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ABSTRACT

THOMAS HOBBS ON INEQUALITY, POVERTY AND SEDITION: A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BLUEPRINT FOR THE WELFARE STATE

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Thomas Hobbes is often portrayed as a proponent of an absolutist government ruled only through fear of punishment. This portrayal overlooks the concern Hobbes had for the safety and security of the citizens of the commonwealth. Inequality and poverty were major concerns for Hobbes as they serve as pathways to sedition and the dissolution of the commonwealth. This essay emphasizes Hobbes's concerns with respect to inequality and poverty. Hobbes's laws of nature provide a blueprint for a welfare state that addresses these issues. The sovereign is obliged to follow the laws of nature and therefore the blueprint for the welfare state.

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THOMAS HOBBS ON INEQUALITY, POVERTY AND SEDITION: A SEVENTEENTH-
CENTURY BLUEPRINT FOR THE WELFARE STATE

BY

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Andrea Radasanu

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of Mary Lou Flamand

(1928-2017)

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INTRODUCTION

The works of Thomas Hobbes are the basis for C. B. Macpherson's concept of possessive individualism. Macpherson's seminal work argues man is the sole proprietor of his person and exists in a purely economic relationship with people in society. Man owes little to society and politics is simply the means of protecting one's own gains.¹ Macpherson notes the bourgeois mentality of the Hobbesian subjects at the dawn of capitalism in England. C. B. Macpherson, in his introduction to *Leviathan*, remarks on the role of the sovereign in Hobbes's commonwealth. Macpherson notes the importance of the sovereign in procuring the safety of the people. Safety for Hobbes is more than the bare preservation of one's life. Macpherson's analysis of Hobbes is strictly individualistic and based on what he notes as Hobbes's bourgeois political theory. Regarding the role of the sovereign in Hobbesian society Macpherson writes "there is no thought here of a Welfare State. It is thoroughly individualist."² This portrayal overlooks the concern Hobbes had for the safety and security of the citizens of the commonwealth. Inequality and poverty were major concerns for Hobbes as they serve as pathways to sedition and the dissolution of the commonwealth. I intend to show life was not merely subsistence survival but rather a fulfilling life where one can live happily and safely in their pursuits. Hobbesian subjects

¹ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962)

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. C.B. Macpherson (London: Penguin, 2003) 48.

leave the state of nature to live a commodious life, not simply to live under the yoke of an absolutist dictator. The continued relevance of Hobbesian thought to the political debate demonstrates his lasting impact on political philosophy.

I posit that the work of Thomas Hobbes can justify a social welfare state that provides for those of the commonwealth. Analyzing the writing of Hobbes, I will argue that the sovereign has a duty to give not just the bare minimum protections but to provide a prosperous, comfortable lifestyle for its subjects. The sovereign has few expressly written duties for which they are responsible. The first and most important of these duties is the assurance of peace and safety within the commonwealth. However, reading the text of *De Cive* and *Leviathan* one finds a blueprint for providing for the least among the commonwealth. The reason for the sovereign to support the subjects is twofold. First, providing for the subjects ensures the strongest and best possible defense against other sovereigns on the international stage. Secondly, providing for the weakest among the commonwealth through the taxation of consumption would eliminate the causes for sedition that Hobbes describes in *De Cive*. A robust social welfare system would provide for the continued protection of the subjects, the commonwealth and, ultimately, the sovereign. I argue right reason dictates that the sovereign must act in this manner, providing security within the commonwealth and simultaneously ensuring protection from outside threats.

This work will examine these ideas in the following sections. The first section offers an examination of the state of nature described by Hobbes in *De Cive* and *Leviathan*. The state of nature for Hobbes is the fundamental building block for the social contract that forms the commonwealth and therefore dictates the actions of the sovereign and the members of the commonwealth. Understanding the state of nature in Hobbes's mind is crucial to the argument of

this work. The conception of the state of nature allows Hobbes to define equality, property, and duty that are fundamental to the formation of the commonwealth. First, this section will examine the idea of inequality in the commonwealth and how inequality is the result of the social contract. After establishing equality in the state of nature, the duties of the subjects to the sovereign are examined. The subjects of the commonwealth are bound by simple obedience to the sovereign. The process of forming the commonwealth establishes the duty of the subjects to the sovereign. The subjects enter the contract with one another and not the sovereign. The sovereign's duty is to the commonwealth and not the subjects within. Finally, the discussion of property rights is critical to the ideas of the state of nature as well as the formation of the commonwealth. The right to property is established by the sovereign. The concept of private property is one that limits the interference in one's property from other subjects. The sovereign cannot be restricted from the property of the subjects in the commonwealth since the sovereign retains rights to all within the commonwealth.³

Building on the ideas of the state of nature, property rights and duties of the subjects, the second section of the work shows the duty the sovereign has in providing for more than the basic survival of the subjects. The laws of nature that come out of the state of nature serve as a guide for sovereign. The sovereign is bound to provide for the peace and security of the commonwealth as the first law of nature is to seek peace. To achieve this peace the sovereign must aim at more than the bare existence of the people within the commonwealth. To ignore inequality and poverty would

³Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 85.

be a dereliction of duty on the sovereign's part. The laws of nature provide a framework for an evolving welfare state that addresses both inequality and poverty.

