

Thomas Hobbs and American Indians

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Abstract

Thomas Hobbs, one of the early founders of modern political science whose seminal work, *Leviathan*, which initiated major shifts in mainstream political theory has been called by one of his biographers, "a Bible for Modern Man," had a negative view of Indians, yet they had a tremendous impact upon his thinking and writing. Largely because of what he heard about Natives of the Americas, Hobbs shifted the definition of "nature" in western philosophy from the telos or ultimate end of something to its conditions at its origins. For example, where the nature of an oak tree had previously been seen in the ideal oak tree, with Hobbs the nature of the oak tree was now to be found in the acorn. In addition, where previously mainstream theory believed rights were a good that it was up to the sovereign to provide as seemed prudent, with Hobbs for the first time there is the beginning of considering rights as natural, though until Locke, this right was extremely limited. Further, there are certain similarities in some of Hobbs laws of nature and American Indian ways of dealing with others, including those considered potentially dangerous, that raise the question if this similarity arises from Indigenous influence upon Hobbs. An examination of Hobbs experience and thinking in relation to American Indian ways of seeing indicates that the similarity is only partial, and that it relates to differences in independent Hobbesian and Indigenous ways of seeing.

1. Introduction

Thomas Hobbs, one of the early founders of modern political science whose seminal work, *Leviathan*, which initiated major shifts in mainstream political theory has been called by one of his biographers, "a Bible for Modern Man,"¹ had a negative view of Indians, yet they had a tremendous impact upon his thinking and writing. Largely because of what he heard about Natives of the Americas, Hobbs shifted the definition of "nature" in western philosophy from the telos or ultimate end of something to its conditions at its origins. For example, where the nature of an oak tree had previously been seen in the ideal oak tree, with Hobbs the nature of the oak tree was now to be found in the acorn. In addition, where previously mainstream theory believed rights were a good that it was up to the sovereign to provide as seemed prudent, with Hobbs for the first time there is the beginning of considering rights as natural, though until Locke,² this right was extremely limited. Further, there are certain similarities in some of Hobbs laws of nature and American Indian ways of dealing with others, including those considered potentially dangerous. this raises the question if this similarity arises from Indigenous

influence upon Hobbs. An examination of Hobbs experience and thinking in relation to American Indian ways of seeing indicates that the similarity is only partial, and that it relates to differences in independent Hobbesian and Indigenous ways of seeing.

2. The Background to the American Indian Influences Upon Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 in England, almost a century after huge numbers of reports of the Indigenous peoples in the Americas began flooding Europe. When Columbus first made contact with Natives of the Americas in 1492, with his reports of them the first of thousands, the Indigenous peoples available to Western Europeans were marginal, at best, in their relations, knowledge and interests. The Sami in the north of Scandinavia, the tribes of the Steps in Russia and the few that peopled parts of the Balkans were two distant to be of consequence, as were the Nordic people of Iceland whose culture continued many Indigenous aspects. Similarly, whatever continuing aspects of Indigenous ways in Basque culture in Southern France and Northern Spain remained had no relevance for mainstream European concerns

and thinking. Some European contacts had long taken place on occasion with some peoples of Africa, but were too few, distant and inconsequential to have much impact on Western European thinking. When the Portuguese and others began taking some strategic locations on the African coast some time before 1492, these were only held as strong and supply points by those seeking an alternate route for European trade with Asia, and did not involve any extensive or important cultural interchange or contact with African Indigenous Peoples. That this remained the case even in the mid to late Eighteenth Century can be seen in the very few references to African Indigenous peoples compared to a huge number of references to peoples of the Americas in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau who was very much influenced by the reports received from the Americas of its Indigenous peoples."³

While some Indigenous cultural remnants remained in mainstream Europe in 1492, as might be seen in some aspects of common laws or such institutions as village commons, and even more in some suppressed and/or marginalized religious and ethnic groups, mainstream Europe had moved considerably away from the equalitarian, inclusive participatory ways of Indigenous peoples, with their generally balanced reciprocity in gender relations,⁴ as would soon be observed in the Americas. Europe was in various degrees patriarchal and hierarchical in culture and governance, though at that time engaged in considerable cultural change, including a developing natural science. In some nations, particularly England and later France, there was considerable potential for, and at times actual, political turmoil. Particularly in England, France and Holland, there was an opening for new ideas, many of which would soon come from reports from the Americas.⁵

