Thomas Hobbes: As Influenced by the English Revolution

During 1640-1660 England found itself in a political upheaval which would later be known as the English Revolution. This political chaos was a direct result of the following three major controversies between the Crown and Parliament: religious, economic and social. With times changing, England found itself torn in two different directions, as an attempt to remain a feudal system were challenged by swift movements toward capitalism. The Crown fought vehemently for the former while Parliament used its monetary means and great support for the latter. On the verge of financial ruin, the King enforced a number of strict regulations that would detrimentally affect the economy of the country and further aggravate Parliament. This, along with the already present struggle for control of the church, made war inevitable. This dominating political turmoil during the English Revolution directly attributed to Thomas Hobbes’ philosophy which is revealed in his pessimistic view of human nature and absolutist ideals as exemplified in *Leviathan.*

The English Revolution was a time of political unrest. The unrest was already present but became magnified with the unison of England, Ireland and Scotland under one monarch. Before this point in time, the Crown and Parliament worked together in order to fight against foreign and internal enemies. With their enemies no longer of concern, their differences in interest took front ground. Parliament was controlled by the bourgeoisies and their ever growing wealth. With a lack of need for protection, parliament lost interest in the concerns of the Crown. The bourgeoisies were aware that a change to capitalism would best benefit their monetary needs. While the king on the other hand, feared their growth in wealth and fought to remain a feudal system for he “was himself the greatest of feudal landlords” and for that reason “opposed no less than any other landowner to a fundamental change from a feudal to a capitalist order of society” (The English). The King implemented heavy taxes which infuriated Parliament who had previously been in control of taxation. He additionally fought to take control of the church and used it as a source of propaganda. This agitated his subjects who wished the control of the church to remain with Parliament. Civil war became inescapable and the King’s unwillingness to compromise ultimately led to his beheading.

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes shares his belief that all men are equal. He acknowledges that men are born with different capabilities that may initially give the appearance of inequality but he argues that the difference between one man and another “is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he” (Hobbes 793). The equality of man does not come from being identical for surely one man can be born with more strength than another. Instead, the equality comes from their ability to use what skill is given them. If one man is physically stronger than another, the weaker man has the ability to devise a cunning plan or to assemble others in order to get what he desires. Due to the fact that all men are equal, no one man has a given right over another. For that reason an issue arises when “two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy” (Hobbes 793). This leads to conflict in which the two men will “endeavor to destroy or subdue one another” (Hobbes 793). Hobbes believes that there are in actuality only three reasons for which men fight: competition, diffidence and glory. Men in the natural state must fight in order to get resources they want or need. Once they attain any sort of property, they will constantly be in fear of someone else taking it. For that reason, they will fight to protect what they now possess. Lastly, men fight in order to build a name for themselves. They wish to attain a positive reputation. The constant fighting or fear of fighting that would governor men in this natural state is referred to by Hobbes as a time of war. He does not believe that their needs to be actual any conflict in order for war to be present but what is necessary is the fear itself. Even if not physically, a natural state consist of “every man against every man” (Hobbes 793). *Leviathan* demonstrates that this natural state would not allow industry, cultural or growth. The natural state breaks down to an individualistic level where invention and development because obsolete. For this reason, Hobbes believes life for man in the natural state would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 793).

The only solution to this horrid state, according to Hobbes, would be a commonwealth. This would be the only “foresight of their own preservation” (Hobbes 794). In order to keep man from destroying one another, they must relinquish some of their rights to a higher power that will protect them from one another. Hobbes believes that there are fundamental laws of nature such as “justice, equity, modesty, mercy, and, in sum, doing to others as we would be done to” (Hobbes 794). However, he believes that these laws are in complete contradiction to man in his natural state. A man in his natural state is constantly fighting to attain resources and preserve them; therefore, he cannot do to others as he would wish to be done upon. For that reason, man must be in “fear of punishment” in order to keep them obeying these laws (Hobbes 794). The entity that would instill this fear of punishment would govern of the people. Two forms of governing entities are brought to light in *Leviathan.* The first is a monarchy where all power is relinquished to one supreme being. The other is some sort of republic where a group of people accept control.

Ultimately, this governing entity is entrusted with “the procuration of the safety of the people” (Hobbes 794). Its main goal is to enact laws that will keep the people from deviating from God’s natural laws stated above. This is only possible if the governing entity is sovereign- in that it is authorized the power to act in the behalf of the multitude. Without this authority, man would return to the natural state and for that reason, the governing entity should do all in its ability to maintain power.

Hobbes exemplifies an Absolutist view. While he states in *Leviathan* that either form of governing system would benefit the people, he promotes a monarchy over a republic. As illustrated by the conflict between the Crown and Parliament during the English Revolution, chaos will ensue when more than one person is instilled all power. For this reason, Hobbes believes one King should retain full control. Additionally, it would be much easier for regulations to be implemented if they were decided on simply by one person. The civil war that arises during this time exemplifies Hobbes’ notion that without supreme sovereignty the commonwealth will be “dissolved and every man” will return to a time of war. The underlying concept in *Leviathan* is that the king will be composed of the will of the people, where although men cannot be entitled to everything they desire they will be rewarded with some of what they desire. Additionally, they would not need fear losing their possessions for any one that attempts to take from another will be punished. This exchange of power for protection is referred to as a social contract, in which the people elect to reduce their will in order to be protected from themselves. Ultimately, the fear of punishment will keep man from committing crimes against one another.

**Works Cited**

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