

Introduction to Research Symposium on Political Economy

The relationship between economics and politics is salient at many points in Hobbes's most famous work, *Leviathan*. For example, in chapter 11 readers learn that competition firstly for "Riches," and then "Honour, Command, or other power," is a primary motivation inclining individuals to "Contention, Enmity, and War."¹ This is followed in chapter 13 by his claim that the passions inclining individuals to peace are, firstly, "Feare of Death," followed immediately by the "Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living," with the related "Hope" that by their own "Industry" each individual will be able to attain them.² These two passages alone create a compelling vision of acquiring wealth as a primary human motivation, material comfort from property as a common human yearning, and human labor as the principal means to acquire either. Hobbes also describes justice at times intertwined with economic considerations. For example, in claiming the science of the laws of nature as "true" moral philosophy in *Leviathan* he writes:

before the names of Just, and Unjust can have place, there must be some coërcive Power, to compell men equally to the performance of their Covenants, by the terrour of some punishment, greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their Covenant; and to make good that Propriety [property], which by mutuall Contract men acquire, in recompence of the universall Right they abandon: and such power there is none before the erection of a Common-wealth.³

Certainly, scholars across fields have then attended in differing ways to Hobbes's description of the economics of the commonwealth.⁴ Studies range

-
- 1 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 152 [47–48].
 - 2 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 196 [63].
 - 3 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 220 [71–72].
 - 4 For an overview see Quentin Taylor, "Thomas Hobbes, Political Economist: His Changing Historical Fortunes," *The Independent Review* 14, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 415–433. A prominent

from examinations of discrete economic terms in Hobbes's writings through efforts to place Hobbes's project in the context of early modern European mercantilism or commercial society. At one end of a spectrum, some studies conclude that Hobbes's economic views are determined by "considerations of statecraft" instead of broader political theoretic considerations, such as justice.⁵ At the other end, studies like that of Macpherson conflate economics with politics in Hobbes's work, associating it with a "possessive market model" in which justice is the product of markets in a commercializing society.⁶ Between these poles, some contemporary scholars arrive at the claim made by Tom Sorell, that "Hobbes's politics is much more essentially political economy than is usually supposed."⁷ This recognition that Hobbes's work is basically "political economy" (a term in circulation by 1615 with Monchrestien de Vasteville's treatise of that title) – as opposed to an economic model of justice *tout court* or a political theory describing justice without much reference to economics – places his thought in another light.

What then is Hobbes's place in the history of political economy? What is his place in seventeenth-century English political economy debates? What did his political economist interlocutors think of his ideas? For example, Sir William Petty (1623 – 1687), later labeled a founder of classical political economy for

example from economics, Nobel Laureate James Buchanan adopted the premises of Hobbes's social contract theory for his own work on economic justice, notably in *The Limits of Liberty: Between Anarchy and Leviathan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975). Though also prominently working on economic justice in the social contract tradition, John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* addresses Hobbes by rejecting his work for the "special problems" it raises (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 11 n4.

- 5 Aaron Levy, "Economic Views of Thomas Hobbes," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15, no. 4 (1954): 589.
- 6 C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 53 and passim. Leo Strauss saw Hobbes's philosophy accommodating commercial society as "bourgeois-capitalist" or "socialist" in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 1. However, Keith Thomas challenged the "bourgeois" reading of Hobbes in emphasizing the "transitional" character of the commercial economy at Hobbes's time as arguably reflected in his writings ("The Social Origins of Hobbes' Political Thought," in *Hobbes Studies*, ed. Keith Brown [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965], 191). That refutation was taken up more recently in this journal by Richard Hillyer, "Keith Thomas' 'Definitive Refutation' of C. B. Macpherson: Revisiting 'The Social Origins of Hobbes' Political Thought,'" *Hobbes Studies* 15, no. 1 (2002): 32–44.
- 7 Tom Sorell, "Hobbes, Public Safety and Political Economy," in *International Political Theory After Hobbes: Analysis, Interpretation and Orientation*, ed. Gabriella Slomp and Raia Prokhovnik (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 42.

minting economic terms like “political arithmetic” and “political anatomy,” was an amicable interlocutor for Hobbes in Paris.⁸

Drawing attention to such questions, the articles in this symposium revisit the productive topic of Hobbes and political economy. Both articles aim to understand aspects of Hobbes’s description of the economy of the English commonwealth. Both articles especially highlight the central role of property in what their authors similarly view as Hobbes’s irenic political project. Whereas Laurens van Apeldoorn’s article traces Hobbes’s view on the nature of property and how it determines the relation between sovereign and subjects across political and legal works, David Lay Williams’s article contextualizes the political salience of Hobbes’s view of economic class distinctions with their property implications.