Columbus first voyage opened the way for major moves by a number of European Nations to obtain and hold extensive territory in the Americas for large scale conquest and/or settlement, trade and the obtaining of resources. This immediately put large numbers of Europeans in interaction with much larger populations of Native peoples. Almost immediately, Europe began receiving huge numbers of reports about the Indigenous peoples of the Americas that were read with great interest in Europe, initiating widespread discussion and considerable writing.⁶ The reports were of variable accuracy and while views of Native Americans in Europe were both positive and negative, the overwhelming impression was that these people "have no kings." Among the very first of writings in response to the reports from the Americas was Sir Tomas Moore, *Utopia*, a work of fiction written in England in 1519. Moore created a fictitious South American Society that was fairly accurate in portraying basic Indigenous American social, political and economic principles that he used to critique early Sixteenth-Century English society. Thus, by Hobbes time, beginning at the end of the Sixteenth Century, much had been discussed about Indians of the Americas emphasizing their extensive freedom, lack of individual property ownership in fairly collaborative economies (while it was missed that Indigenous Americans did have individual and family use rights to property), and the misimpression of many that they had no government, while other Europeans understood

that tribal societies in America functioned through inclusive participatory decision making.

3. The Development of Hobbes Life and Thought

Fear was prominent in Hobbes life beginning with the time of his birth and it played a major role in his political thinking. From reading his major work, *Leviathan*, one might think he was a bit paranoid. In fact, he was not, though extremely law and order oriented amidst turbulent times.⁷ Similarly, from what Hobbes said of human nature, one might think he was not a very nice or sociable person. But that was not the case. For Hobbes was also very much involved in the development of science - a factor in his political thought - regularly abstracting from reality to come to conclusions and make points. That was even the case regarding his own personality.

Hobbes was born in Westport, England in 1588. That was a year when there was much fear in England and among his family members, especially his mother.⁸ For more than a century Martin Luther's theologians had been predicting that 1588 would be "climacteric," the beginning of the last 70-year era of the world in which mothers giving birth would be especially negatively impacted. For months rumors had been circulating in England of the coming invasion by the Spanish Armada which many feared would bring the Antichrist, ushering an end time of wars and upheavals. Hobbes mother could not know that the Armada would suffer a great storm and be defeated.

Hobbes reported years later that his mother's fear had caused her to give birth to him prematurely, saying, "At this point my mother was filled with such fear that she bore twins, me and my fear."⁸ Hobbes adult life coincided with turbulent political times in England, including The Wars of the Three Kingdoms,⁹ also known as the British Civil Wars, a series of interrelated conflicts fought between 1639 and 1653 in the kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland, the 1639 to 1640 Bishops' Wars, the First and Second English Civil Wars, the Irish Confederate Wars, the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland and the Anglo-Scottish War of 1650–1652. Amidst the civil wars the 1649 victory of the Parliamentarian army, the execution of Charles I, the abolition of monarchy, and founding of the Commonwealth of England. This later became The Protectorate headed by Oliver Cromwell. It was a unitary state which controlled the British Isles until the Stuart Restoration in 1660. With the victory of Cromwell, Hobbes, a well-known royalist, was, as he later stated, the "first of those that fled,"¹⁰ finding sanctuary in France. His flight was for good reason, given the arrests that had already taken place of supporters of the king. Never-the-less, it reinforced his underlying fear of disorder.

Hobbes father was a semi-literate protestant clergyman.¹¹ Hobbes following a Calvinistic Protestantism with its view that human beings were born of original sin, giving them a negative nature, which needed to be countered and controlled in their upbringing, likely contributed to Hobbes negative view of human nature as expressed in *Leviathan*.¹²

4. Hobbes Interest in Science

Hobbes took a profound interest in the development of science that was in progress during his lifetime and philosophized about it.¹³ He philosophized much on the nature of numerous phenomena and of all things. This interest was likely one factor in the shift he initiated in philosophy about what constituted nature, to be discussed below. For Hobbes, seeking certainty in an uncertain world, most of his approach to science was in geometric logic, that if correctly reasoned was certain in terms following from the assumptions made, which were considered true.¹⁴ But he was also pragmatic, with theory only being useful if it could be applied usefully.¹⁵ This may explain why he was so certain his attempted geometric proof for squaring the circle was correct, though it made one of the classical errors involved in all such efforts. For Hobbes solution to the problem was very close to being successful, and thus he may have considered it correct in terms of its practical value. Thus, Hobbes writing in *Leviathan*, and other works, consists of extensive definitions and logical arguments.

