

HOBBS' POLITICAL THEORY AND THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, attempt is made to properly situate Hobbes on the continuum of political theorists, whose ideas have served as catalysts to improving socio-political conditions in contemporary societies. This attempt at placing Hobbes politically in the proper perspective is important in view of the fact that Hobbes' antecedent training was in Latin and Greek Literature. The following excerpt from M.M. Goldsmith describes Hobbes's training in the classical languages:

Tutored by Robert Latimer, Hobbes learned Greek as well as Latin before he went to University at Oxford, age 14 'he had turned *Euripidis Medea* out of Greek into *Latin Lambiques*'. Hobbes' first published work was his translation of Thucydides. In 1673 at the age of 85, he published a translation of Homer. He wrote poetry as well as philosophy in both Latin and English.... He may well be characterized as a late Renaissance humanist in the technical sense of a scholar trained in the humanities that are Latin and Greek Literature.¹

Although Hobbes's earlier studies focused on the classics as shown in the passage just quoted, his growing concern with politics, which many believed to have started with his translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* into English, attained such a height that many years later, the great political economist, Karl Marx was to describe Hobbes as "the father of us all".² Also, despite the fact that many political essays and treatises were written in the long period of Western history, starting from the time of Hobbes's forebears in ancient Greek, Hobbes is today still acclaimed by many to be 'the greatest political theorist' and 'the

prime catalytic agent in modern political thinking'.³ It becomes necessary therefore in a paper like this, to properly situate Hobbes and to delineate those of his ideas, which are still relevant to understanding and improving socio-political conditions in contemporary societies.

This paper will be in two parts. The first part will discuss the nature and proper concerns of political theory. Here, attempt will be made, not only to reconcile the dissenting views on what should be the nature and proper concerns of political theory, but also to show what contemporary political theory embraces in its grand totalizing nature. In the second part of the paper, efforts will be directed at portraying those salient aspects of Hobbes' thought which not only distinguish him from other political theorists who overtime have grappled with similar problems of political unrest and social disintegration, but more importantly, with those legacies he bequeathed to political theory, which are today complimentary to efforts at understanding and improving socio-political conditions in contemporary societies. Let us start our discussion by looking into what should be the nature and subject-matter of political theory.

The Nature of Political Theory

Ever since men started living together in some kind of political order, various attempts have been made at addressing questions bordering on the relationship between men living in society on the one hand, as well as the relationship between the citizens and the government on the other. Over the years, people increasingly started feeling the need for political institutions, actions and decisions to be rationally justified. It is in the light of this urge that philosophers, right from the time of Plato tried to provide justification for a particular position or political order.⁴ This endeavour, of trying to rationally justify a particular political order, marks the birth of what later became known as political theory. In this regard, Dipu Irele describes political theory as

concerning itself ‘with the evaluation of political institutions and other beliefs of political society in general’.⁵

There is today, however, a marked difference between political theory as espoused by the ancient Greek thinkers and political theory as championed by contemporary social science. Plato is today regarded as the father of what later became known as political theory, but his writings and views, like those of many others after him, differ from most other major and recent works in political theory in being prescriptive. For instance, *The Republic*, for all its depth and insight, concerned itself mainly with setting up norms or ideal standards for society and government; telling us what ought to be the case, or what we ought to do.⁶ In other words, political theory, starting from the time of Plato, is seen essentially as ‘normative’ and most texts that evolved at that time were believed to contain normative statements about the desirability of certain types of political principles and institutions.⁷ This is how political theory was conceived until towards the middle of the last century.

From the 1950s, this traditional form of political theory as a discipline came under intense strain. The major onslaught against the normative approach to political theory came from the logical positivists. Logical positivism denied political theory the status of a legitimate form of knowledge and inquiry, for in the positivist outlook, particularly as set out in the logical positivist programme,⁸ all knowledge is founded on sensory observation and values play no justified role in the formation of knowledge, since values cannot be derived from sense experience. Since therefore, logical positivism tied the meaning of concepts and theories directly to empirical observations, value judgements were not accorded the status of knowledge claims. Accordingly, the normative statements of early political theorists were characterized by the positivists as “mere declaration of conflicting preferences and opinions.”⁹

At the heart of the positivist legacy was the behavioural revolution. The central tenets of behaviourism are that political theory could be reduced to empirical components and that the structure of the science of politics and society could be unfolded from the logical foundations of natural science. Put differently, the key feature of behaviourism is that political theory, as an enterprise, should be concerned with the development or generation of theories and laws patterned along the line of physical science, as against the theoretical framework of traditional normative political theory. Once again, Irele poignantly describes the mission statement of behaviourism thus:

