

CSS-2022  
Q: Illustrate the Hobbesian concept of limited right to revolution.

## Explicating the Hobbesian Concept of limited Right to Revolution

Thomas Hobbes was an English philosopher. He was extremely influenced by the conditions of his country during his life time. He saw the reigns of James I, Charles I and Charles II.

This was the most turbulent period of his country because there was a tussle between parliament and the king for supremacy. All this scenario badly influenced his thoughts for human nature and state of nature. He had a very dark concept about the nature of human and state of nature.

In his book "Leviathan" written in 1651 he proposed the concept of limited right to revolution<sup>for the people</sup> that would have given them<sup>the</sup> right to overthrow the government only in severe circumstances, most often when the sovereign could not <sup>protect</sup> the life of people.

"A subject could only rightfully resist against government authority as a matter



of self-defense and only when lethal harm against him was imminent."

(Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651)

## Expounding the Reasons behind Hobbesian concept of limited Right to Revolution

### a. Hobbesian Concept for <sup>the</sup> nature of human

Hobbes was a very pessimistic person so he drew a very dark concept about the nature of human. According to him man is selfish, self-seeking, fearful, cunning and competitive to the point of combativeness. He believed that man shows no sympathy towards his fellow-beings. He always wants to satisfy his own interests even at the cost of others.

### b. Hobbesian Concept for the State of Nature

For Hobbes, the state of nature is characterized by the "war of every man against every man," a constant and violent condition of competition in which every individual has a natural right to everything regardless of the interests of others. Existence in state of nature is, as Hobbes famously states, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."



# Hobbes' Social Contract. A Unilateral Contract between subjects themselves

According to Hobbes, the conditions in the state of nature might have continued for indefinite period of time but it could not because of two factors inherent in men i.e. <sup>ability to</sup> reason and fear of violent death.

Man is reasonable and can understand that unless they willingly accept the discipline imposed upon them by superior authority, their possessions and lives may be forfeit. So the unsustainable conditions come to an end when:

- Individuals agree in a social contract to relinquish their natural rights to everything and to transfer their self-sovereignty to a higher authority (Hobbes called this authority Leviathan).

- Each individual says to each other:

“I transfer my right of governing myself to the sovereign if you do too?”

Hobbes was in the favor of absolute monarchy. He believed that if people were given the right to revolt freely then this would push them back in the state of chaos.



# Main Tenets of Irrevocable Social Contract proposed by Hobbes

## a. Absolute sovereignty of Leviathan

Hobbes was in the favor of absolute sovereignty possessed by the supreme authority only. He was extremely influenced by Machiavelli so he believed that Leviathan could use force to bring peace in society and every mean no matter legal or illegal, is justified.

used by him  
"Covenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all"

(Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651)

## b. No division of Sovereign's Power

Hobbes gave absolute power to the sovereign i.e. legislative, executive and judiciary. His powers may not be divided. He believed that a mixed state cannot exist because the division of power among King, Lords and Commons has led England to civil war. He believed that monarch cannot disgrace himself and it is ordinarily most



efficient form of government.

### c- Supremacy of Sovereign Over the law

Hobbes wanted the sovereign to be supreme over the law. Customs and traditions cannot be made as the law. Only those customs will be source of law that are validated by the sovereign. He can amend the laws. He possesses the supreme authority to levies taxes necessary for the state's income.

He has all judicial powers to punish his subjects. He can even hear and decide all (judicial) controversial matters of the state as supreme judicial officer.

### d- Submission of all rights before Sovereign

Hobbes is too prudent here and he believes in submission of all rights of <sup>People</sup> citizens before sovereign. He says that Leviathan is not a government by consent and people have no right to go against him in law-making until they feel any threat to their lives. Thus people have to surrender their rights of property and liberty before the sovereign.



# Criticism on Hobbesian Concept of Limited Right to Revolution in the Light of theories of Philosophers

## ⇒ Theory of Benjamin Franklin:

"Those who sacrifice their liberty for the sake of security deserve neither liberty nor security." (Benjamin Franklin)

As Hobbes justified his concept of limited right to revolution in this way that people should surrender their rights of liberty to sovereign for the sake of peace and security.

But Benjamin Franklin is opponent of this view as he thought that no compromise should be made over liberty at any cost.