5. Hobbes and Indians

At an early age Hobbes professed an interest in Indigenous peoples. While a student in his teens at Oxford, he stated that he took "great delight" in going to bookstores and looking at maps. He expressed having a fascination with land areas marked "terra incognita", wanting to know about the people and monsters of those lands.¹⁶ Given the continuing great interest in Indians in England and Western Europe from first contact to long after Hobbes death, Hobbes must have heard much discussion about Native Americans in the several intellectual circles in which he was involved over many years.¹⁷ Further Hobbes held a share of stock in one of the 8 offshoots of the Virginia Co. of the British colony of Virginia from 1622-1624, attending a number of its board meetings during that period.¹⁸ Yet he was limited in his knowledge of Indigenous Americans and considerably mistaken in what he thought he knew about them. As his biographer, Martinich, comments,

"In light of Hobbes early interest in exploration and membership in the Virginia Company, it is surprising that his knowledge of North America was so limited and his beliefs so distorted. In *Leviathan*, he would write that the condition of the American Indian is one example of the state of nature (the other two are civil wars and wars between nations.)."¹⁹

6. The influences on Hobbes Major Writing

The combination of Hobbes interest in science and his misinterpretation of reports from the Americas and commentaries stemming from them were major factors in his initiating two major shifts in western philosophy, especially in political philosophy. While to a considerable extent his views were already expressed in his earlier writings, they are best expressed in his seminal and most influential work, *Leviathan*, first published in 1651. There he made only a few changes from his earlier thinking, along with several modifications in his rhetoric to strengthen his argument made by geometric logic following from a long series of definitions.

The first major shift was in the definition of nature and what is the nature of anything or being. Previously, the classical view in mainstream philosophy, going back to Plato and Aristotle, held that nature is in the telos, the ideally most developed form of something (e.g. the nature of the acorn is in the perfect oak tree). Beginning with Hobbes nature was to be found not in ends, but in origins: in an original state of nature (e.g. the nature of the oak tree was in the acorn). Beginning with Hobbes, the state of nature, whether conceived of as real or only theoretical, was an often-negative state²⁰ that individual human beings needed to exit in order to form societies through a social contract that made good civilization and quality living possible. If not for this shift, Hobbes could have argued for monarchy and law and order government as had those such as Robert Filmer on the basis of patriarchy.²¹ Filmer held that human beings had always been born into societies, the first of which were families headed by fathers, and this was the legitimate form of government, and that kings ruled by divine right.

Hobbes hearing that Indians of the Americas had no kings and had a great deal of freedom prevented a Filmer like approach. Hobbes fear of disorder caused him to miss that Natives of the Americas lived in well-functioning inclusive participatory societies in which their members appreciated their relationships with each other, and with all beings.²² Where Indigenous peoples consider all people as naturally good, needing proper guidance to develop who they are as unique, whole individuals within expanding circles of community: Hobbes saw human beings being born with reason and passion, but left to themselves caught up in their passions and self-centered in their views. This causes people by nature, who are not properly raised to control their passions and to socialize well with others, to be fearful of others whom they see as competitors for what they desire and feel they need to have.²³ Thus, without kings or some other form of sovereign government, Hobbes saw life in the state of nature as being filled with "continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" in a war of all against all.²⁴

This led to a limited beginning of the second major shift in Western philosophy and political thinking, that rights of people were natural. Previously, it had been thought that rights were a good that the sovereign had the discretion to give people as seemed prudent. For Hobbes, if people had no kings, no government, and were free of any restraint save those resulting from competition with others, they lived in a condition where all people were equal, because every person was vulnerable to being killed by others. In this condition each person had a natural right to self-preservation: the right to seek anything they thought necessary for their self-preservation.²⁵

For Hobbes, natural rights were balanced by natural laws. Since the state of nature was inherently dangerous and limiting to the right of self-preservation, the first law of nature was to seek peace. This meant forming a social contract with others to create community peace by having a strong, rule enforcing sovereign.²⁶

Each person had the right to decide when to enter such a contract. However, Hobbes believed the state of nature so dangerous, that if one person told another to submit to his/her authority under the dictator's social contract or be killed, this was a free choice. At this point, the person accepting the contract with the sovereign was bound to obey the sovereign. The sovereign could be in any form, democracy, oligarchy or monarchy. Hobbes preferred monarchy because he considered a unitary government more stable. He believed it less subject to internal conflict from factions. The individual maintained the right to resist the will of the sovereign or seek another sovereign only under two conditions. The first was if the sovereign directly threatened the life of the individual. The second was if the sovereign was no longer able to protect the individual. When the authority of the sovereign became so threatened that it might fail the individual, he or she had the right to decide if their self-preservation was no longer secure, in which case they could consider the social contract broken and seek another sovereign.