The effect of this position on political theorizing in general was to distract attention from the traditional manner of political philosophy and to encourage political theorizing skewed towards empirical stance.¹⁰

A fundamental response to the positivist attack as Irele puts it, is whether, given the realities of contemporary politics, it is possible to accommodate significant portions of political phenomena under a set of empirically discoverable laws.¹¹ In other words, is it possible to have a value-neutral description of political phenomena? And if the value dimension to political theory is ruled out as sought by the positivists, what then becomes of political theory described earlier as an endeavour which should have as its goals, “a rational critique of existing inhibitive social order that does not allow for the flowering of human personality”?¹² Whereas for Isaiah Berlin, the entire enterprise of political theory will be impoverished if value is drained out of it,¹³ for many others, the exclusion of the evaluative aspect from political theory will evince political quietism, and this in turn may lead to conservatism and irrational support for the status quo.

Again, the positivist’s attack on the traditional normative mode of political theorizing seems to miss the mark, for as many scholars have noted, the great classical political theorists did not speculate in the air. Their theories were not only the outcome of their reflections on the

beliefs and values of their people, these theories were also based on practical political experiences of their age. In other words, mere speculation cannot be said to be the end-task of ancient political theorizing. One can easily discern from Plato's *Republic* that his purpose of depicting an ideal society was not only to promote understanding of general social concepts but also to criticize existing society.¹⁴

These flaws notwithstanding, logical positivism however reached a hegemonic position within the social sciences, resulting in such great attempts at providing sophisticated and general explanatory laws of human behaviour by figures like Adam Smith, Karl Marx and others. It was in recognition of this development that Peter Laslett wrote his famous and much quoted judgement; "for the time-being anyway, Political Philosophy is dead"¹⁵

The hold of logical positivism on the traditional normative mode of political theorizing did not however last long! John Horton describes it as "something of a passing fashion".¹⁶ So, while the celebration of positivism was marked, it by no means won a total victory over the traditional mode of political theorizing, for, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, political theory started emerging with new vitality from the shadows of positivism.¹⁷ The impetus for this regeneration of political theory was brought about by the demise of positivism, caused by the works of some philosophers of science, who did much to discredit the positivist model of what science is like. Philosophers like Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, Mary Hesse and W.V.O. Quine did much to show "that the positivist logic of a unified science was an inappropriate way of trying to understand the very nature of natural scientific practices, for science as a form of human activity is inescapably an interpretative endeavour involving problems of meaning, communication and translation"¹⁸ In the specific case of Kuhn¹⁹, "he subverts the conventional wisdom about science being the paradigm of rationality as well as being value neutral,²⁰ while

Quine attacks the ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ clothed in the very famous analytic synthetic distinction.

Apart from these philosophers of science, the renewed concern with substantive questions of the real world as reflected in John Rawls’ *A Theory of justice* and Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State and Utopia* also contributed to the resurgence of political theory as a normative enterprise. This reinvigoration of political theory led the editors of the same work where Peter Laslett’s provocative declaration was published, to retract what was said in the first series: “it would be satisfactory if we ... proclaim the resurrection of political philosophy or theory”.²¹

The debate over positivism did not only dislodge the supercilious behavioural sympathy for the construction of political theory based on the logical foundations of natural science, it also resulted in the establishment of a plurality of alternative methodological positions on what should be the nature and proper concerns of modern political theory. Given however the various activities that many refer to when they use the term ‘politics’ and given also the combination of feelings of cynicism, skepticism and mistrust that many have about politics, people have expressed differing opinions on what should be the nature and proper concerns of modern political theory. Whereas some in the liberal camp are of the view that the subject-matter of political theory should strictly be the examination of the nature, the structure and the proper ends of governments and states²², for some others, politics is largely co-extensive with the whole range of human activity. Accordingly, political theory for them should be of universal application to all dimensions of human life-private and public- independently of any specific ‘site’ or set of institutions.²³

While this broad conception of the domain of contemporary political theory is useful in elucidating the range of issues affecting the quality of collective life upon which public decision

making may be necessary, such unbounded conception of the domain of political theory however provides no clear-cut demarcation between what is 'political' on the one hand, and the everyday life of citizens as subject for political theorizing and control. And political theorists could easily take advantage of this boundless domain of politics to justify an unbridled public regulation and control of private realms. On the other hand however, where the proper concern of political theory is regarded as a sphere different and to be separated from the economic, cultural and other private realms of human life, one soon discovers that a vast domain of what is central to politics in some other traditions of thought will be excluded from the subject-matter of political theory. In this wise writes Susan Moller, "the political theorist restricts himself or herself to a narrow concept of the political... at considerable risk"²⁴

