Thomas Hobbes and the Social Contract: Promoting Governmental Tyranny

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Abstract
This paper examines Thomas Hobbes’s social contract theory, arguing for the claim that the English philosopher, in one way or another, promotes a tyrannical form of government. This study has been conducted following a brief examination of similar research studies, notably those that can be viewed as criticism of the Hobbesian social contract. Building on previous literature, and providing arguments that follow through the claim made, has paved the way for some conclusions. Hobbes, according to this study, is guilty of the claim we made against him, especially after careful consideration of the historical context of his writings, and a brief analysis of his idea of absolute authority, as well as his state of nature.

Keywords: Hobbes; social contract; absolute authority; state of nature; tyranny; government.

Introduction
The social contract theory remains relevant in contemporary politics. One might argue that −taking into account the political turmoil that is taking place in the world− even people who have no interest in politics and (or) more specifically political philosophy are now overwhelmed with an insisting curiosity about the nature and source of political authority and legitimacy. Thomas Hobbes, one of the most influential philosophers of the 17th century England, puts forward a compelling social contract theory.
In his book, the Leviathan (1651), Hobbes theorizes for a social contract that partially stems from what he terms the state of nature. Hobbes believes that the state of nature is a state of war of all against all; it is a state similar to what we know as civil war. Hobbes’s wit of expression comes into play as, in Leviathan, he adopts the Latin phrase “Homo homini lupus”1 and uses it in reference to human nature. Hobbes thus addresses his social contract theory from a rather depressive view of human nature and the state of nature alike, resulting in what I believe to be a totalitarian form of government− I am to argue that Hobbes’s social contract lays the ground for a totalitarian regime under which political authority becomes tyrannical and its legitimacy becomes nonexistent.
One important ramification of the Hobbesian social contract theory is that it comes “as a justification for binding men with the chains of an unlimited authority”2. In fact, it is a blatant observation one can hardly escape in Hobbes that he preaches for absolute obedience to the sovereignty, justified only on a theoretical ground− the state of nature. Amongst the critics of Hobbes, one may mention Rousseau. The French enlightenment philosopher adopts a different view of the state of nature; he believes it to be a state of freedom and equality. On this basis, the whole argument put forward by Hobbes becomes quite shaky,

1 Taken from Leviathan, the Latin sentence can be translated into the following: the human is the human's wolf (philosophy dictionary of arguments.
especially if one were to believe, as many philosophers suggest, that Hobbes’s view of human nature—that is, human beings are driven solely by self-interest and would do anything and everything in pursuit of their own good—is quite overly pessimistic.

There are, of course, others philosophers and scholars who adopt a critical stance on the Hobbesian social contract. To name but a few, one may refer to the feminist argument that the Hobbesian agent is characteristic of men only, and takes not into account the female gender as part of society. Other critics of Thomas Hobbes particularly hold him accountable for the idea of absolute authority of the government—or the sovereignty.

There are in fact abundant criticisms levelled against Thomas Hobbes and his social contract theory. Therefore, as I have mentioned earlier, this study is to join those who criticize the Hobbesian social contract theory because it promotes tyranny and results in totalitarian regimes. As for the outline of the paper, I intend to support this thesis following three sections in which evidence and arguments are to be provided. The first section, entitled **Hobbes and the historical context**, is devoted to a critical review of the historical context in which Hobbes wrote the *Leviathan*, addressing significant motivations that resulted in the production of his social contract theory. The second section, entitled **Hobbes and the state of nature**, examines the pivotal Hobbesian notion of the state of nature, questioning the possibility of an overly pessimist thinking. The third and final section, entitled **Hobbes and the promotion of tyranny**, is of paramount importance for it helps us form a final judgment as to whether or not there is risk for tyranny and totalitarianism when adopting the Hobbesian model of government.

1. **Hobbes and the historical context**

The historical context in which Hobbes wrote *The Leviathan (1651)* is what this section concerns itself with. The need for this section is evident, for I believe that, Hobbes’s ideas and theories have been influenced by many factors—including the political and social context at the time. To begin with, it is rudimentary to highlight the life and times of the English philosopher.

1.1 Life and times.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is considered the father of English political philosophy. His life and times have indeed played a role in making him what he turned out to be. Alongside the civil wars taking place in England at the time—perhaps the most important event that has affected Hobbesian political philosophy—we can also speak of his exposure to the nobility class and to the royal family as an important factor in his making. What makes Hobbes’s political life special, in my opinion, is his exposure to different governmental rules. Having been contemporary to the Civil Wars of 1642-46 and 1648-51, Hobbes had formed a good understanding of the monarchical and republican governments, despite having exiled himself to France at the time.

The military division of England at the time meant that the socio-political sphere witnessed a mode of life so much similar to that described in Hobbes’s state of nature (I will elaborate on this in another section). Hobbes could have inspired his state of nature from what was visible to him, and in that case, one might wonder as to whether or not 17th and 18th century England is representative of all times and places.

