

Hobbes, Or, We the People

Douglas C. Bennett
Earlham College

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Deep down, I want every student that passes through my hands to read [Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*](#), first published in 1651. I think it is the single best path to a deeper, clearer understanding of politics and the terms of a common life. Hobbes is bracing (breathtakingly bracing), and wrestling with Hobbes is an education in clarity all by himself. For those of you who have not read him within the past week, Hobbes is the one who says, “the condition of man by nature,” is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” He’s the one who argues that the only way to avoid that predicament of “the war of all against all” is to have a single, unitary, unquestioned sovereign, and obey him (or her or it) no matter how much the sovereign acts in ways that are tyrannical or greedy or morally bankrupt.

I don’t want my students to read Hobbes because I agree with Hobbes. I want them to look into the abyss. I don’t believe anyone wholly agrees with Hobbes, and that’s really the point. But how and why is he wrong? Most of our current political lexicon, most of our ways of thinking about politics today derive from him. He’s the first person to use “authority” as we use it today. The first to use “representation” as we use it today. The first to begin with an understanding of God-given individual “rights” as fundamental. We already – all of us – adopt a great deal of the way Hobbes thinks. How do we separate from the parts we don’t like, especially when there is a taut logic to how he connects the pieces?

For many years I taught political philosophy the straightforward way: first Plato, then Aristotle, then chronologically on through Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to John Stewart Mill’s *On Liberty*. For many students it was a hard slog. Plato wasn’t at all about their world, Aristotle was (well) boring, and Hobbes was just dense and offensive.

So I tried Plan B. I taught the course backwards. First Mill, who they liked, but perhaps could come to see, was a little shallow. Then Locke who was familiar, but, they could eventually see, inconsistent. And then Hobbes. They could see (or at least many of them could), that Locke built on Hobbes’s foundation, and perhaps they caught a glimmer that Hobbes built better (even if less attractively) on those foundations. Locke was trying to soften Hobbes, but was he successful? Did he provide a way out? They weren’t so sure. After that, I hoped, Aristotle and Plato would offer some hope that there was a way to escape Hobbes’s bracing, offensive conclusions. Maybe they’d read them with a little more sympathy. Maybe they would see that assumptions that were wholly individualistic and wholly selfish were not the right ways to think about what it meant to be human.

Then I started trying Plan C. I didn’t stop teaching political philosophy, but I also started teaching public policy. If I wanted my students to think clearly and wisely about equality, about liberty and rights, about justice, about the legitimate reach of government power, about what laws can and should do, maybe I could teach that better to more students through public policy than political philosophy. Twenty years into Plan C., I’m pretty sure I’m teaching the same thing, whether I’m teaching political philosophy or public policy. The deep issues of the Humanities are always the same.

When people are poor, what should we do for them? Should we give them money? Food? Should we give them these things for every year they are poor, or just for a few years, because really they should provide for themselves, and we will ruin them if we provide assistance with no time limit? Do we have a responsibility to provide a quality education for all young people? If so, how do we exercise this responsibility? Does it extend through sixth grade? Or through high school? Or through college?

Notice how often the word “we” comes up in these questions. What are we going to do for one another? And who are “we,” anyway (and who are “they” – the not “we”)?

I was still at Temple University when I started Plan C. One year, among the two dozen students I had in the public policy class were two African-American young men, good friends for many years, from the rugged, very poor, African-American North Philadelphia neighborhood around Temple. We were deep into the course. We had discussed poverty policy and social security, education and health care. Now we were starting into immigration policy. The most important question regarding immigration policy, I suggested to the class, was one virtually never discussed, but one from which everything else followed: “should we have open borders?” If we have open border, then we don’t have to worry about enforcement questions or a border patrol or the rights of undocumented people. But if we don’t want to allow access to everyone who wants to come in, then we do have to think together about all those things – and also justify why we are telling some people they can’t have access to what God has provided to us all on planet earth.

So, I asked this group of students, do you believe in open borders? “No” said one of the two young men firmly, just as the other said, “Yes,” just as firmly. And then they looked at each other. I don’t imagine they had ever disagreed so starkly about anything. To one it was intuitively and immediately clear that the U.S. government had no legitimate authority to exclude anyone who was seeking opportunity. (He had seen enough of that for himself and for those like him.) To the other, it was equally clear that to allow free entry to anyone and everyone would further delay the already unconscionably long-delayed saga of equality for African-Americans first brought to these United States against their will. I wasn’t privileged to hear the rest of that argument; they had it outside class, but I’m sure they were both better off for having that argument. In honesty, we should all have it.