However, the subject-matter of contemporary political theory transcends the divide between the normative analysis of concept and the empirical understanding of political processes and structures. Both perspectives are now taken as complimentary to understanding the complexities of contemporary life. For as David Held rightly points out:

All political philosophy implicitly, or explicitly makes complex claims about the operation of the political world, which require detailed examination within modes of enquiry, which go beyond those available to philosophy alone. Conversely, political science inevitably raises normative questions, which a dedication to the 'descriptive-explanatory' does not eliminate.²⁵

Given this realization therefore, it has now become possible to produce an unending list of what should be the proper concerns of contemporary political theory; a list covering issues ranging from the normative and historical, to the empirical concerns of human lives. In such a list, will include (i) the examination and interpretation of political texts with a view to establishing the texts' authentic meaning by placing them in their exact historical contexts; (ii)

the systematic reflection upon and clarification of the meaning of key terms and concepts of political discourse; (iii) the systematic elaboration of the underlying structure of our moral and political activities; (iv) the analysis of abstract theoretical questions and principles with a view to showing their beneficial relevance to concrete political issues and (v) the construction of explanatory frameworks to illuminate particular political problems.²⁶

It follows therefore that the contemporary political theorists will have to concern themselves with a number of distinct tasks, transversing the historical, the philosophical and the empirical. All of these aspects are complimentary and should be harnessed, so that contemporary political theorizing will not be just another futile exercise, not capable of resolving concrete problems of existence and improving the human condition.

Having analyzed what should be the nature and proper concerns of contemporary political theory, it will be necessary to look at Hobbes' distinct contributions to political theory and the import of these on contemporary attempts at understanding and improving socio-political conditions in society through political theorizing.

Hobbes' Legacies to Political Theory

Right from the time philosophy took its root in ancient Greek, down to our own present era, a long lineage of political theorists can be traced. Among the greatest political theorists in the long history of political philosophy are Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bodin, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, Montesquieu, Bentham, Madison and Jefferson. An important point to note is that the works of most of these political theorists were essentially responses to increasingly troubled political conditions. Plato for instance lived, brooded, thought and wrote during the declining years of the golden ages in the history of culture, that is, the 15th century B.C. in Athens. According to Robert Nisbert,

By the time Plato reached his young manhood, Athens was showing unmistakable signs of decadence in culture... and a social conflict that threaten the very existence of the polis.²⁷

Plato himself described this radical disorder in society as a “whirlpool and shifting currents that left him dizzy”.²⁸ The solution to these problems, Plato finds in philosophy. Hence his recommendation that philosophers acquire political power or else, that the class of those who have political power become, by some dispensation of providence, real philosophers.

This combination of perceptions of social disorder and the philosophical perspective on the necessity to construct a political community which would save man from chaos and anarchy, we see running in almost identical form, in the writings of Aristotle, Nicolo Machiavelli, Edmund Burke, Jean Bodin, Rousseau, Montesquieu and others: On this, Robert Nisbet once again writes”

Whether in the political filiation of Plato to Hobbes to Rousseau, what we have in each instance is an over powering perception of the world as conflict ridden, disorganized, tending towards the anarchic and needing therefore the sovereign anodyne of community.²⁹

Essentially therefore, political theorists from Ancient period down to the time of Hobbes and even beyond were faced by the same kind of problems, and being familiar with the writings of their predecessors, each up coming theorists merely operated within an already existing framework of discourse. M.M Goldsmith puts this point more clearly with regards to Hobbes when he wrote that “the key elements of Hobbes’ civil science were not original” and that “Hobbes was working within as well as transforming a widely used form of discourse”³⁰

Murray Forsyth is even more explicit:

There is no doubt that the ideas espoused in Hobbes political theory can be detected in earlier writings. For instance, the harsh, realism with which Machiavelli contrasted the necessities of

politics with the maxims of morality is echoed in *Leviathan*. Hobbes concept of sovereignty is foreshadowed in Bodin's *Six Books of the Commonwealth* with which he was familiar.³¹

However, continuities such as these do not alter completely the fundamental nature of Hobbes' distinctive contribution. It becomes important therefore to point out those major contributions, which not only distinguished Hobbes from other political theorists, but more importantly, those of his ideas which have become crucial in the present effort at addressing socio-political problems in society.

