

# Can Hobbes' Justification for Absolute Sovereignty Be Applied to Contemporary Democratic States?

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## Abstract

This paper has critically examined the question: “Can Hobbes’ justification for absolute sovereignty be applied to contemporary democratic states?” in the context of Hobbesian democracy. Hobbesian democracy refers to contemporary democratic states in which under a rule of universal suffrage those people to whom the sovereign power is entrusted are elected by secret ballot. The sovereign’s right to rule and the citizens’ duty to obey is thus the result of consent and consensus of the self-interested, yet rational, individuals. By analyzing the development of Singapore during the era of Lee Kuan Yew, it has been demonstrated that the answer to the question is seemingly affirmative and argued that Hobbes’ political philosophy is of immediate relevance to contemporary democratic states.

## Keywords

Hobbes, Social Contract, Absolute Sovereignty, Contemporary Democratic States

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## 1. Introduction

By the seventeenth century the intellectuals throughout Europe witnessed the development of a new natural philosophy (i.e. natural science) that tended to be mechanistic and typically involved the repudiation of the outmoded Aristotelian idea of an orderly hierarchy of natural kinds or species of things. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), often regarded as the founding father of modern political philosophy, was much concerned with discovering new principles of political theory—new ways of conceptualizing the nature of political authority and of its relation to human beings—as rigorous and exacting as those in

the natural science (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). Specifically, Hobbes pondered over the question: “Instead of simply declaring a divine right to rule, could the authority of monarchs be justified scientifically?” (Hobbes, 2017). His masterpiece *Leviathan* attempts to answer this question and helps lay the foundation of modern political science.

In *Leviathan* Hobbes gave a detailed account of human nature and how it influences politics. In his search for a fundamental political theory, Hobbes resorted to fear that is a familiar human trait and appeals to reason as much as to emotion. Then he constructed the image of “the state of nature” via a thought experiment: “the contemplation of the consequences of life without the protection of a sovereign” (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). Unsurprisingly, on Hobbes’ account, life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short in the state of nature”, where “there is no rule, order or justice” (Hobbes, 2017). The only way to stave off these threats and dangers is for everyone to reach a consensus on submitting himself or herself to a central authority which is responsible for enforcing law and order. In other words, by entering into such a social contract people could lead a peaceful life and be protected by a sovereign of absolute power (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008).

Obviously, one will ask whether Hobbes’ account of the state of nature is true. Is the gloomy picture of human society prior to the establishment of government exaggerated? Most important of all, can Hobbes’ justification for absolute sovereignty be applied to contemporary democratic states? In this paper I attempt to critically assess the relevance of Hobbes’ political philosophy to modern democracies. First, I critically review Hobbes’ conception of the state of nature and the human condition as well as how it leads to the establishment of an absolute sovereignty. Second, I discuss the relevance of Hobbes’ political theory to contemporary democratic states with Singapore as an illustrative example. Finally, a conclusion is presented.

## **2. Hobbes’ Political Philosophy**

### **2.1. The State of Nature**

Hobbes embarked upon the construction of the state of nature by making several individually plausible assumptions (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). First, nature has made human beings so “equal in their physical and mental capacities” (Hobbes, 2017) that no one is invulnerable and able to dominate the others. Second, the main desire of human beings is self-preservation and the avoidance of violent death. Third, each person in the state of nature has a natural right to prevent violent death befalling him or her. As this is the right to do whatever will be needed to ensure one’s preservation, it is practically an unlimited right to potentially anything—a “right to all things” (Hobbes, 2017). Lastly, in the state of nature life is always at stake, so each person should adopt what he or she sees to be the necessary means to the most important end, namely self-preservation. This is a principle of practical rationality. Under these assump-

tions, Hobbes claimed that the state of nature would turn into a “state of war” (Hobbes, 2017) owing to three principal causes of discord, namely competition (for scarce goods), distrust (fear of attack by others), and glory (the pleasure of dominating others) (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008).