Today, we are having (you all know) a difficult, edgy and often uncivil argument today about the future direction of these United States. Much of it is an argument about the proper direction of public policy. Often, the Constitution of the United States gets dragged into this argument. For some, it is a question of whether we respect the Constitution, but I believe it is much better understood as an argument about how we should read the Constitution in respecting it. They’ve even taken to reading the Constitution in the House of Representatives.

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” Those, of course, are the opening words of the United States Constitution. Those aren’t so much the words we most argue over, but let’s just pause on those first few words: “We the people...” The Constitution doesn’t mean very much if we do not know how to say “We the people. But how do we manage to say “We?”

Well, don’t you know, that’s Hobbes’s problem. Starting with so many glorious individuals, Hobbes can’t see any way to see “we” without having an overbearing government (a sovereign) who

makes us “we” by fiat and force, a sovereign that does just as he or it pleases, representing us by speaking for us – and not needing to care a whit what we happen to think.

I imagine that each and every one of you believes that it is possible to say “we” in some way, with some degree of inclusiveness, and with the implication of some degree of moral or civic responsibility to take care of one another – to take care of those within the “we.” And I imagine that each and every one of us believes that it is possible to constitute that “we” without an autocrat assembling and ordering that “we-ness.” Put another way, I imagine each and every one of you disagrees with Hobbes.

I am talking about Hobbes today, in a consideration of the Humanities and Public Policy, because the study of public policy today is dominated by methods and perspectives drawn from the discipline of economics. And economics, as a discipline, has its footings squarely in Hobbes. It assumes a world composed of individuals (whether persons or firms), and it assumes those individuals act out of selfishness – or, put another way – out of the maximization of utility. The framing of questions in such Hobbesian or economic terms, narrows what we can think possible. If you start with Hobbes’s assumptions about human beings, it is difficult to escape his conclusions.

Towards the end of his life, the historian Tony Judt made a similar point in a remarkable valedictory lecture entitled “[What Is Living and What Is Dead in Social Democracy?](#)” His topic was the overall character of public policy in advanced industrial countries. “For the last thirty years, in much of the English-speaking world (though less so in continental Europe and elsewhere), when asking ourselves whether we support a proposal or initiative,” he said, “we have not asked, is it good or bad? Instead we inquire: Is it efficient? Is it productive? Would it benefit gross domestic product? Will it contribute to growth? This propensity to avoid moral considerations, to restrict ourselves to issues of profit and loss—economic questions in the narrowest sense—is not an instinctive human condition. It is an acquired taste.”

To talk meaningfully about public policy you do have to ask whether a policy is good or bad; you do have to address moral questions. Those moral questions get flattened into one shallow dimension of gain and loss for selfish individuals – the perspective of Hobbes.

I am not arguing against the value of economics as an approach to understanding public policy. I am urging that we become uncomfortable with a monopoly reliance on this approach.

Even more than I want my students to read Hobbes, I want them to think deeply about when and whether it is ever possible to think sensibly about a “we.” It seems easy to say “we the people” until you start to think about it. Hobbes thought about it and wasn’t sure we ever could. Most of us think it must be possible, and live trying to make those connections that constitute a “we.”

One way to look at the Humanities is to see them as successive, alternative, contested and contesting answers to this problem.

I want my students to think about who “we” are, about how we become a “we,” and who we exclude from the “we.” I want them to think about what we owe one another, what responsibilities we have. I want them to think about what we can count on, what we are entitled to (what rights we have, if you will) from one another. And most of all, I want my students to think about why we think about “We the people,” in whatever way we do

Where will they go for the answers? Tony Judt said, "A historian has to be an anthropologist, also has to be a philosopher, also has to be a moralist, also has to understand the economics of the period he is writing about." I think the same can and must be said of a public policy person.

I hope my students will read Hobbes, but I also hope they'll read a thousand other profound works of the Humanities. I hope they'll read Faulkner and Rousseau. I hope they'll read the Bible and the Qur'an. I hope they'll read Elizabeth Bishop and Sojourner Truth.

And all the while I hope they're wondering whether and how and with what breadth we can say "we the people."