One of the most significant points in Hobbes' political theory is its total reliance on the power of human reason. Although earlier philosophers like Plato had dwelt extensively on the part played by reason in the attainment of the good, the just and the ideal form of society, Hobbes' analysis of the part played by reason in the transition from the state of nature to the civil society is an improvement on that of his forbears. Whereas in his theory of form, Plato tried to demonstrate that behind the mercurial world of the senses, there is a world of reality accessible to reason alone and that therefore, the ideal state can only be attained if society is propelled by men of reason, Hobbes brought his search for 'the ideal' down from the metaphysical realm, while consistently guiding the role reason is to play in the construction of the body polity.

Hobbes believes that all the inconveniences of the state of nature are the inevitable consequences of the responses of men when governed by passions instead of reason, and he tried to demonstrate how an understanding of man's psychology would give an insight into the nature of the human passions. However, the journey from the state of nature to that of the civil society was, according to Hobbes, initiated by reason.³² According to M. Goldsmith, "with the dawn of reason, man understood that he could not live in eternal warfare and that if he wished to satisfy his instinct of egoism, he must seek peace."³³ This unflinching reliance on the power of reason to

move man from being the helpless, isolated creature of fear, to being a citizen in a state is indeed a major contribution on the part of Hobbes.

Again, Hobbes' political theory stands out because of its unsparing legalism and its refusal to make any compromise with the world of organized religion. Unlike earlier theorists such as Jean Bodin who had sympathy for the customs, traditions and moralities that existed outside the framework of sovereign law, Thomas Hobbes argues that legal authority is not grounded on traditions, customs or scriptures. Laws for Hobbes are those rules which the sovereign commands, and nothing else. Hobbes' political theory also gave the deathblow to the most cherished of all medieval doctrines - that the political ruler is subject to the authority of the church since the state is believed to have a transcendent foundation, having been divinely willed.³⁴ Hobbes was quick to recognize that the church, by reason of its tenacious hold upon man's spiritual allegiances, will always be a divisive force within the commonwealth unless it is made strictly subordinate to political power. In Hobbes theory, this transcendent foundation of the state, characteristics of medieval political thinking disappeared. Hobbes not only interpreted everything political as coming from atomistic individuals – their instinct and reason and from contractual agreement among them, his ideas were also the result of his reflections on concrete historical events in his own country England. In this way, Hobbes founded his political philosophy entirely on his naturalistic interpretation of human nature as well as concrete historical events.³⁵ It is in this respect that he is called a realist.

Again, Hobbes contributed largely to the gradual development of political theory as an independent naturalistic science³⁶ by bringing his training in mathematics and geometry to bear on politics. Hobbes' various expeditions while in the services of the Cromwell and Cavendish families exposed him to the new natural philosophy of Galileo and others, and when he returned

to England in 1836 and found his country in a state of political turmoil, he began to apply those principles he learnt from mathematics and geometry to politics. He applied the principles he learnt from mathematics to intellectual moral and political life describing them as “objects of mathematical calculus and hence are made up of nothing but combinations of matter in motion.”³⁷ He was so obsessed by the new science of motion that he interpreted all modes of activities to be the motions that take place in the body or the effects of the motions of one body to another.³⁸ By applying the scientific conceptual scheme in the presentation of his political theory, Hobbes’ approach no doubt marks a shift in the axis of political theorizing.

Finally, Hobbes’ political theory like those of some of his forebears is a blend of rigorous social nihilism and political affirmation. The nihilism in Hobbes theory springs from his determination to cleanse from the political state, all those conditions he had earlier identified in the state of nature as destructive to social well-being and political unity. To do this successfully, he had to affirm the supremacy of the political state over all other roles in the society. That is, “of the political role over all other roles of kingship, religion, occupation; of the political authority over all competing social and cultural authorities... and of the political state as the chief protector of man from uncertainties, deprivations and miseries”.³⁹ Hobbes’ political theory is therefore a synthesis of rationalism, empiricism, nihilism and political affirmation.