Apeldoorn begins by claiming that individual property secured by law is necessary for the peace of the commonwealth, as evidenced throughout Hobbes’s political and legal works. Even so regulated, individual property does not exclude the representative sovereign on whose discretion it depends. Apeldoorn examines Hobbes’s descriptions of property in order, starting first in *Elements of Law* and extending to *De Cive*, to show individual property conceived in terms of natural right and effective possession, which extends to the sovereign who is thereby said to own everything. By using an unconventional definition of property in terms of effective control rather than exclusive right, this includes making subjects the “property” of the sovereign. In the later *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes individual property as a function of civil law excluding other subjects to ensure their exclusive right to possession, with attendant legal powers (e.g., transfer, alienation). For Apeldoorn, it follows that *Leviathan*’s definition no longer involves the idea that the sovereign owns citizens or their belongings. While lastly *A Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student, of the Common Laws of England* draws on the feudal doctrine of divided property, which held that sovereign and subjects might have property in the same possession, the work continues to maintain that subjects may not hold property against the sovereign. Apeldoorn’s analysis of Hobbes’s special interest in the relation between sovereign and subjects regarding property raises questions about the basis – natural as opposed to civil law – for resolving lawsuits brought by subjects against the sovereign over issues like expropriation

8 See John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898). A short manuscript by Petty might even “fruitfully be considered in terms of the light it casts on the relation between the formation of classical political economy and Hobbes’s thought,” according to its translators (Frank Amati and Tony Asproumorgos, “Petty *Contra* Hobbes: A Previously Untranslated Manuscript,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46, no. 1 [1985]: 128).

or judgments contrary to grants through charters. The thesis that Hobbes aims for a legally unencumbered sovereign who can also participate in economic life thus seems to extend Apeldoorn's own claim from an earlier article that Hobbes seeks "to guarantee the material conditions of the commonwealth," especially through centering his view of property in "the appropriate organisation of the economy."⁹

Without claiming that the theoretical dilemma of economic inequality is as central for Hobbes as it would later be for Rousseau, Williams makes a case for examining Hobbes's views on the potential of both poverty and concentrated wealth to disrupt a peaceful commonwealth. After pointing out developments in England at Hobbes's time affecting general trends in the inequality of wealth and property – from the Civil War and effects of increasing commercialization to the Poor Laws and Ship Money tax – Williams then details Hobbes's concern for potential conflicts fomented by those who have too little or too much. Poverty threatens individual self-preservation and dignity and leads to discontent in various forms. The immoderately rich are vain-glorious, with a desire to dominate others while believing in their own impunity, and can be hard to govern – especially when trying to preserve their wealth against their sovereign representative. The "factious nature" of inequality is of political concern in rich displays of luxury and disobedience (e.g., not paying taxes) and the resultant envy of the poor whose resentment, not just desperation (Hobbes does not blame a poor individual stealing for survival), can similarly lead to marshaling people through their grievances for an uprising. Williams then catalogues Hobbes's recommendations for addressing inequality to maintain peace through specific approaches to public charity, taxation, and education as well as equity in dealings between sovereign and subjects or even, he argues, in significant redistribution of property. Along with their relevance for theories of distributive justice, the latter two remedies also suggest the salience of Hobbes's concept of equity – or "equitable reasoning" in one commentator's words – as a standard for his political economy broadly.¹⁰ Moreover, understanding Hobbes on equity entails a detailed examination of Hobbes's view of

9 Laurens van Apeldoorn, "The Nutrition of a Commonwealth: On Hobbes's Economic Thought," in *History of Economic Rationalities: Economic Reasoning as Knowledge and Practice Authority*, ed. Jakob Bek-Thomsen, Christian Olaf Christiansen, Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen, and Mikkel Thorup (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 28.

10 Claire Finkelstein, "Equity," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hobbes*, ed. S.A. Lloyd (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 176; also see Lee Ward, "Equity and Political Economy in Thomas Hobbes," *American Journal of Political Science*, 64, 4 (2020): 823–835. Johan Olsthoorn examines Hobbes on distributive justice through a broader lens than only equity in *Hobbes on Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

“greed” for more than one’s share, contravening natural law, as Williams highlights here.¹¹

The approaches to interpreting Hobbes in both symposium articles raise questions about the relation of his texts to each other regarding their order of production and publication alongside the question of their place in seventeenth-century English political economy debates (surely, the forthcoming Clarendon editions of Hobbes’s works will further elucidate the development and relation of his texts in context).¹² These articles also set up specific questions about Hobbes’s views on wealth and property in terms of redistribution, political authority over property (i.e., sovereign non-exclusion), and the political economics of legal instruments such as charters. Studying Hobbes and political economy ultimately points back to some of the main issues in his writings with which scholars working on most topics continue to grapple: equality in relation to inequality, natural law in relation to civil law, and the material conditions necessary for the union of individuals as a body politic. Hopefully, this symposium demonstrates connections between Hobbes’s work and the history of political economy on questions about the economic side of justice that will interest and encourage dialogue among readers of *Hobbes Studies* across many fields.

Acknowledgements

The idea for this symposium resulted from a 2018 Renaissance Society of America panel accepted by Johann P. Sommerville as Legal and Political Thought Discipline Representative entitled, “Hobbes on Aspects of Political Economy,” as chaired by Todd Butler with papers presented by Ioannis D. Evrigenis, Susanne Sreedhar, and Katherine M. Robiadek. With gratefulness to all panel attendees, special thanks go to Gabriella Slomp as former editor of *Hobbes Studies* for supporting subsequent development of this symposium as well as to the journal’s current editorial team, especially Deborah Baumgold,

11 For more on the danger of greed for Hobbes, see Gabriella Slomp, *Thomas Hobbes and the Political Philosophy of Glory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 49.

12 For details on the “serial composition” of Hobbes’s political texts, see the “Editor’s Introduction” in *Three-Text Edition of Thomas Hobbes’s Political Theory: The Elements of Law, De Cive and Leviathan*, ed. Deborah Baumgold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

for seeing it through. The symposium was intended to also include an article by Professor Olaf Asbach that we hope will be part of the next issue of the journal.

Katherine M. Robiadek

Department of Political Science, Hood College, Frederick, Maryland, USA
robiadek@hood.edu