

# International Politics



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*Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)*



-Do you agree with the assumption that at international levels all states are merely seeking self interests?

-What are the restraints on the unlimited pursuit of national interests at international levels?

-Do you think human nature has any direct impact on the practice of international politics?



# Hobbes - Historical Context

- Hobbes lived in a time of upheaval sharper than any England had since known
- The rich and powerful were divided in their support for the King, especially concerning the monarch's powers of taxation. Parliament was similarly divided concerning its own powers vis-à-vis the King
- Society was divided religiously, economically, and by region
- Inequalities in wealth were huge, and the upheavals of the **Civil Wars** saw the emergence of astonishingly radical religious and political sects. Civil war meant that the country became militarily divided. And all these divisions cut across one another
- for example, the army of the republican challenger, Cromwell, was the main home of the Levellers, yet Cromwell in turn would act to destroy their power within the army's ranks
- In addition, England's recent union with Scotland was fragile at best, and was almost destroyed by King Charles I's attempts to impose consistency in religious practices
- Hobbes's greatest fear was social and political chaos – and he had ample opportunity both to observe it and to suffer its effects



# The State of Nature

- Hobbes seeks to clarify the rational principles for the development of a civil polity
- Hobbes aims to show the desirability, or even the necessity, of an **absolute political authority** capable of ensuring peace
- To this end, he invites us to consider what it would be like to live in a state of nature, i.e. in a condition that lacks any form of government
- Whether a mere hypothesis or an actual historical condition (he thought the American Indians lived in such a condition), Hobbes argues that this lawless arrangement would render impossible the basic **security** at the root of civilized life
- There would be “no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; [...] no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; and which is worst of all, **continual fear**, and **danger of violent death**
- life of man, **solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short**”



# The State of Nature (continued)

According to Hobbes “natural condition of mankind” is a state of violence, insecurity, and constant threat no one could reasonably wish for. Why is this so?

- Hobbes thinks individuals are animated by a vital energy, which is more or less the same in everyone. This power or natural right can be defined as their **freedom**, namely the set of means they employ to satisfy their desires and preserve their life
- Hobbes further assumes that individuals have similar mental and physical features, whereby no one is **invulnerable** nor can expect to be able to dominate others. Every human being, in fact, is able to kill any other
- Hence, there is no natural source of authority to order their lives together (against natural or God-given right to rule)
- Hobbes argues that people compete to secure the scarce goods necessary for the satisfaction of basic needs. They challenge others and fight out of fear (“diffidence”), so as to ensure their personal **safety**. They strive to achieve glory, not only for its own sake but also for its protective effects.



# The State of Nature as a State of War

- Man is not a social animal, but rather a “**wolf to man**”. Far from having objective consistency, good and bad are just subjective categories reflecting each one’s desire. Man’s asocial behaviours are not a guilt or a crime, because there is no effective law or moral constraint
- Since everyone has the right to do whatever one judges needful for one’s preservation and the satisfaction of one’s preferences – including killing someone else –, for Hobbes the state of nature is characterized by a **war** of all against all (or at least the possibility thereof)
- The state of nature is a state of dangerous and deadly conflict, which looms as a perpetually present possibility we ought to fear and avoid (civil war is just what Hobbes has in mind when he speaks about the state of nature)



# The Laws of Nature

- According to Hobbes, the exit from the state of nature is not a matter of justice. Rather, it is matter of **utility**. Fearing violent death, individuals are rationally obliged to recognize that their true interest lies in **peace**. Hobbes calls this “moral” injunction a “law of nature”: reason forbids man to do what might be harmful for his own life
- This law of nature implies 19 other laws, among which the first three are the most important ones:
  - 1) Every man should seek peace
  - 2) Every man should lay down his “right to all things” to an equal extent
  - 3) This mutual cooperation is a pact that must be respected, because justice amounts to respecting covenants



# The Social Contract

- Making possible associated life in a stable, secure, and peaceful form, for Hobbes such a political order is the result of a **pact** or covenant, according to which every individual agrees with all others to cede his natural right (except from the right to defend his life) to a third person external to and created by the pact
- This artificial figure is what Hobbes calls the **Leviathan**, i.e. the unique custodian of the natural right each and everyone
- As the highest conceivable power on earth, the Leviathan has the right to decide what everyone else should do, to decide the rules of property, to judge disputes, to enforce punishments, and so on
- This means that the Leviathan is the **sovereign representative** of everybody, without which individuals could not have political existence. The power of the Leviathan is irresistible not because it is naturally superior to his subjects, but rather because obeying the sovereign individuals obey someone they have authorized



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# Modern Political Rationalism

- Politics consists in the rational **construction** of a sovereign order, which gathers within itself the original faculty of action characterizing each human being in the state of nature
- politics has no other source of legitimation than **human reason**
- As a result, there is no act that subjects can judge to be unjust, because each subject is the author of the acts of the sovereign. The laws of the state are like the rules of a game on which everybody agrees, whereby again they cannot be said to be unjust



# Hobbes' Negation of the Right of Resistance

- for Hobbes, the right of resistance is **unthinkable**
- One cannot refuse to obey the Leviathan, because the latter is created by the covenant and remains outside it
- Nevertheless, disobedience remains an actual possibility and, when widespread, it can even undermine the very structure of the state
- The price to pay for the end of civil wars and salvation is the irreversible **alienation** of individual liberties to the sovereign



# The Features of the Leviathan

- The representative sovereign has an indivisible, unconditional, and irresistible power
- That is true whichever system of government is in place, whether monarchy, aristocracy or democracy. All have advantages and disadvantages
- But the unity that comes about from having a single person at the apex, together with fixed rules of succession that pre-empt dispute about who this person should be, makes monarchy Hobbes' preferred option.
- Hobbes excludes any **separation of power**. Dividing the power of the state would be tantamount to letting the state of nature straight back in.
- Laws are constraining because they are the expression of the will of the sovereign as the only one who is entitled to legislate and they are effective
- Yet the Leviathan cannot order a citizen to kill him/herself and cannot put him/her legally to **death**



# Obedience and Freedom

- Under the authority of the Leviathan, the freedom individuals enjoy in the state of nature is restricted so as to ensure their peaceful co-existence.
- The state as a whole can be free (i.e. independent from other states).
- Subjects can no longer exercise their natural freedom, unless this refers to rights that were not alienated through the pact (i.e. the right of self-defence).
- Within its boundaries, however, individuals can still enjoy **private freedom**, i.e. the space of freedom that remains after obeying the law or where the law keeps silent.
- Yet, for Hobbes, **obedience is not equivalent to belief**: the state and its laws address only individuals' external behaviour, not their inner and intimate convictions. This difference reflects Hobbes' distinction between a public and a private sphere.
- The construction of the sovereign gives birth to the public sphere – the state –, with respect to which the private sphere is what remains after the transfer of natural rights to the sovereign: their physical and moral life. But the Leviathan makes possible also a third dimension, i.e. that of **civil society**, where private citizens can meet in order to work, produce, and compete economically.
- The Leviathan remains a **mortal God**: it is a man-made product, which errors, casualties, and war might destroy



# International Politics

How does Hobbes concepts of the war of all against all apply to the international context?

Do countries at international level give up parts of their freedom to an international leviathan?

How about the right to resist at international level?

What are the differences between domestic and international politics?