In fact, Steinberg argues, “Hobbes's political ideas were obsessed with the English civil wars and can only be understood in that context. Steinberg seems to mean this in the strongest sense possible, not just

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3 The whole section has been inspired by Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. [https://iep.utm.edu/](https://iep.utm.edu/) Accessed 2 Mar. 2024.

about the origination of Hobbes's ideas, but also about their validity”. A conclusion we can reach from this is that Hobbes’s view of the world was limited to a politically divided England, and that his social contract theory is only representative of that particular context. One might conclude that the Hobbesian social contract is a generalization stemming from a bad place, and not a necessarily always-actual one. Perhaps politically divided England was in dire need for a totalitarian regime that would save it from its political turmoil, but is that true by extension to other places of the world? While Hobbes’s writings are numerous, and perhaps equally important, I focus in this study on the Leviathan for it introduces Hobbes’s social contract. Commenting on the Leviathan, scholars and philosophers concerned with political philosophy had many arguments to level against Hobbes. Particularly, the focus will be on criticism that is directed towards the Hobbesian concept of absolute authority.

1.2 The Leviathan and absolute authority.

Written in France, Hobbes's Leviathan (1952) has evoked intense reactions from its audience. It is widely regarded as a pinnacle of English political philosophy, shaping the essence of modern politics more than any other work. From the late 17th century to the early 20th century, prominent political theorists have used it as a benchmark to gauge their own contributions to the field. However, the work has received criticism on many fronts, especially regarding the idea that Hobbes might have fallen into a trap he would not have wanted to fall into: promoting a totalitarian despotic form of government.

To better understand that, however, I resort to Thomas’s article entitled “Some Contemporary Critics of Thomas Hobbes”⁶. Commenting on the Leviathan, he finds that the social contract theory included in the Leviathan plays the role of “binding men with the chains of an unlimited authority”. Of course, there are many variables to consider when studying the Hobbesian social contract, including absolute authority. In that, Hobbes fails to justify the reasons that would make the sovereignty worthy or justified in having absolute authority, especially considering his refusal of the divine connection that allegedly links kings with God⁷. To think that Hobbes refuses this notion, and holds that even the interpretation of scriptures is the job of the sovereignty alone is quite interesting in that it leads us to agree with Thomas. Central to Hobbes’s the Leviathan is, thus, the idea of absolute authority. Although those supportive of Hobbes may conclude that he was a realist and that the world was and is in need of an authoritative source that establishes peace and maintains it—which is apparently and naturally true indeed— but to preach for a totalitarian regime is quite contradictive of that purpose in essence. However, one way in which Hobbes defends this total authority of the sovereignty is through the hypothetical state of nature; a state he believes to be a state of war of all against all. With that in mind, Hobbes could not escape criticism, even for his state of nature. That is something I will talk about right after a concluding remark on this section.

1.3 Concluding remark.

To conclude, I have to put forward an argument that is central to this paper. The fact that Thomas Hobbes supports total authority of the sovereignty is critical in forming a judgment regarding his political philosophy and whether it promotes tyranny. While it is understandable that the state of nature, as Hobbes imagines it, could be unfavorable for its inhabitants, it is also understandable that being under a totalitarian

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regime is not the best human beings can hope for. Historically speaking, there is evidence\textsuperscript{8} of totalitarian regimes being run in ways so despotic one may even prefer to live in the ugly Hobbesian state of nature.

Hobbes and the state of nature
The inclusion of this section is particularly significant for it seeks to highlight the idea that Hobbes’s view on Human nature and the state of nature is not necessarily valid, and that many writers in fields of anthropology, history, and political philosophy disregard such a view. Proving that Hobbes’s state of nature is false—false in that prepolitical societies are not as anarchical and war-oriented as Hobbes imagines—will lead us to conclude that a totalitarian regime and a despotic one at that, is not the best human beings can hope for.

In his book "Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men" (1755), Rousseau puts forward a view on human nature that contrasts Hobbes’s. He argues that Humans are naturally peaceful and egalitarian, and inequality and conflict arise because of societal progress and the introduction of private property. Political philosopher John Locke, in his seminal work "Second Treatise of Government" (1689), presents another contrasting viewpoint. He argues for a pre-societal "state of nature" where individuals possess inherent and inalienable natural rights, most notably life, liberty, and property. These rights predate government and are not bestowed by any authority. While Locke acknowledges the potential for conflict in the state of nature, he believes that individuals have the capacity for reason and moral judgment, which can guide them towards cooperation and the establishment of civil society\textsuperscript{9}. Anthropologically speaking, contemporary studies have been conducted on hunter-gatherer societies in order to elicit conclusions regarding human nature and human behavior in prepolitical societies. Marshall Sahlins’s "Stone Age Economics" (1972) and Richard Lee’s "The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society" (1979) have highlighted the cooperative and egalitarian nature of many pre-state societies\textsuperscript{10}. The results appear to be challenging the Hobbesian portrayal of the state of nature as inherently chaotic and conflict-ridden.