The third section of the paper details the four causes of sedition in the commonwealth. I show how providing for the subjects and the use of taxation eliminate the internal threats of poverty and massive inequality within the commonwealth. Through the provision of welfare for the subjects the sovereign ensures the continued safety and prosperity of the commonwealth.

Finally, I conclude by explaining how the laws of nature oblige the sovereign to maintain a welfare state that is responsive to the needs of the commonwealth. Hobbes's prescriptions for the well-being of the commonwealth are not bound to the seventeenth century. Hobbes's ideas for preserving the peace and safety of the commonwealth are expressed in a manner that allows for adaption in the means of delivery. The use of the terms safety, peace, and prosperity in describing the duties of the sovereign allow the sovereign to adapt the forms of assistance provided to the commonwealth's well-being. The use of a social welfare program allows the sovereign to avoid sedition in the commonwealth and a return to a state of nature from the safety of the commonwealth.

STATE OF NATURE

Hobbes's state of nature serves as the foundation of his political theory. It is in the state of nature where man does not have a common power to overawe that man's true nature comes to sight. Hobbes's definitional method allows him to imagine a theoretical time before man forms a commonwealth. The state of nature is the basis of all Hobbesian thought on the need of a strong sovereign that provides for the subjects of the commonwealth. Preventing a return to the state of

nature is the *raison d'être* for the Hobbesian sovereign. As Hobbes famously writes, man's life in the state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" with a "continual fear and danger of violent death."⁴ Self-preservation is the motivating factor in the state of nature. The state of nature is Hobbes's basis for defining equality, property and duty in the commonwealth.

In the state of nature, man enjoys equality with all others. Hobbes writes as follows: "Nature hath made men so equal in the facilities of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or quicker of mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another man not pretend as well as he."⁵ Man is more or less equal in body and in mind, with no man enjoying a benefit in either that would lead to great inequality in the state of nature. Even the strongest and smartest individual needs rest. In addition to this equality of body and mind, man shares common rights to everything equally as well. From this condition of equality where "every man has a right to everything" including "one another's body" that a state of war appears.⁶ Hobbes notes the three principle causes of quarrel in the state of nature are competition for the resources to sustain life, diffidence or fear of others, and glory. Men invade others in the state of nature for three reasons: gain, safety, and glory. When accounting for the causes of quarrel amongst men the reasons for invasion are clearly the result of the insecurity in the state of nature.

⁴Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) pg. 76 All later references to *Leviathan* will be to the Curley edition.

⁵ *Leviathan* pg. 74

⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 80.

Man's common right to everything in the state of nature relates to the notion of property as well. There is no individual property in the state of nature as there is no means to enforce the idea of individual ownership. Property is the result of civil law which in the state of nature is noticeably absent. Civil law is the construct of the sovereign in the commonwealth. "It is consequent also to the same condition (state of nature) that there be no propriety, no dominion, no *mine* and *thine* distinct, but only that to be every man's that he can get, and for so long as he can keep it."⁷ In the absence of a common power, there is no individual right to anything. The state of war in the state of nature is not conducive to industry. Hobbes laments this loss: "In such a condition there is not place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, no culture of the earth, no navigation, not use of the commodities that may be imported by the sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society..."⁸ In nature man has no means to protect his gains from others. Notions of mine and thine do not exist in the state of nature. Private property and the protections that this affords the individual does not come into being until the formation of the commonwealth under the auspices of the sovereign. This insecurity leads to a lack of "all the comforts and amenities of life which peace and society afford."⁹

The combination of a shared right to everything in common and the lack of property in the state of nature lead to the conclusion that there is no conception of just and unjust. Man is his own judge of his actions in the state of nature. Hobbes's state of nature is a "war of every man

⁷ Ibid., pg. 78.

⁸ Leviathan pg. 76.

