



## RETHINKING OF THOMAS HOBBS'S *STATE OF SOVEREIGNTY*

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to provide an answer to those theorists and critics and also Hobbes's own followers (Hobbbism) who believe that Thomas Hobbes's theories are the supporters of arbitrary government and totalitarianism. Although in Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan and his theories we can find the elements of Liberalism still there are existing many misinterpretations about that. The aim of this essay is to prove the liberalistic and revolutionary ideas of Thomas Hobbes regarding, individualism, equality and the matter of attention Hobbes gave for the change of opinions in the 17thc by referring to historical and cultural evidences.

Key Words: Hobbism, Thomas Hobbes, Liberalism, Individualism, Equality, Opinions, 17thc historical and cultural evidences

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### INTRODUCTION

Hobbism refers to the approach of current studies on Thomas Hobbes's political philosophy. An over-simplified reading of Hobbes which are not only contributed to his notoriety in his day but also leads to the present day misinterpretations of his philosophy. The main problem here is that these interpretations are too much different from Hobbes's own theories because they lead towards a pessimistic views on him. However, Thomas Hobbes is more liberal than many would suppose. This paper demonstrates Hobbes's liberalistic ideas as found in his work Leviathan in contrast to Hobbism theories and also by referring to main historical and cultural events during the 17thc, I will answer to this question that what was the real and original state of sovereignty explained by Thomas Hobbes.

#### Argument

According to Hobbism, before the existence of the state there is a state of nature. In this state of nature individuals live without possessing strong bonds between one another. here persists equality

in strength and abilities between individuals, which results in constant uncertainty described as "war of all against all" (Hobbes 86-90). his state is hardly desirable, and accordingly, a way out is found via erecting a commonwealth as common power, which is to act as the "foresight of their [men's] own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby" (Hobbes 101). According to Hobbism, human nature is self-interested, asocial and violent. In this reading of Hobbes, it appears that human nature is fundamentally and basically "malicious, competitive and selfish" (Skinner 269). It suggests that Hobbes believes that humans when are free are violent and like a savage animals treat each other. Human's main wish is to preserve and keep himself by gaining power over others. So humans are savage and in an absence of a common power, they can not cooperate and then treat and hurt each other because they are naturally egoist and Power-oriented (Guathier 3). Also because Hobbesian people are self-interested and egoist they can never cooperate with one another except under a

common and powerful authority. For only the sovereign's command can determine what is right or wrong. By two ways a commonwealth can be established: First, the covenant all individuals (but not the constituted power) enter into the so-called government by institution. Secondly, "the contract each individual concludes solely by him or herself in order to accept a new ruler, the so-called government by acquisition" (Williams 2-3). In both cases the commonwealth is represented by the sovereign (Hobbes 211). Anyway because the power of the sovereign is indivisible and absolute, his government becomes arbitrarily and egoist by the time. In sum, Thomas Hobbes's theories are supporters of totalitarianism and his ideas do not support liberalism (Skinner 268).

Hobbes believes humans are naturally "going through the motions" of survival, "controlled by self-interested desires for self-preservation and indulgence" (Hobbes 60). As while Hobbesian men are self-interested and they mainly concerned with their own well-being and security as stated by Katelyn Wilkins it does not mean that they care for nothing but their own self-preservation. 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" (Wilkins 85). Conflict comes from the 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 70). So it is incorrect to claim that Hobbes advocates egoism if egoism is defined as that "men never act in order to benefit others, or because they believe a certain course of action to be morally right" (Gert 505). As Bernard Gert helpfully indicates:

To say only that most actions of most men are motivated by self-interest presents no philosophical problems, though it states a pessimistic view of human nature which may not be justified by the facts ... It is the claim that all actions of all men are

motivated entirely by self-interest that is philosophically interesting (Gert 505).

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 202). 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" (Wilkins 83). We should consider this that Thomas Hobbes was living during the age of reason and that's why he puts an emphasis of the matter of reason. 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" (Wilkins 87). 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 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. 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. (the matter of individualism) This belief forms the roots for the famous idea that government is created by the consent of the governed. "Liberal governments today, especially in the United States, use this idea as a stepping stone to create their own constitutions" (Wilkins 86). Hobbes has a strong sense of liberty in his writing. He defines liberty as the "absence of external impediments of motion" (Hobbes 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 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”(Wilkins 87). 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 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. According to Steven.B.Smith in his film documentary about the state of sovereignty, The purpose of the sovereign is really to safeguard and regulate this for the individuals so that it becomes consistence with the rights of others and again not an open war against all. According to B.Smith here the significance is the priority Hobbes gives to rights over duties this in many ways arguably makes him a founding father of modern liberalism. Hobbes refers to the sovereign as a mortal god and this is his answer to the problems of the state of nature, the condition of “life being solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbs 70).