For Hobbes, this last right was a practical necessity. Once King Charles had been defeated and beheaded by the Rump Parliament under Cromwell, he and other royalists had either to live in exile as fugitives or make peace with the new sovereign by signing an oath of allegiance. While the natural right that Hobbes recognized was extremely limited, it initiated the much broader view that rights of human beings were considerable and unalienable, as first set forth by John Locke in *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*, Chapters II, IV and V.

7. Some Partial Similarities between Hobbes Laws of Nature and American Indian Ways of Seeing

Hobbes First Natural Law, to seek Peace, along with the following laws of nature that in essence say one should strive to get along with others, is partially similar to American Indian prudence in dealing with a complex world in which there is always uncertainty. This similarity raises the question of whether Hobbes thinking on the need to seek peace was influenced by Indigenous American thinking.

For Hobbes, lack of authority to ensure comfortable self-preservation was an existential danger both within and between societies. Therefore, whenever there was a lack of such authority one should seek to create it. While Hobbes does not say this himself, it follows from this first law and the laws that follow that in making domestic or international policy it is prudent for those in power ("sovereigns") to enact policies that lessen threats to the public peace and safety and promote harmony. That would include promoting harmony over faction.

For Indigenous Americans, with a world view similar to that of modern chaos or uncertainty theory, life, while generally good, was filled with uncertainties. One never knew when a situation might change, and therefore a certain amount of prudence was required, particularly in acting in regard to neighbors and persons or beings deemed dangerous.²⁷ For example, Narragansett

leader Miantonomi, in 1635, related to Roger Williams, who had just been banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a series of stories dealing with cannibals, those who are different and potentially dangerous.²⁸ These tales and the accompanying comments by Miantonomi emphasized the need in an uncertain world to act inclusively with them, to be tolerant, and so far as possible to harmonize one's relationship with those who may be disruptive (and on the deeper level, with all people, all beings). The Narragansett leader noted that is not always possible. Sometimes one has to fight or exclude someone. But this is a last resort. One's main object is to be inclusive, work to create and restore harmony, so that the differences of views and talents in a community function as major assets.

Similarly, when the Pilgrims arrived at what became the Plymouth Colony in 1620, the Wampanoag had just suffered a plague, while their neighbors with whom they sometimes had conflicts did not. Had it not been for this situation, the Wampanoag likely would have been willing to trade with the new arrivals, but not let them stay. In the existing situation, however, the local nation thought it useful to have allies as new neighbors. To ensure that the newcomers would be good neighbors, the Wampanoag had one of their members who spoke English live with the Pilgrims, working to Indianize them so that they could understand each other and have harmonious relations.²⁹ For the most part, good relations developed and continued for close to half a century.

Another aspect of the Native complexity theory like approach to life is flowing prudently with unfavorable situations until a leverage moment arises when one can act to bring about change. For example, Vine Deloria as the sole Native on the board of the Heye collection of Indian artifacts, that later became the National Museum of the American Indian, did not attempt to change the nature of the board and the collection for a considerable time. When he perceived a leverage moment existed in a board meeting, just before a press conference launching an important exhibit opening, he took action. At that moment, having made preparations to have support from other Indian leaders if needed, he forced the board to appointment more Indians to itself by threatening to embarrass the board with a statement at the Press conference by saying the board's actions were racist. That began the turnover of board members that soon brought Native people into the majority, setting the stage for the eventual development of the National Museum.³⁰

The Indigenous prudence in dealing with uncertainty is part of holistic, long-term thinking based on careful long-term observation of experience. Hobbes narrower, reductionist approach, does have some similarities to Indigenous thinking relating to uncertainty. The similarities, however, do not appear to be based upon Native influences upon Hobbes. As shown above, Hobbes had a too limited and distorted knowledge and understanding of American Indians to have known about the relevant aspects of their holistic world views. Rather, Hobbes emphasis on seeking peace arose from his narrower concern with disorder impacted by his own fearful experience in troubled times [1-17].

Notes

¹A.P. Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 225.

²John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Civil Government* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1986), Ch. II. Locke was greatly influenced in his thinking by the numerous reports from the Americas about the Native peoples there, and he met with some of them who came to England. Perhaps the most important influence was the perception of most Europeans who came to the Americas that the Indigenous people had tremendous freedom, and this appeared to a great many to be natural. This view brought Locke to believe, and state for the first time in a major European writing, that rights were inalienable. Locke's *Second Treatise* is analyzed to show the impact of Native American ways on him, including where his reactions to the American Indigenous led him to partial or largely disagree with their ways in Stephen M. Sachs, Bruce E. Johansen, Ain Haas, Betty Booth Donohue, Donald A. Grinde Jr., and Jonathon York, *Honoring the Circle: Ongoing Learning from American Indians on Politics and Society Volume I: The Impact of American Indians on Western Politics and Society to 1800* (Cardiff, CA: Waterside Productions, 2020), Ch. 3, Section 3. That chapter details the huge impact of American Indians on European thought resulting from the very large number of reports of Indians sent to Europe by Europeans in the Americas, beginning with Columbus.