⁹ De Cive pg. 30.

against every man” where there is no place for “notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice.”¹⁰The ideas of good, evil, just and unjust are social constructs that are established once man leaves the state of nature. Hobbes succinctly expresses this in his comments on objections to *De Cive* writing:

This must be understood as meaning nothing that one does in a purely natural state is wrong against anyone, at least against any man... For injustice against men presupposes Human Laws, and there are none in the natural state... I will compress the argument and enable it to be taken in at a glance. Each man has a right to self-preservation; therefore, he also has the right to use every means necessary to that end. The necessary means are those that he shall judge to be so himself. He therefore has the right to do and to possess everything that he shall judge necessary to his self-preservation. In the judgement of the person actually doing it, what is done is rightly done, even if it is a wrong, and so is rightly done.¹¹

The state of nature is the foundation upon which Hobbes builds his argument for the actions of man. According to the fundamental law of nature -to seek peace – man must leave the state of nature. Hobbes writes the following on leaving the state of nature in *Leviathan*: “The passions that incline men to peace are fear of death, desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living, and a hope by their industry to obtain them.”¹² Hobbes notes reason suggests the formation of the commonwealth to satisfy the needs of man. The formation of the commonwealth brings the idea of duty as “obligation begins where liberty ends.”¹³

Duty in Hobbesian thought is important to untangle in order to understand the argument in this paper. It is from the state of nature that duty arises. As previously noted, in the state of nature all men are equal and have no obligation or duty to one another. However, the formation

¹⁰ *Leviathan* pg. 78.

¹¹ *De Cive* pg. 28.

¹² *Leviathan* pg. 78.

¹³ *De Cive* pg. 36.

of the commonwealth – or the social contract - is the beginning of duty for both the subjects and the sovereign. The obligations are different for the two entities. Hobbes is clear in his exposition of the duties of the subjects. In the state of nature individual rights are either renounced or transferred. Simple renouncement of right is when the individual does not care who benefits whereas the transferring of right intends the benefit of certain person or persons. When men either renounce or transfer their rights they are then “obliged or bound not to hinder those to whom the right is granted” and he “ought, and it is his duty, not to make void that voluntary act of his own.”¹⁴ For Hobbes, the mutual transfer of right is the basis for all contracts.¹⁵ Furthermore the establishment of the commonwealth through the social contract is a voluntary act which for Hobbes denotes a positive act of “some good to himself.”¹⁶ While the subjects of the commonwealth are duty-bound to the sovereign as a result of the transferring of rights, the limit of the transfer is preservation of one’s life. One cannot transfer away this fundamental right of nature: to ensure the continued existence of one’s life. Hobbes clearly marks this distinction when writing on the simple obedience one owes the sovereign. “The obligation to offer it (obedience) does not arise directly from the agreement by which we transferred every right to the commonwealth, but indirectly, i.e. from the fact that the right of Government would be meaningless with obedience, and consequently no commonwealth would have been formed at all.”¹⁷ Hobbes is clear when writing of the duty of the subjects to the sovereign, simple obedience. The subjects have not contracted with the sovereign directly but rather with every

¹⁴ Leviathan pg. 81.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 82.

¹⁶ Leviathan pg. 82.

¹⁷ De Cive. Pg.82.

other man when leaving the state of nature. The bonds of obligation are to the sovereign who establishes the commonwealth for the safety, security, and prosperity of the subjects within.

OBLIGATION OF THE SOVEREIGN

While not bound by contract to the people, Hobbes's sovereign is bound by the laws of nature to support the well-being of the people in the commonwealth. Hobbes is clear in regard to the lack of contractual duty between the subjects and sovereign. The subjects of the commonwealth enter into contract with one another and not with the sovereign. The sovereign remains in the state of nature and retains the subsequent rights that remaining in nature entails. However, Hobbes does write of the obligations of the sovereign in terms of providing for the safety of the people. The sovereign is bound by the laws of nature to provide for the safety of the commonwealth. Hobbes's sovereign owes an obligation to no one but himself to uphold and provide for the commonwealth. The laws of nature are the precepts deduced from the realities of the state of nature. Hobbes observes that man wants to live by these precepts but is unable to without a common power to enforce the laws. Hobbes opens the chapter entitled "Of the Office of the Sovereign Representative" as follows: "The office of the sovereign consisteth in the end for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely, the procuration of *the safety of the people*, to which he is obliged by the law of nature."¹⁸ Hobbes ties the duty of the sovereign to the laws of nature which he formulates in relation to the state of nature thought experiment earlier in the text. If the sovereign were to neglect his obligation to the commonwealth it would be a dereliction of his duty to provide for the people based on the laws of nature. While the sovereign is not in contract with

¹⁸ Leviathan pg. 219.

the subjects he is obligated to provide for the safety of the people. To understand the basis of the sovereign's power one must turn to the laws of nature set forth by Hobbes. It is these laws that bind the sovereign and set up the foundation for the social welfare program in a Hobbesian commonwealth. The sovereign is able to live by the laws of nature owing to the fact other men are not able to attack his gains in the same way the individual is left weak and vulnerable in the state of nature. Man desires to live by the laws of nature but it is the vainglorious amongst them that cause all men to live as if in war against all. The sovereign is not an individual but rather the ruler of a commonwealth. This allows enough protection in order to abide by the laws of nature when dealing with the commonwealth.