It is only a creation of a sovereign or an absolute power that putting an end to the condition of uncertainty, anxiety and unrest which was totally misinterpreted by Hobbism.Hobbes Describes sovereign as an “artificial person in which he means the sovereign is the creation of a contract or covenant that brought this artificial man into being” (Hobbes 87-9). Sovereign is not existed by nature but rather is the product of art or science. He is a production of the people. This sovereign commands all of the power in the contract in order to have more power than its subordinates and maintain peace and security. 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 98).

But the question is that why Hobbes talked about sovereignty? What were the reasons for the need of the state of sovereignty? According to Simon Schama in his film documentary about Civil war, one of the major events not only in Thomas Hobbes s’ life period but also in the England of the 17thc was the English Civil War. The English Civil War started in 1642 and it changed the structure of the English government forever. Actually this Civil War had many causes but the personality of Charles I who had been executed publicly in 1649 was one of its main reasons. Before his execution and also during the period of the reign of his father James I, England was not in an acceptable condition.The statue of Monarchy had started to decline under the reign of James I who believed in the “divine rights of the kings”.Till this death he had many problems with parliament regarding money and economical issues.After his death,his son (Charles I) also had more serious problems with the parliament and that ‘s why he caused Civil War to happen and then his own execution by the strict puritan military leader, Oliver Cromwell.It was during the 1640s, the period initiated the great Civil War in England and the execution of Charles I that Hobbes left the England to France with many royal and aristocratic families.It was clear for him that parliament was going to turn against Charles I. The Leviathan had been composed in the midst of The English Civil War.Hobbes was deeply distressed by the outbreak of war and that ‘s one of the main reasons for spending a great dial of time reflecting on causes of war and political disorders.The theme of fear was always with Hobbes during his life as he himself recounted that: “Fear and I were born twins together” (Hobbes 55). That ‘s why he regards the state of nature as the state of war.It ‘s a condition of maximum insecurity.The man of 17thc was actually encountered with the ruin of intellect because of the confusion of Christian philosophy and the classical pagan ideas from Greek and Rome. Thomas Hobbes wanted to brought this man out of this chaos unconscious and the loss of

identity and reality. Hobbes wanted to reemphasize the reality of the human being. Although, Hobbes is widely taken to be a defender of monarchical absolutism, he displays a kind of neutrality over actually what form the sovereign should take. Among the power, the sovereign he insists can control over our laws concerning "property, foreign policy, rules of justice concerning life and death (criminal law) and the right to decide what books or ideas should be taught (the right of censorship)" (Wilkins 94). The sovereign is not only the interpreter of the rules but also the maker of the rules and that's why he can never act unjustly. Because the sovereign is a source of law and the rules of justice, therefore Hobbes concludes that he can never act unjustly. Here Hobbes distinguishes between a just law and a good law. All the laws by definition are just laws but it doesn't follow that all laws are good. The good law is needed for the good of the people. The purpose of law Hobbes maintains is not to control but to facilitate.

For the use of laws (which are but rules authorized) is not to bind the people from all voluntary actions, but to direct and keep them in such a motion as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires, rashness, or indiscretion; as hedges are set, not to stop travellers, but to keep them in the way (Hobbes 311).

and again Hobbes maintains that "Unnecessary laws are not good laws" (Hobbes 309).

But the power to control for Hobbes also applies to the matters of opinions. According to Hobbes in Leviathan as he says "the actions of man proceed from their opinions, and the well governing of opinions consisteth the well governing of men's actions in order to their peace and concord (155-156).

So if you are going to be governed or regulate human behavior, we have to begin by regulating opinions. Following professor B. Smith in his summaries, Hobbes believes that the sovereign has the right to decide what opinions, what books and what ideas are conducive to peace and which one's aim is to stir up to war and discontent. This idea of Hobbes is directed into an important institution which is university. Hobbes, along with subsequent

theorists, seems to take a different 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 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. Also Hobbes distinguishes the liberty of the ancients (as themselves believe) and the liberty of the moderns. The ancient's liberty in other words was not just a property of the individual, it was an attribute of a regime of which one was remembered.

The Athenians and Romans were free; that is, free Commonwealths: not that any particular men had the liberty to resist their own representative, but that their representative had the liberty to resist, or invade, other people (Hobbes 189).

Hobbes in a better sense not only criticized the foundations, motivational and psychological foundations of ancients' theory of politics in human nature but also he blamed the influences of ancients for much of the Civil conflicts of his age especially regarding Aristotle. He sees Aristotle as the second great cause of the Civil War. Aristotle who was increasingly embraced by Civil republicans in England of his time had been brought up according to Hobbes, on Aristotle's teaching

that" man by nature is a political animal" (Aristotle 57). This was again a thesis of classic republicans according to which we only became fully human when we are engaged in political life and ruling ourselves by laws of our own making. Aristotle was concerned with Ideas about self-government and ideas about direct democracy. Hobbes regards this as an important cause for the recent Civil War and the killing of Charles I.