According to Hobbes, “all human motivation is some sort of push, whether in the form of an ongoing drive (appetite) or in the form of a repulsion (aversion)” (Hobbes, 2017). Appetite denotes the inherently endless needs and wants of human beings whilst the overwhelmingly dominant form of aversion is the fear of death, for death is something that most of us will do more or less anything to avoid (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). In making a decision on how to act in a particular situation, human beings must weigh appetites and aversions so as to choose the act that optimally benefits the individual concerned. Because human beings live in a world of relative scarcity of the goods they desire, conflict and competition involving those goods are inevitable (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). Being forever in competition with each other, human beings thus become “distrustful of one another on one hand and desirous of power on the other” (Hobbes, 2017). Power is not only necessary for survival but it also gives pleasure to those who possess it. As Hobbes said, human beings are always striving for glory; that is, human beings enjoy being powerful and they take pleasure in having others recognize their power (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). Given these conditions, the state of nature will inevitably be a condition of war, “not because human beings are always actively fighting each other but because in this situation fights may break out at any moment” (Hobbes, 2017). In this state of permanent insecurity each person would exercise his or her “right to all things” (Hobbes, 2017) to protect himself or herself against any external threats. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have no place there at all. There is also no such thing as ownership, no legal control, no distinction between mine and yours; anything that one can get is his or her for as long as he or she can keep it. Accordingly, life becomes a “war of all against all” (Hobbes, 2017) and all outcomes are determined by “force and fraud” (Hobbes, 2017).

## 2.2. Social Contract and Sovereign

Beyond question the state of nature is a deplorable condition; none of the important human ends can be realizable. Then, can human beings escape from this misery? As Hobbes argued in *Leviathan*, by nature human beings enjoy peace and are willing to accept the imperatives necessary to secure it. These imperatives are called the “Laws of Nature”, the sum of which is “not to treat others in ways we would not like them to treat us” (Hobbes, 2017). In order to enforce peace, human beings need to mutually covenant to surrender to the authority of a sovereign whose job is to establish laws and to keep order (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). Under the protection of the sovereign, we may be able to lead a peaceful life because we may trust that our neighbours will not harm

us at every turn, that they will keep at least some of their promises, that contracts made can be expected to be fulfilled, and that disagreements will be litigated in a court of law rather than being settled by hired thugs.

As “covenants without the sword are but words”, the covenant must confer absolute power on the sovereign for the good of all: self-preservation and the avoidance of violent death (Hobbes, 2017). Once the sovereign of absolute power has been chosen, citizens need to forsake constitutionally guaranteed freedoms that might conflict with law enforcement and peacekeeping. There is no right of rebellion because the sovereign is above the law. Only a government of unlimited power can be reliably effective in maximizing both the liberty and the security of the individuals. Undoubtedly, it is admitted that “the sovereign may be despotic, but even the worst despotism is better than anarchy” (Hobbes, 2017). A society based upon this kind of social contract is called a “commonwealth”, and it is like a giant made up of ordinary people, a “Leviathan” (Hobbes, 2017).

Nevertheless, Hobbes admitted that “the citizens retain a right of self-defense against the sovereign power, giving them the right to disobey or resist when their lives are in danger” (Hobbes, 2017). This is not surprising because the absolute right of self-preservation provides the motive for instituting the government. Under the social covenant, political obligation ends when protection ceases; that is, political legitimacy depends only on whether it can effectively protect those who have consented to obey it (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). Hence, although the “Leviathan” is bigger and more powerful than a person, and thus is like a god, yet it shares with ordinary people their mortality.

### 2.3. Critical Remarks

The ingenuity of Hobbes’ thought experiment concerning the state of nature lies mainly in the way it is related to reality. “Anyone who doubts its truth could step beyond the protection of his or her sovereign and taste the dangers of such a life at any time.” (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). This aspect of the state of nature is not only familiar to human beings but also credible. Indeed, Hobbes’ reference to the constant warfare between nations lends strong support to his description of human life in the state of nature. Since there exists no international institution that has the absolute power to keep peace among nations, “there is hardly a moment in human history when two nations are not at each other’s throat, killing each other’s citizens, and destroying each other’s farmlands and houses” (Peters, 1972; Russell, 1972; Schmitt, 2009; Simmons, 2008). All in all, how can one deny that the state of nature is a deplorable reality? If Hobbes’ diagnosis of the dangerous human species were not true, why would states and wars be necessary?