Conclusion: Hobbes’ Political Theory Today

Although Hobbes lived and wrote centuries ago, his theory today still generates many interpretative disputes. This notwithstanding, the fact however remains that Hobbes was able to apply his theory, not only in explaining the rationale of political life, but also in resolving socio-political problems in the society of his days. This same theory is particularly relevant in today’s

world in which globalization is the defining feature. We have two reasons for making this claim. First is that the combatant nature of the present world order, particularly the readiness of states to unleash terror on perceived enemies, makes the world pass for a 'state of nature'. For the past three to four decades, major events around the world, such as the breakdown of governmental authority in Somalia and Congo, the breakup of the states in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, the intensification of tribal, religious and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, Algeria and other parts of the world, the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, the spread of terrorism and the deepening economic crises engulfing most underdeveloped countries, all convincingly set forth the picture of a world in chaos. In fact, if Hobbes were around to assess the present world order in which globalization is the defining feature, it is very unlikely that he would feel the need for an alternative expression other than "state of nature". Again globalization, from all its manifestations, has veered towards the convergence of cultural values and the eventual emergence of a universal "hegemon", akin to Hobbes' leviathan. The current era of globalization, which is characterized by the increasing acceptance of common values by peoples throughout the world, has eventually culminated in the emergence of "a supra national state with dominant coercive and legislative power"⁴⁰ Following this view, many have argued that most, if not all of the problems confronting humanity today will be adequately resolved by the emerging hegemon the way Hobbes' leviathan took charge of the problems in Hobbes' political state. The many reactions against this Hobbesian interpretation of the contemporary world order notwithstanding, the fact remains that Hobbes' theory today provides the much needed insights into understanding our contemporary world, and unless those legacies Hobbes bequeathed to political theory are allowed to guide contemporary political reflections, navigating the unfamiliar terrain of our globalized new world may yet become another impossibility.

ENDNOTES

- 1 M.M. Goldsmith "Hobbes: Ancient and Modern" in Tom Sorell (ed.), *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension Between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 317.
- 2 Karl Marx is cited in Martin Walsh, *A History of Philosophy*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985, p. 257
- 3 Robert Nisbert. *The Social Philosophers*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc., 1973, pp. 23-24.
- 4 Dipo Irele, *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, Ibadan: University Press, 1998, p. 2
- 5 Ibid, p.11
- 6 D.D Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy*, London: Macmillan, 1970, p. 3
- 7 Dipo Irele op. cit. p. 2
- 8 For details on Logical Positivism. See A.J. Ayer *Logical Positivism*, New York: Free Press, 1959 and Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudo Problems in Philosophy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- 9 David Held (ed.), *Political Theory Today*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 11
- 10 Dipo Irele, op., cit. p. 3
- 11 Ibid. p.4
- 12 Ibid. p. 5
- 13 Isaiah Berlin "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" in P. Laslett and W.G. Ruciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 2nd Series, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962.
- 14 Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 3

15 Laslett is cited in Held (ed.), *Political Theory Today*, op. cit., p. 12. See also the Introduction to the 1st series of *Philosophy, Politics and Society* edited by P. Laslett, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956, p. vii

16 John Horton "Weight or Lightness? Political Philosophy and Its Prospects" in Adrain Leftwich (ed.), *New Developments in Political Science*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990, p. 128

17 David Held, *Political Theory Today*, op. cit., p. 12

18 Ibid. p. 13

19 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

20 Irele, *Problems of Political Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 11

21 This excerpt is cited in Irele, p. 11

22 Held, *Political Theory Today*, op. cit., p. 5

23 See for Instance, Mary Wollstone-Craft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.

24 Sussan Moller is cited in Held (ed.), *Political Theory Today*, op. cit., p.8

25 Held op cit., p. 19

26 Ibid., pp. 16-19

27 Nisbert op. cit., p. 2

28 Ibid

29 Ibid., p. 6

30 Goldsmith "Hobbes: Ancient and Modern" op. cit., pp 334 – 335

31 Murray Forsyth "Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan" in Murray Forsyth and Maurice Keens-Soper (eds.), *The Political Classics: A Guide to the Essential Texts from Plato to Rousseau*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.121

32 Goldsmith, "Hobbes: Ancient and Modern" op. cit., p. 325

33 Classic Philosophers Index. File://A://thephilosophyofthomashobbes.htm

34 Forsyth "Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan", op. cit., p. 121.

35 Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Book Two, Vol. IV, V and VI, New York: Image Books, 1985, p. 47

36 Walsh, op. cit, p. 256

37 Classic Philosopher Index, op. cit.

38 Hobbes, in describing the individualism of the state of nature as rooted in the natural human passions, interpreted passion to be ‘motions about the heart’ He avers further that it is the different ‘motions about the heart’ in different individual bodies that lead naturally to competition, mistrust and the disposition towards a state of war between individuals.

39 Nisbert, op. cit., p. 3

40 Malcolm Waters, *Globalization*, London: Routededge, 1995, p. 100

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