According to Hobbes a law of nature is “a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.”¹⁹ From this, at least in *Leviathan*, Hobbes deduces that the fundamental law of nature is to seek peace. In *De Cive* the first law of nature is “to seek peace when it can be had; when it cannot, to look for aid in war.”²⁰ Both texts show the importance of self-preservation in the law of nature and the foundation of the commonwealth with which the sovereign is bound to uphold. Peace is the root of all the later laws of nature, where Hobbes expands on the duties of the sovereign. Man relinquishes his right to everything in the state of nature when he enters into the contract that forms the commonwealth. Man does not do anything that is not for his own benefit and the mutual sacrifice of rights must be equal amongst all the subjects. As stated earlier the “voluntary” means good for oneself according

¹⁹ *Leviathan* pg. 79.

²⁰ *De Cive* pg. 34.

to Hobbes.²¹ In the case of natural inequalities in nature – whether it be with respect to strength, wit or possession – man enters the commonwealth as equal to all others and so is equal in ways that are politically relevant. Inequality is the result of the formation of the commonwealth and the introduction of civil law.²²

Inequality is something the sovereign must contend with in the commonwealth and the fifth law of nature provides the for the sovereign to deal with it. The fifth law of nature deals with complaisance in the commonwealth, namely that “every man strive to accommodate himself to the rest.”²³ Those who cannot abide by this law are to be cast aside like stones who take too much room in a wall. Hobbes notes the dangers of inequality in this section: “For seeing every man, not only by right, but also by necessity of nature, is supposed to endeavor all he can to obtain that which necessary for his conservation, he that shall oppose himself against it for things superfluous is guilty of war that there upon is to follow, and, therefore, doth that which is contrary to the fundamental law of nature, which commandeth to seek peace.”²⁴ The implications of this law are clear. Those who enjoy superfluous luxury while others struggle are inviting war within the commonwealth. Furthermore, the sovereign, by allowing such behavior, would be complicit in the dissolution of the commonwealth.

Further support for the welfare policies of the sovereign are present in the ninth and tenth laws of nature which deal with pride and arrogance respectively. As stated earlier, inequality in the commonwealth is the result of the civil laws.²⁵ Man will not enter into a commonwealth under

²¹ Leviathan pg. 82.

²² De Cive pg. 26.

²³ Leviathan pg. 95.

²⁴ Leviathan pgs. 95-96.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 96.

auspices that do not align with presumed equality. Hobbes writes, “If nature therefore have made men equal, that equality is to be acknowledged: or if nature have made men unequal, yet because men that think themselves equal will not enter into conditions of peace but upon equal terms, such equality must be admitted.”²⁶ Here Hobbes is acknowledging the possibility of natural inequality while at the same time dismissing the notion of founding a commonwealth based on natural inequalities. Man would not agree to live in a commonwealth established on unequal terms.

The tenth law of nature deals with arrogance and modesty. This law requires “that at the entrance into conditions of peace, no man require to reserve to himself any right which he is not content should be reserved to every one of the rest.”²⁷ Hobbes goes on to state men retain the “right to govern their own bodies, (right to) enjoy air, water, motion, ways to go place to place, and all things else without which man cannot live, or not live well.”²⁸ It is not mere survival that is guaranteed by entry into the commonwealth, but the right to living well is articulated in the laws of nature. The sovereign has the obligation to provide the means by which man can provide for himself with his own industry. This would call for the right to work, which in turn would require a right to land or to other means of production. The sovereign once again has an obligation to provide more than the bare necessities of living.

The eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth laws of nature explain equity, the use of things in common, and distribution by lot of things that cannot be enjoyed in common.²⁹ The idea of distributive and commutative justice come to the fore and give the sovereign immense powers

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 97.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 97.

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 97.

²⁹ Leviathan pg. 97-98.

over the commonwealth. Commutative justice involves the “barter, sale, purchase, borrowing, payment of loan, letting, hiring, and all other actions of mutually contracting parties...”³⁰

Distributive justice is concerned with “men’s dignity and desserts” and is done proportionally.