Despite that Hobbes was able to give a clear and logical depiction of the state of nature, his approach, though free from mysticism and superstition, tends to oversimplify the problem. In accordance with the findings of modern psychology, anthropology and sociology, human nature is much more complex than Hobbes

thought. For instance, contrary to Hobbes' claim about the significance of self-preservation to human beings, there are indeed many cases in our daily lives demonstrating that some people are willing to risk their lives to save others, even strangers, from danger. Hence, one might wonder whether human beings are really destined to Hobbes' state of nature in the absence of a government or not. Even without any government providing law and order, don't most people have a reasonable sense of morality and justice, which might prevent the sort of contract-breaking and generalized insecurity that Hobbes was concerned with?

Furthermore, even if security were of paramount importance to each citizen of the commonwealth, absolute authority of the sovereign would be a dangerous expedient that may jeopardize individual interest. It is because the assumption that the interests of the sovereign are more or less aligned with those of individuals might not always hold true. In time of war the sovereign and its subject population are desperately seeking synergy, but in time of peace very sharp conflicts could appear. Hence, it is not always true that we must resort to the absolute sovereign in order to avert anarchy. On the contrary, the best way to prevent war may be to exercise some concession in the way of sharing power.

### 3. Relevance to Contemporary Democratic States

In a modern democratic state the government can be regarded as a political sovereign which essentially enjoys an absolute constitutional authority over almost all aspects of the daily life of its citizens within the so-called rule of law. Van Dun coined the term "Hobbesian democracy" to describe such contemporary democratic states (Van Dun, 2005). Under a rule of universal suffrage those people to whom the sovereign power is entrusted are elected by secret ballot, and enabled to derive meaning and significance from the constitutional regime; the sovereign's right to rule and the citizens' duty to obey is the result of consent and consensus of the self-interested, yet rational, individuals (Van Dun, 2005). The "war of all against all" (Hobbes, 2017) is still fought in election campaigns and electoral battles fiercely because the winner takes all. The elected government, namely the State, can then impose its will on its subject population for as long as it is not defeated in another "war of all against all" (Hobbes, 2017). As the parliamentary majority party is also the governing party, the functional separation of powers of the State among its legislative, executive, judiciary and administrative branches is merely enforced at a superficial level, and the legislative power indeed dominates the other powers. The natural right to everything, which one is entitled to have, now becomes a citizen's right to everything secured by legal-political means and exercised in the ritual act of voting only (Van Dun, 2005). In addition, both the effective power of the government in a modern democratic state as well as the techniques of rule and control in the complex mazes of its policy-making processes and bureaucracy surpass those of the most powerful absolute sovereigns in history. Hence, in the name of a gain of civic liberty and social responsibility, the citizens' freedom and self-respect are being ripped off unknowingly. Moreover,

the State tries to convince the citizens that they have been given the right to vote for their representative agent, and thus they must bear the blame themselves for whatever the State has done to them. That is, “[t]he majority ‘represents’ the citizens and gets to make the laws that according to the democratic theory are authorized by all of them.” (Van Dun, 2005).

Now, regarding the question: “Can Hobbes’ justification for absolute sovereignty be applied to contemporary democratic states?”, the answer is affirmative; Singapore, which is a parliamentary representative democratic republic, serves as a vivid example confirming the relevance of Hobbesian democracy to the modern world. Singapore has a long history of suffering aggression from other countries. In 1867 it was colonized by Britain as part of the Straits Settlements and was later occupied by Japan in 1942. After World War II, Singapore gained self-governance in 1959 and joined the new federation of Malaysia in 1963. Very soon, due to ideological differences, it was expelled from the federation in 1965 and became an independent sovereign country. In a speech to the Singapore Press Club in 1996, the “Father of Modern Singapore”, Lee Kuan Yew, who was elected Prime Minister for 31 years, reminisced Singapore’s state of nature:

“In 1965 Singapore suddenly became independent—a vulnerable island with an improbable chance of survival. The geopolitical, economic, and demographic forces were against it. Singapore is not a natural country. It is man-made, artificial, the result of British commercial activities across the oceans which made it a nodal point in a world-wide British maritime empire. We inherited one nodal point, but without a hinterland, like a heart without a body. We faced a bleak future.