## ⇒ Theory of John Locke:

John Locke promoted the concept that every man is born with three basic rights i.e. life, liberty and property. He mainly focussed on liberty and also promoted freedom of press, educational reforms and religious tolerance. He called for



for revolution to overthrow the government that failed to protect their liberty, property and other basic rights. This is quite opposite to Hobbes who focussed on limited right to revolution i.e. people could revolt only in extreme circumstances.

## ⇒ Theory of Rousseau

Rousseau gave the concept of "General Will" which means only that law is acceptable that is agreed by majority people of the state. While Hobbes gave absolute authority to sovereign. Hobbes allowed the sovereign to make laws according to his own will. On the other hand, Rousseau (relinquish<sup>was</sup>) ~~is~~ <sup>was</sup> against the concept of particular will as he believed that rule of particular will leads to monarchy or oligarchy.

## ⇒ Theory of Montesquieu

Montesquieu <sup>was</sup> the person who gave the concept of <sup>separation of powers among</sup> a legislature, executive and judiciary. He promoted the concept of strong checks and balance among

State organs. This was the foundation of American constitution. On the other hand, Hobbes did not allow division of legislative, executive and judicial powers i.e. all those powers will be exercised by sovereign only.

### ⇒ Theory of Karl Marx

As Hobbes was Machiavellian so he justified each law, policy and step taken by sovereign that could bring peace in society. This concept of Hobbes will lead towards a capitalist society where only capitalist will design the superstructure of society. But Karl Marx was against capitalism. He gave the concept of self-governance that is quite opposite to Hobbesian concept. He promoted the concept of socialism and communism as he did not believe in concentration of authority in few hands.



# Incompatibility of Hobbesian Concept with Contemporary World

⇒ Undemocratic Nature of Hobbesian Concept :

In today's world majority of countries are following the theory of John Locke in their government system as it allows the protection of liberty and presence of authoritative body like parliament simultaneously. Unlike Hobbesian concept 167 countries have set up democratic system of government in their states.

Even the Scandinavian countries are famous for their best democratic systems in the world and these countries follow Rousseau concept of General Will in their government system that prefers will of majority not of particular people.

In fact in Pakistan, there is democratic system of government. So Hobbesian concept is incompatible with modern world.



due to its undemocratic nature.

## ⇒ Tyranny caused by Absolute Authority of Sovereign:

The absolute authority of sovereign leads to tyranny. Because when he is free to exercise any power then he can become brutal. He will not care for the basic rights of people. This concept of absolute authority was practiced in France for a very long time that has converted the prosperous country of France into state stuck in debt trap. The king of France was very tyrant and unjust with 97% common population of France. But the Bourgeoisie of this 97% population was very fond of John Locke so they took stand and the event of Tennis Court Oath 1789 took place that brought revolution in France. Today, France is a democratic country.

## ⇒ Lawlessness caused by sole Authority of Sovereign:

As Hobbes gave sole authority to sovereign of the state but this will lead to lawlessness.

In modern era, possession of all powers by single state organ leads to lawlessness and violation of basic fundamental rights.

This will lead to a situation where common people ~~were~~<sup>will</sup> not be able to protest for their



their rights. <sup>government system of</sup>  
Comparison of UK with US:

In UK, the House of Commons possesses majority of powers and it can pass any bill. No state organ can resist against it and not even people are able to do so.

(Stephan)

Stephen Leslie says that: you have to kill your blue eyed babies if House of Commons of UK pass this bill.

On the other hand, in US judiciary can nullify any bill approved by the parliament if it is against human rights.

Recently, US supreme court has passed anti-abortion bill <sup>for</sup> ~~in~~ football. Supreme court has passed this bill on the basis of protection of human rights. This whole scenario clearly depicts that Hobbesian concept of is impracticable today.

## Conclusion

Hobbes concept of limited right to revolution was mainly influenced by his dark thoughts for man and state of nature. His theory is of great importance in political sciences but in modern era it is impractical to follow his theory of limited revolution. Due to undemocratic nature of Hobbesian concept of limited right to revolution, his theory is



incompatible with modern world. This is in the nature of man that he moves towards progression so it is impossible for humans to stick on Hobbesian concept of limited right to revolution. That is why, most of world has adopted democratic system unlike Hobbesian concept of social contract.