The writer disagrees with Hobbes on the concept of the state of nature. It could be true that anarchy may mark its appearance in non-political societies, but the Hobbesian argument that life under a corrupt sovereignty is better than life in the state of nature is one I find fault with. According to the aforementioned counterarguments, one may conclude that life is better in that state of nature than it is under a corrupt sovereignty. The Hobbesian state of nature does in fact justify the severity with which Hobbes supports a totalitarian regime, but when viewed from different perspectives, it fails to be convincing.

The literature on the concept of the state of nature prompts us to wonder as to what Hobbes intended when coming up with such a bleak view. While it could be difficult to pin down his intentions, we can claim that the politically divided England and its chaotic state pushed Hobbes to feel the need for this authoritative power that rules as it wishes but also maintains order. However, the fact that Hobbes failed to see the risk of totalitarianism and despotism in his model of government is surprising to say the least. Following this is the last section of the paper; it encompasses the writer’s arguments in support of his claim that Hobbes has, in one way or another, promoted a totalitarian despotic form of government.

\textsuperscript{8} Totalitarian regimes throughout history have proven to cause a lot of oppression to their subjects (e.g. Stalin, Hitler...)


Hobbes and the promotion of tyranny

In this final section, I intend to conclude with what I consider to be the most paramount part of the study: arguments in support of the aforementioned claim that Hobbes’s social contract promotes a tyrannical form of government.

My main concern in his paper has to be by and large the practical implications of Hobbes’s social contract theory. I believe that, when applied, the Hobbesian form of government promotes tyranny on part of the sovereignty. This tyranny is one we can easily trace throughout Hobbes’s theory. First, it can be traced in his concept of absolute authority, which he fails to justify on a moral basis\(^\text{11}\). To maintain peace and order, and to avoid a state of anarchy, of course, it is plausible for a government to have a certain degree of power upon its subjects; however, Hobbes provides no limitation to this power, which makes one question his intentions in writing the *Leviathan*. It is, thus, a central argument of mine that there must be certain limits to this authority; otherwise, one is to become, no doubt, skeptical about the Hobbesian form of government on the grounds that it can abuse the power assigned to it, while it is not to be held accountable for the consequences of such abuse, for to Hobbes’s thinking, the sovereignty holds justice and is justice. In an article on Hobbes’s political philosophy, Charles Tarlton writes,

Tyranny, as Locke saw it nearly thirty years after the writing of *Leviathan*, ‘is the exercise of Power beyond Right, which no Body can have a Right to’. What that amounted to, in negative terms (here merely reversing Locke's requirements 'to understand Political Power right'),\(^\text{15}\) was an absolute authority not bounded by consent, law, individual rights (especially the right of property), or the public good. These four boundary criteria, plus the topics of religion and philosophy, together with an examination of the ways in which Hobbes discredited and disregarded them, will help us appreciate the absolutist and despotic character of the political power Hobbes had designed.\(^\text{12}\)

Moreover, one can argue that tyranny makes its appearance in the *Leviathan* as Hobbes addresses questions regarding dissent\(^\text{13}\). The fact that the philosopher advocates for a strict suppression of dissent expression raises a plethora of questions. Subjects of a government must indeed be equipped with the right to express dissatisfaction with the sociopolitical conditions, and at that, the government must act accordingly. However, this suppression is one I believe serves the benefit of the sovereignty, as it sees the subjects unable to express dissent shall they face one or more forms of oppression—which is by no means a thing of the imagination.

Hobbes holds that a sovereignty can be corrupt, but he views this as a necessary trade-off for preventing the chaos of the state of nature. Once again, it is quite uncertain whether the state of nature is that dangerous, for we have argued otherwise. Additionally, one remains puzzled as to what purpose such a government should serve should it govern upon a state that is not as chaotic as was England during Hobbes’s time. A sovereignty that knows no limit to power faces the danger of transgressing against its people, especially if it were, as Hobbes favors, a monarchy; this is because a monarch is faced by his human nature, which according to Hobbes is one of self-centeredness.

Conclusion

This paper has been written with the intention of putting into paper some of the impressions that reading

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about Hobbes left upon the writer; they are impressions of despotism and tyranny. It is no doubt crucial, for the sake of maintaining peace, that a government has power over its subjects. But this power, viewed from a Hobbesian point of view, is tyrannical.

Hobbes life and times, although not wholly covered in this paper, have had the lion’s share when it comes to the influences that made of Hobbes the philosopher he was. The politics of the time, the division of England, and its civil wars have, no doubt, played a key role in the production of the Hobbesian social contract. This is something we believe can be traced in his state of nature.

One must, however, look at the Hobbesian social contract from the extremist view it adopts. To do that, one must acknowledge that the likelihood of civil wars to take place is quite thin, and in that Hobbes is correct; however, one must also acknowledge that the absence of civil wars does not necessarily mean a quality life and the best possible life for the governed. Additionally, it becomes rather a right of the people to engage in civil wars against their rulers, in order to seek the very life conditions that the government could provide, but did not. Hobbes eliminates that possibility, and ensures the government carries on its corruption, while its people are grateful not to live in the state of nature, ruling out any possibility of feeling dissatisfaction—or rather acting on their dissatisfaction—towards their “protectors” from such a horrible state.

Works cited