³Sachs, et al, *Honoring the Circle: Ongoing Learning from American Indians on Politics and Society Volume I: The Impact of American Indians on Western Politics and Society to 1800* (Cardiff, CA: Waterside Productions, 2020), Ch. 3, Section 5. Rousseau's writings are analyzed there to show the considerable impact American Indians had on his thinking. This chapter also shows the huge interest in Europe, and particularly France, in the thousands of reports sent from Europeans in the Americas beginning with Columbus of its Indigenous peoples, and the impact of those reports as well as of interactions with a few American Indians brought to Europe.

⁴Sachs, et al, *Honoring the Circle*, Volume I, Ch. 1.

⁵Sachs, et al, *Honoring the Circle*, Volume I, Introduction, Introduction to Part I and Ch. 3.

⁶Sachs, et al, *Honoring the Circle*, Volume I, Ch. 3. An extensive discussion of the huge number of European writings about Indigenous Americans is in, William Brandon, *New Worlds for Old: Reports from the New World and Their Effect on the Development of Social Thought in Europe 1500-1800* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986). These included a huge number of very positive reports of Native peoples by Jesuits in Canada asking for donations to support their work (These are recorded in many volumes, a short collection is J.H. Kennedy, *Jesuit and Savage in New France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950)). These reports were read regularly to congregations in Churches across France.

⁷As I had thought and mistakenly written in, Sachs, et al, *Honoring the Circle*, Volume I, Ch. 3, Section 2, before reading a biography of Hobbes life and work (Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, on the situation at Hobbes birth, p. 1).

⁸Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, pp. 1-2.

⁹"Wars of the Three Kingdoms," *Wikipedia*, July 8, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wars_of_the_Three_Kingdoms.

¹⁰Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, p. 162.

¹¹Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, pp. 2-5.

¹²John Calvin on Original Sin and Human Nature, Predestination, and the Sacraments, (Extracts from *Christianae Religionis Institutio (Institutes of the Christian Religion)* Calvin Op. ii. 3I sq. (edition of 1559) [The first edition of the *Institutes* was published 1536 when Calvin was twenty-six.], "<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/dfg/amrl/calvin.htm>).

¹³Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, particularly Ch. 4 and pp. 90-91.

¹⁴Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, pp. 64-85.

¹⁵Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁶Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, pp. 8-11.

¹⁷Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, discussed throughout the work.

¹⁸Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, pp. 60-64.

¹⁹Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography*, p. 64.

²⁰Where for Hobbes the state of nature was an extremely negative condition, and to a lesser extent for Locke, as expressed in the *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, this was not the case for Rousseau as he wrote in *The Social Contract, A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality and A Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (All three writings are available in Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950).

²¹Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha or the Natural Power of Kings* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015). The work was likely begun in the 1620s but was not published until after the restoration of the English monarchy in 1680 ("*Patriarcha*," *Wikipedia*, May 24, 2024, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarcha>).

²²Sachs, et al, *Honoring the Circle*, Vol. I, Ch. 1 and on the naturally good nature of all human beings which needs to be guided to achieve a fine whole person as part of expanding circles of community, see also Vol. IV, Ch. 8. A good example of the Native view of human nature as seen by Lakotas is in Richard

Moves Camp, Simon D. Joseph, ed., *My Grandfather's Alter: Five Generations of Lakota Holy Men* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2024), p. 51.

²³Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Parts I and II* (Indianapolis and New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1958), Ch. 6 and 13.

²⁴Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 107.

²⁵Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch 14.

²⁶Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch 14.

²⁷An Anishinaabe perspective on uncertainty can be found in Lawrence W. Gross, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), especially in Parts II and III.

²⁸Scott L. Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), chap. 5 (especially 84–97).

²⁹Betty Booth Donohue, *Bradford's Indian Book* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), Preface.

³⁰Stephen M. Sachs, "Power and Sovereignty: The Changing Realities of American Indian Nations," Paper presented at the 2008 Western Social Sciences Association Meeting, available on *Academia*, <https://iu-indianapolis.academia.edu/StephenSachs>.

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