Distributive justice as proportional distribution amounts to equality of distribution. Hobbes

illustrates this by writing that “thousand pounds are to be given to a hundred men, and six

hundred to sixty, and four hundred to forty.”³¹ Distributive justice – the proportional distribution

of goods amongst men- is essential to the closing chapter of this work. Distributing goods that

can be divided amongst men equally eliminates the competition for resources that led to conflict

in the state of nature. The sovereign taking an active role in this aspect of society demonstrates

the depths to which Hobbes was concerned about quelling any notions of conflict over

distribution of resources. The commutative justice that allows men to barter, trade and sell at the

prices agreed upon by with one another shows the freedom that the Hobbesian sovereign allowed

subjects in the commonwealth. The combination of distributive and commutative justice allows

the sovereign to interject when inequality and resource scarcity could lead to sedition while at

the same time allowing the free movement of goods and people within the commonwealth.

Distribution of goods equally without regard to the needs of one over the other is fundamental to

the distribution of social services that prevent sedition in a commonwealth. A universal welfare

policy would eliminate the haves and have nots along with any formation of faction over

accusations of the misuse of funds by one group or another. Furthermore, the sovereign cannot

act in an unjust, or just, manner with the subjects of the commonwealth. This is due to the fact he

is not in contract with them and the subjects cannot enter into agreement with the sovereign. The

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 95.

³¹ De Cive pg. 46.

people contract with each other to leave the state of nature and not with the sovereign. The agreement is amongst the people and not with the sovereign. The idea of the sovereign holding the right to give to each what he believes to be just and allowing for the day to day market relations of commutative justice, or simple equality, of the subjects to continue in the commonwealth gives the sovereign immense powers to dictate welfare policies for the commonwealth.

This brings us back to the idea of safety in the commonwealth. By safety Hobbes means more than “bare preservation, but also all other contentment of life, which every man by lawful industry, without danger or hurt to the commonwealth, shall acquire to himself.”³²

CAUSES OF SEDITION

Hobbes writes of internal reasons for the dissolution of the commonwealth. Numbers, mutual trust, tools, and leaders are the indispensable components of the “hope of winning”³³ against the sovereign.³⁴ The first item needed to lead a revolt successfully is numbers. By numbers Hobbes means men to fight against the government and secure victory. Hobbes offers a solution to this problem. First, Hobbes writes that faction is like having an enemy within the commonwealth. Elimination of faction within the commonwealth is within the right of the sovereign and in line with the natural laws. Through provision of social goods ensuring no one is left in poverty a Hobbesian sovereign can eliminate the ability of faction to form within the commonwealth Economic well-being is the most effective means to ensuring the continued

³² Leviathan pg. 219.

³³ De Cive pg. 138.

³⁴ Ibid., pgs. 138-139.

safety and security of the commonwealth. While simply seizing lands, wealth and imprisonment of seditious people is also a means to securing the commonwealth this path can lead to further faction and sedition. Using a social welfare program would eliminate the majority of the causes of sedition without imposing the will of sovereign on the people directly. As Hobbes notes in *De Cive*, “those who are hurting in current conditions” are “glad for revolution.”³⁵ The provision of daily needs the sovereign can ensure the numbers do not build in favor of revolution. Additionally, keeping the subjects in right mind and body is necessary for the defense of the commonwealth.

Hobbes notes the need for the sovereign to prevent idleness within the commonwealth. Prevention of idleness has a double effect on the commonwealth. The first is to restrict the number of people who want revolution, while the second is the encouragement of the well-being of the people. Hobbes writes that those with “strong bodies... are forced to work.” And, to avoid the excuse of not finding work, “laws should be established that encourage all manner of arts (as navigation, agriculture, fishing, and all manner of manufacture that requires labour).”³⁶ Hobbes’s argument here is that the sovereign should encourage the proliferation of employment of the subjects of the commonwealth. The sovereign’s duty extends to a right to work which allows able-bodied people the ability to pursue the means to living well. The multitude of poor is an issue for the well-being of the commonwealth as well. Hobbes notes: “The multitude of poor (and yet strong) people still increasing, they are to be transplanted into countries not sufficiently inhabited... to court each little plot with art and labour.”³⁷ As stated earlier, those who are

³⁵ *De Cive*, pg. 138.

³⁶ *Leviathan* pg. 228.