I had one guiding principle for survival from the very start, that Singapore had to be better organised than the countries of the region.” (Lee, 1996).

This gloomy picture of the initial stage of Singapore’s independence apparently fits well with Hobbes’ account of the state of nature, implying that Singaporeans need to surrender to the authority of the government in order to escape from the misery. In view of the pressing problems such as unemployment, housing, education, lack of natural resources, lack of land and the threat of terrorism, Lee championed practicing political pragmatism in order to ease the plight of Singaporeans and was credited for transforming Singapore from a third world country to the most prosperous country in the Southeast Asia—one of the “Four Asian Dragons”—during his long tenure. Although he was often criticized for using iron-fisted policies in his governance of Singapore, he was regarded as a “benevolent dictator” and his actions were believed to be vital for Singapore’s early development. Indeed, he openly rejected that “democracy necessarily leads to development” and mocked at the implicit assumption of democracy that “the more people are entitled to vote on any issue the better the decision regarding that issue is likely to be” (Van Dun, 2005):

“So when people say, ‘Oh, ask the people!’ It’s childish rubbish. We are lead-

ers. We know the consequences. You mean that ice-water man knows the consequences of his vote? They say people can think for themselves. Do you honestly believe that the chap who can't pass primary six knows the consequences of his choice when he answers a question viscerally on language, culture and religion?" (Lee, 1992).

It is now well known that not only Singapore has achieved the top ranking for government effectiveness by the World Bank, but Singaporeans are also proud of the efficiency of their government which can keep corruption firmly under control and maintain very low crime rates. After the era of Lee Kuan Yew, the People's Action Party remains as the dominant political party in Singapore and assumes the authority conferred by the people. Accordingly, considering what the alternative consequences could have been without the rule of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore appears to be a legitimate democratic state, namely the "commonwealth", conceived by Hobbes in the context of a social contract.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the context of Hobbesian democracy, I have critically examined the question: "Can Hobbes' justification for absolute sovereignty be applied to contemporary democratic states?" By analyzing the development of Singapore from its state of nature during the era of Lee Kuan Yew, I have demonstrated that the answer to the question is seemingly affirmative and argued that Hobbes' political philosophy is of immediate relevance to contemporary democratic states. Undoubtedly, there are critics challenging the legitimacy of the social contract between the government and citizens in Singapore; that is, they question whether the Singaporean government has really obtained the consent of the citizens, particularly the younger generations who abhor despotic rule. Indeed, most criticism focuses on the role of unanimous collective agreement in managing conflicts within the liberal democracy and stresses the utmost significance of promoting unanimous agreement for the democratic society to work effectively. Nevertheless, the long tenure of Lee Kuan Yew and the subsequent rule of the People's Action Party have presented the convincing evidence for the legitimacy of the Sovereign in Singapore; otherwise, the citizens of Singapore can exercise their natural right to everything, which is secured by legal-political means and exercised in the ritual act of voting, to get rid of the governing party. According to the latest World Happiness Report for 2025, which is published by University of Oxford in collaboration with the United Nation and evaluates factors such as GDP per capita, freedom of choice, healthy life expectancy, social support, generosity, household characteristics, and overall life satisfaction, Singapore has been ranked the second happiest country in Asia and 34<sup>th</sup> in the world. It is clear that whilst Hobbes' sovereign gains legitimacy through an initial social contract, Lee's rule appears to claim legitimacy through performance—notably in economic growth, security and low corruption. This pragmatic social contract, where people tacitly accept limited freedoms in exchange for prosperity, mirrors Hobbes' logic.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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