams from Lancaster University in the United Kingdom. Williams argues that, "Theoretically, Hobbes fails to prove that we have an almost unlimited obligation to obey the sovereign" (Williams 2005). He believes that the success of modern democratic societies, and the crimes and failure committed by modern dictatorships, is proof that Hobbes was mistaken in his theory.

I disagree with Hobbes' critics. They try to claim that Hobbes attacks liberal ideals when in fact he does just the opposite. In the vast scheme of history, Hobbes could (and should) be viewed as a

liberal who made the fruition of democracy and increased individuality possible. Hobbes is considered the turning point in history between ancient and modern political theory, but why? He is one of the first to acknowledge the idea of Social Contract. Critics tend to overlook this major point in Hobbes' theory because they focus on the fact that he uses it to advocate for an absolutist regime, yet Hobbes clearly writes:

“[The contract] is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one the and the same person, made by the covenant of every man with every man, in such manner, as if every man should say to every man, *I authorize and give up my right of governing myself, to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.*” (Hobbes 1997, 95)

This contract is a mutual agreement between all parties involved that they have a horrible life in the state of nature and they will collectively work together to remove themselves from it. Since the contract is also the only way in which Hobbes sees humanity being able to leave the state of nature, he gives the “Leviathan” its unlimited power to enforce it because the state of nature is so terrible. Hobbes judges that people should be so afraid of the state of nature that they would agree to any terms, no matter how corrupt, to escape from it. He does not expressly give the ruler the right to reach into every aspect of its subjects' lives (though many seem to interpret it that way), rather he simply wants to allow the sovereign to have as much power as it needs in order to protect the people under the contract.

This idea brings up another major point that Hobbes, along with subsequent theorists, seems to take a different approach to

politics than the ancients. Instead of looking at what humans *ought* to be, Hobbes focused on what they *are*. Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato spent entire works answering the question of what humans should be, and arguing for the repression of their desires in order to better serve society. Hobbes uses the entire first quarter of *Leviathan* to examine the true nature of man, even calling it "Of Man," and urges management of human desires, not repression. Since Hobbes views humans in terms of what they are, he sees that they are naturally going to be competing with each other out of greed and selfishness, unless a powerful entity stops them. The sovereign is in place to act as that powerful entity as well as acting as the neutral party in conflict resolution. Hobbes articulates this idea in Chapter XVII of *Leviathan* when he writes, "The final cause, end, or design of men ... in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves ... is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby ..." (Hobbes 1997, 93). The constant fear that humans in the state of nature feel concerning their safety is greatly diminished with the sovereign in place, thus creating an environment in which they can better express their individuality. After looking at Hobbes' theory in terms of providing security and stability, one can see that the purpose of the sovereign is not to limit liberty, but to grant the authority necessary to uphold the terms of the contract with society. Once the sovereign can no longer uphold its end of the bargain, the people no longer have to obey. In a sense Hobbes provides for a certain, albeit narrow, sphere of morality in which the people are justified in disobedience due to the inability of their sovereign to protect them.

In response to a point previously mentioned about Hobbes' religious critics, they only offer further support to the fact that Hobbes was more liberal than some gave him credit for. In his time,

in lieu of Divine Right Theory and the prevailing popularity of Christianity, his thoughts were very radical ideas because they separated Church and State by taking God out of the equation. Hobbes did not, however, remove God from his politics completely. He includes in *Leviathan* an entire chapter, interestingly one of the longer chapters, devoted to religion and how it fits into the government, even calling it "Of Religion" (Hobbes 1997, Ch. 12). There is no reliable refutation of Divine Right Theory because the existence or non-existence of a deity cannot be proven; however, it is no longer used to justify rule over people. Now, the idea of rule by consent of the governed is accepted as the norm. Hobbes cannot claim ownership of the idea of rule by consent because it originated in Greece with the ancients, but he can take credit for using it in an entirely new approach.

All too often, *Leviathan* is taken out of context. The period in which Hobbes was writing was one of destruction and war, thus making his ideas of human nature and subsequent human society seem much less far-fetched and more understandable. His scientific approach to the explanation of human nature creates the beginnings of modern Political Science. I do not believe that Thomas Hobbes should be seen as the absolutist brute that some believe him to be. In Hobbes's political theory he does support an absolutist regime, but only for the benefit of the humans that recently left an abhorrent state of nature. He uses the absolutist ruler to provide stability where there previously was none, and allow the people to have a better chance of individual expression. Hobbes should be seen as illuminating the path for future theorists to open up the ideas of classical liberalism that he begins. The ideas of innate equality and a Social Contract are planted in the minds of many people and subsequent theorists are able to implement these ideas into their

theories, all while Hobbes takes the brunt of the negativity. Jeff Kahl writes, "In a small way, Hobbes has planted the seeds of limited government into the garden of political philosophy" (Kahl 1995). Thomas Hobbes is thus deserving of more credit than he is given regarding his proto-liberal ideas in *Leviathan*.

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