³⁷ *Leviathan* pg. 229.

hurting in current conditions are ripe for revolution and by ensuring that they have nots find a means to be productive ensures continued safety within the commonwealth. By ensuring subjects of a commonwealth have an avenue to secure by their own industry it prevents the multitude of poor from rising against the sovereign while at the same time providing revenue and strength for the commonwealth itself. The active role of the sovereign is in line with his duty to preserve the peace and to prevent sedition within the commonwealth. The sovereign benefits are twofold: peace and capital accumulation for the state.

In *Leviathan*, we learn that the sovereign ought to go further than securing the means to industry among the citizens of the commonwealth. Hobbes's comments on charity may point the way to something like a public safety net: "And whereas many men, by accident inevitable, become unable to maintain themselves by their labour, they ought not to be left to the charity of private persons, but be provided for by the laws of the commonwealth."³⁸ Hobbes continues by way of outlining a duty of the sovereign to provide for those who are destitute: "For as it is uncharitableness in any man to neglect the impotent, so it is in the sovereign of a commonwealth to expose them to the hazard of such uncertain charity."³⁹ The insecurity that comes with private charity runs the risk of causing the dissolution of the commonwealth. Hobbes refers to the acts of justice and charity as the "virtues of peace."⁴⁰ The sovereign must provide charity for those in need as a means to preserving the peace. The evidence for this comes in the *Leviathan* where Hobbes argues the right of the destitute to steal. Hobbes writes as follows: "When a man is destitute of food or other thing necessary for his life and cannot preserve himself in any other way but some

³⁸ Ibid., pg. 228.

³⁹ Ibid., pg. 228.

⁴⁰ De Cive pg. 4.

fact against the law (as, if in a great famine he take the food by force or stealth which he cannot obtain for money nor charity, or in defence of his life snatch away another man's sword), he is totally excused."⁴¹ If a subject of the commonwealth finds themselves unable to preserve his life within the laws of the commonwealth they are thrust back into the state of nature. In the case of extreme necessity the subject is permitted "to steal, or take by force the goods of others" that the subject "ought to be maintained by the commonwealth".⁴² Leaving the destitute to the "uncertain charity of private persons" could lead to trouble for the commonwealth.⁴³ The subjects who cannot provide for themselves have the right of nature to steal from others, which causes the same insecurity for the other subjects of the commonwealth that is found in the state of nature. The sovereign's one obligation is the safety of the commonwealth and its people. By failing to provide for the necessities of life the sovereign is inviting sedition into the commonwealth.

Hobbes presents three means for acquiring the goods necessary for self-preservation in the commonwealth: theft, charity, or money. Those who are unable to sell their labor for money through no fault of their own are left with two choices: charity or theft. Theft would lead to great insecurity in the commonwealth as one is unable to secure the fruits of one's own labor and thrift if the theft of the product is justified by those who cannot support themselves. The second avenue is through charity. Private charity would also lead to insecurity, given that men would not know whether and when they could count on it, driving them to turn on one another in the commonwealth. Therefore, the duty of the sovereign is to support the continued safety and peace of the people through public charity. A social welfare program would prevent the civil unrest that private charity

⁴¹ Leviathan pg. 198.

⁴² Ibid., pg. 228.

⁴³ Ibid., pg. 228.

introduces into the commonwealth. Therefore, in fulfilling the fundamental duty of the sovereign – securing peace – the sovereign is compelled to support those who cannot support themselves. An additional advantage to the sovereign providing for public charity is avoiding the influence that moneyed individuals might have and with which they might challenge the authority of the sovereign.

The private accumulation of vast wealth may lead to other concerns as well and could cause the emergence of three of the four causes of internal sedition. Hobbes compares the commonwealth to an artificial person throughout *Leviathan*.⁴⁴ Hobbes attributes the accumulation of vast wealth in the commonwealth to a sickness that attacks the body and soul of the commonwealth. The inequality that comes with the accumulation of wealth is a terrible illness for the commonwealth, akin to pleurisy, and the result is that the commonwealth “dieth.”⁴⁵

Arms, numbers, and leaders all arise from large sums of wealth. Hobbes notes: “Popularity too implies faction, when it reaches the point that an armed force could be founded upon it, unless guarantees are given in the form of hostages or other pledges. And the same is to be said of immoderate private wealth; for everything obeys money.”⁴⁶ In *Leviathan*, Hobbes continues the comparison of this phenomenon to a disease that attacks the commonwealth. The accumulation of wealth is twofold: the popularity of those with money and the greatness of cities within the state. On the latter, Hobbes writes that the popularity of an ambitious man is a “dangerous disease” because the people “are drawn away from their obedience to the laws, to

⁴⁴ *Leviathan* pg. 217.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 218.