And as to rebellion in particular against monarchy, one of the most frequent causes of it is the reading of the books of policy and histories of the ancient Greeks and Romans; from which young men, and all others that are unprovided of the antidote of solid reason (Hobbes 291).

And Hobbes continues :

and imagine their great prosperity not to have proceeded from the emulation of particular men, but from the virtue of their popular form of government not considering the frequent seditions and civil wars produced by the imperfection of their policy. From the reading, I say, of such books, men have undertaken to kill their kings, because the Greek and Latin writers in their books and discourses of policy make it lawful and laudable for any man so to do, provided before he do it he call him tyrant. For they say not regicide, that is, killing of a king, but tyrannicide, that is, killing of a tyrant, is lawful (Hobbes 291).

the sovereign for Hobbes is not a people ruling directly in their collective capacity. the sovereign for Hobbes is an artificially reconstructed will of the people in the person of their representative. The sovereign 's main goal is to provide the condition in which people feel secured. The sovereign representative acts like a filter for wills and passions of the people. He or she is not a direct expression of my will or your will but rather is an abstraction from my natural desire to rule myself. Instead of seeking to participate directly in political rule, Hobbes wants us to be away from politics by agreeing to be ruled, by this artificial man or representative that he gives the name of the sovereign.

That 's Hobbes 's views regarding the reading of Aristotle and ancients and the attention Hobbes gives for the change of a dominant idea or belief during his age. Hobbesian sovereign aims for equal liberty. Hobbes 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, arises equality of hope in the attaining of our ends" (Hobbes 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.

Seeing then the benefit that everyone receiveth thereby is the enjoyment is the enjoyment of life, which is equally dear to poor and rich, the debt which a poor man oweth them that defend his life is the same which a rich man oweth for the defence of his; saving that the rich, who have the service of the poor, may be debtors not only for their own persons, but for many more. Which considered, the equality of imposition consisteth rather in the equality of that which is consumed, than of the riches of the persons that consume the same (Hobbes 307-308).

Far from constructing an arbitrary tyrant, Hobbes provides a much more subtle account of the scope and constraints of sovereignty than Hobbism acknowledges. He even sets some limits on the legitimate power of the sovereign. He takes the justice and the rule of law very seriously. While the Hobbesian sovereign's authority is, by definition, indivisible and absolute, he or she is not allowed to rule arbitrarily. On the contrary, Hobbes explicitly

confines the scope of sovereign authority within 'the end for which he [the sovereign] was trusted with the sovereign power, namely the procurement of the safety of the people, to which "he is obliged by the law of nature" (Hobbes 250). Since "by safety here is not meant a bare preservation, but also all other contentments of life, which every man by lawful industry, without danger or hurt to the commonwealth, shall acquire to himself" (Hobbes 219), a Hobbesian sovereign is required to be equitable. Specifically speaking, he must administer justice equally 'to all degrees of people' so as the great may have no greater hope of impunity when they do violence, dishonour, or any injury to the meaner sort, than when one of these does the like to one of them" (Hobbes 226). As B. Smith remarks: "equal justice Hobbes tells us requires equal taxation policy and it seems to be proposing a kind of consumption tax so that the rich who consume more would have to pay their fair share so those who are unable to for themselves shouldn't be forced in the society.

From this equality of ability arises equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavour to destroy or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass that where an invader hath no more to fear than another man's single power, if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united to dispossess and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another (Hobbes 108).

### Conclusion

As discussed in this essay Hobbesism has totally a negative and false interpretation of Thomas Hobbes's philosophy regarding his law of nature and sovereignty. Undoubtedly, Thomas Hobbes is a godfather of modern liberalism because of his emphasis on individuality, opinion changing

and equality. In a case of individuality because 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. This means that the individual comes before the society or government. In other words, the parts come before the whole and this belief forms the roots for the famous idea that government is created by the consent of the governed. Liberal governments today, especially in the United States, use this idea as a stepping stone to create their own constitutions. In a case of changing opinions because Thomas Hobbes took one of the important institutions of the 17thc which was under the philosophical teachings of ancients and Aristotle especially about the ideas of self-government and direct or participatory democracy under the question and he totally developed new theories. His last idea about equality idea about equality rights for all the different classes of people and he maintained that because the sovereign is the source of law and justice rich people can never misuse the social properties and the rights of poor individuals. The last point which I want to maintain is that Hobbes like other writers during the 17thc wanted to change the ruined intellect of the people who were under the influence of both Christian philosophy and classical pagan ideas. He wanted to find an origin and base for the thoughts of the 17thc man who was already experiencing the Civil War which was rooted in the arbitrary and corrupted deeds of the court and the kings and the reformed Christianity.

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