⁴⁶ *De Cive*, pg. 149.

follow a man of whose virtues and designs they have no knowledge.”⁴⁷ Hobbes notes this problem is most pervasive in a popular government where the monied influence of an individual can distort the commonwealth. On the subject of the “greatness” of cities, Hobbes notes that the “immoderate greatness of a town” that may be able to furnish its own army and so forth constitutes another “infirmity of a commonwealth,” which results in multiple lesser commonwealths in the “bowels of a greater.”⁴⁸ The towns and corporations are akin to little worms attacking the bowels of the commonwealth through “disputing against absolute power by pretenders to political prudence” and are “animated by false doctrines” that “meddle with the fundamental laws” of the commonwealth.

Hobbes’s consumption tax does not address the accumulation of vast private wealth, as those who save their money are not taxed. This could lead to the acquisition of arms and numbers while giving leaders in the form of the wealthy to challenge the sovereign’s right to rule. Hobbes would argue that the wealth of the private individual is only private because the sovereign allowed it to be so. However, simply seizing the wealth of private individuals will give rise to other reasons for sedition and could ferment ill feelings toward sovereign authority. As Hobbes notes, the internal affairs concern defensive strategies, defensive positions and maintaining soldiers, but also “the state of people’s feelings towards the prince or governors of the commonwealth.”⁴⁹ So, while the sovereign keeps the right to all property in the commonwealth, prudence in leadership will limit the seizure of wealth from the citizenry.⁵⁰

Hobbes does not deny that some monarchs would use their power to enrich themselves and those

⁴⁷ Leviathan pg. 218

⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 218

⁴⁹ De Cive pg. 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 83-84.

close to him through abuse of the sovereign power.⁵¹ However, as Hobbes writes in *De Cive*, this abuse of power would not “arise from bad design of the political order” but rather from the “poor administration of a well-designed commonwealth.” Hobbes “cannot imagine how public wealth can be disadvantageous to private citizens” given that they are not so “exhausted that it is impossible to sustain body and soul.”⁵² Hobbes discusses the idea of taxation in some depth in *De Cive* with the idea of defense of the commonwealth in mind. “Taxes and tributes are simply the wages of those who keep watch under arms, so that the citizens’ industry will not be hampered by enemy invasion.”⁵³ Hobbes goes so far as to state the failure of the sovereign to tax and provide for the people of the commonwealth would act against the reason of the ruler and result not from design but from poor administration of the political order.⁵⁴

Taxation has two justifications in a Hobbesian commonwealth. The first is the requirement to fund the military and to build forts, garrisons, and support the overall defense of the commonwealth.⁵⁵ This fulfills the requirement of being forearmed, which is to be prepared to defend oneself against invasions from outside forces. “Those too who think it is time enough to exact funds for provisioning the troops and other army expenses when danger begins to appear, are surely failing to consider how difficult it is to scrape together such an amount of money all at once; people so tight-fisted.”⁵⁶ In order to do so, one must levy taxes on the people even in times of peace because once men have something in their possession it is difficult to convince them to part with it. Being forearmed to protect the commonwealth is an essential duty of the sovereign.

⁵¹ *De Cive* pg. 119

⁵² *Ibid.*, pg. 117.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. 137-138.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 145.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pgs. 145-146.

If people cannot protect the fruits of their labor and are fearful of invasion the subjects are no better than they were in the natural state. The purpose of leaving the state of nature was to enjoy a happy life, with comforts.

The second reason to tax the people is to ensure the commonwealth has the money necessary to carry out the day to day functions and, I argue, to support the citizenry in times of need. Before looking at the expenditure of the money, the tax policy itself should be examined. In *De Cive*, Hobbes proposes a proportionate taxation system that is based on the consumption of goods within a society and not on the wealth of the citizenry. “The question can be asked therefore whether citizens should contribute to the public purse in proportion to their gains or to their consumption, that is, whether persons should be taxed so that they contribute in proportion to their wealth, or whether things should be taxed, so that each man contributes in proportion to their consumption.”⁵⁷ This consumption tax is the equivalent to a modern-day value added tax that is common in Western European nations today. For Hobbes, the taxation is about equal enjoyment of peace: “For although all men equally enjoy peace, the benefits of peace are not equal for all. For some acquire more property some less. And again, some consume more and others less.”⁵⁸

Taxing consumption was good both for lightening the tax burden and relying on a plausible way to collect taxes in seventeenth-century commonwealths. Consumption could be easily taxed while income tax would require a large bureaucratic administration to collect revenue effectively. If one were to make some citizens bear heavier financial burdens, these

⁵⁷ *De Cive* pgs. 147-148.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 148.

burdened citizens would have cause for just complaint and “It is in the interest of the public peace to remove a justified complaint, and consequently it is a duty of sovereigns to ensure that public burdens are equally borne.”⁵⁹ Hobbes reinforces the idea of shared burden: “since the citizen’s contributions to the community are simply the price they pay to purchase peace, it is logical that those who equally enjoy peace should pay equal shares, by contributing either money or services to the commonwealth.”⁶⁰ Hobbes equates consumption to enjoyment in this instance and this is how Hobbes justifies the consumption tax.

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes revisits the idea of equal taxation on the subjects. “Equal justice appertaineth also in the equal imposition of taxes, the equality whereof dependeth not on the equality of riches, but on the equality of debt that every man oweth to the commonwealth for his defence.”⁶¹ The equality of taxes is tied to the enjoyment of the peace provided by the sovereign and this protects the commonwealth against the luxurious wastefulness of private men. Hobbes clarifies his rationale: “For what reason is there that he which laboureth much, and sparing the fruits of his labour, consumeth little, should be more charged than he that living idly, getteth little, and spendeth all he gets... But when the impositions are laid upon those things that men consume, every man payeth equally for what he useth, nor is the commonwealth defrauded but he luxurious waste of private men.”⁶² Hobbes’s taxation would encourage industry while at the same time discourage the excess wealth that could cause faction to form within the commonwealth. This follows the fifth precept of natural law in *De Cive* which posits a difference between the natural compulsion to meet needs for self-preservation and seeking luxuries at the

⁵⁹ De Cive, pg. 147.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pg. 147.

⁶¹ Leviathan pg. 227.

⁶² Ibid., pg. 228.

expense of others. The latter are responsible for the war that breaks out.⁶³ Preventing this through the taxation of expenditures is the obligation of the sovereign.

CONCLUSION

I have shown the state of nature is basis for equality, property and duty in the Hobbesian political thought. The state of nature where man does not have a common power to over awe him is a state of war of all against all. In this state, there is no mine and thine rather everyone is equal in right and has an equal claim to everything and anything around them.⁶⁴ Only the foundation of commonwealth secures property rights and only at the discretion of the sovereign. The commonwealth is founded for the peace and safety of the people. Macpherson concludes the state of nature and Hobbes's analysis of bourgeois man leads to an individualistic economic relation. However, Macpherson does not believe the sovereign of the commonwealth has an obligation to provide more than basic security for the subject's property. I have argued this analysis does not consider the obligation the sovereign has to provide more than the bare protections in the commonwealth. Hobbes mentions that this safety is more than subsistence living without the fear of violent death but rather a comfortable commodious lifestyle.

The laws of nature that oblige the sovereign and the people within the commonwealth offer a foundation for social welfare programs that can evolve with the times. The obligation to provide for the commonwealth is not based on a contractual agreement between the subjects and the sovereign. Rather it is based on the role of the sovereign. The sovereign is obligated to

⁶³ De Cive. Pg. 48.

⁶⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *A Dialogue of the Common Laws of England*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 73.

uphold the laws of nature and maintaining the role of sovereign requires this obligation is met. If the sovereign neglects the duties of the office, they are no longer acting as sovereign of the commonwealth. The sovereign has the power to distribute lands and goods as they see fit and in a manner that is equitable. Providing as much or as little assistance as is needed by the people. Preventing gross inequality and assisting those in poverty allows the sovereign to prevent sedition in the commonwealth. Numbers, tools, mutual trust and leaders are the ingredients to sedition.⁶⁵ Providing for the subjects of the commonwealth as instructed by the laws of nature prevents the key components to a successful sedition.

As I have shown, the laws of nature require the sovereign to act in this manner – to maintain peace. The sovereign is not only obliged to follow the laws of nature but also has a selfish motive for providing for the people. A strong, stable commonwealth will protect the sovereign on the international stage. Therefore, the sovereign can and must create a broad redistributive welfare program for the commonwealth. The language of the laws of nature affords Hobbes's work an adaptability with the times. Hobbes does not prescribe a specific plan to eliminate sedition or to provide for the subjects of the commonwealth but rather a set of ideas and principles that the sovereign must follow. This allows for generations of leaders to adapt to new concerns that arise throughout modernity. This is not a blueprint of an oppressive tyranny but rather as Hobbes says in *De Cive* the thoughtful care of one's inheritance. Hobbes writes, "our best spiritual is to be subject to someone who has interest in our safety and health. This

⁶⁵ De Cive pg. 138.

situation occurs when we are the sovereign's inheritance... the wealth of princes is not estates and monies but the citizen's physical and mental vigour."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Ibid., pg. 126.

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