A Study of Hobbes' View of the Social Contract in Leviathan

(With Suggestions for the Future of the World)

Written Lecture by Dr. Reza Gholami, Wednesday, January 10, 2025

In the Name of God

I am delighted to have the opportunity to deliver a series of lectures on political philosophy at the House of Iranian Wisdom in Vienna. Through revisiting the ideas of influential and groundbreaking philosophers, I aim to explore their relevance to contemporary issues. The title of my lecture is "A Study of Hobbes' View of the Social Contract in Leviathan," accompanied by reflections and suggestions for rethinking the social contract to address the challenges of the future. My discussion will be presented in ten parts:

1. Introduction: Hobbes and Leviathan in Political Philosophy

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) is one of the most significant political philosophers of the modern era, often referred to as the father of modern political philosophy. His seminal work Leviathan, published in 1651, marked a transformative moment in the field of political philosophy.

As one of the first comprehensive texts on social contract theory, Leviathan has become a foundational work influencing modern philosophical, political, and social debates. Hobbes lived during the tumultuous period of the English Civil War, and his primary concern was to find a way to establish peace and order in a society torn apart by political and religious conflicts. Understanding the historical context of Hobbes' life is crucial to comprehending his ideas.

In Hobbes' thought, the state—or the Leviathan—is an artificial yet necessary entity without which human life devolves into a "war of all against all." This lecture will primarily focus on Hobbes' perspective on the social contract. The social contract is a philosophical theory that explains how individuals agree to form a society and government to escape the state of nature (commonly understood as a condition without laws, order, or security) and establish shared rules for collective living.

This theory forms the basis for justifying the legitimacy of government and authority. After Hobbes, philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau modified and expanded the social contract theory within a liberal framework. Even in contemporary times, thinkers like John Rawls have revisited and refined the social contract, making it the cornerstone of his theory of justice. The social contract remains a crucial topic and could potentially serve as the key to transforming global governance theories for the future.

2. The Meaning of the Social Contract

In political philosophy, the social contract refers to a hypothetical agreement among members of a society in which individuals relinquish some of their freedoms to a governing authority in

exchange for security and social order. Hobbes argues that this contract is necessary to escape the state of nature, where conflicting human desires lead to perpetual conflict. According to Hobbes, the government must possess absolute power to maintain peace and justice.

Key points in defining the social contract:

1. The social contract is not necessarily a historical event but is often hypothetical, used to explain the legitimacy of governance and laws.

2. It aims to establish order and security, protect individual rights, and prevent chaos or injustice.

3. Individuals in this agreement surrender some of their rights and freedoms to a central authority or government.

4. The social contract defines mutual responsibilities between the government and the people, often referred to as reciprocal obligations.

5. Applications of the social contract in modern times include explaining the legitimacy of governments, examining citizens' rights and duties, justifying laws and social order, and providing a basis for concepts like democracy and human rights.

3. Hobbes' Intellectual Foundations for the Social Contract

Hobbes bases the social contract on a philosophical-anthropological perspective. He argues that humans are inherently self-centered and driven by their own interests, which makes life in the state of nature dangerous and unbearable. According to Hobbes, humans possess enough rationality to understand that without a centralized power, their security cannot be guaranteed. This rationality compels them to enter into a social contract.

Hobbes' Leviathan is a cornerstone of political philosophy that systematically presents the theory of the social contract. In Leviathan, the social contract is explained through several key aspects:

1. The Basis of the Social Contract: The State of Nature

Hobbes describes the necessity of the social contract by illustrating the state of nature:

• In the state of nature, humans live without laws or government, and their self-interested nature leads to a perpetual "war of all against all."

• Life in this state is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

• To preserve their lives and ensure security, humans are compelled to leave the state of nature and form a social contract.

2. The Concept of the Social Contract

Hobbes explains the Leviathan as a social contract where individuals surrender certain freedoms to a central authority (the sovereign) to prevent chaos and disorder. The primary goal of the social contract is to ensure security and order, rather than liberty or justice.

3. The Leviathan as a Symbol of Sovereignty

The Leviathan represents absolute sovereignty, deriving its power from the social contract. Hobbes describes the Leviathan as a mythical and powerful creature whose primary function is to maintain order and security. He asserts that the sovereign must wield absolute power to fulfill its role, and no power should challenge the sovereign, as doing so would lead society back to the state of nature.

4. The Relationship Between Individuals and the Sovereign

According to Hobbes, the relationship between individuals and the sovereign is as follows:

• By accepting the social contract, individuals transfer their rights to the sovereign, who in turn is obligated to ensure their security and order.

• Individuals have no right to rebel or breach the contract, even if the sovereign is oppressive, as rebellion would lead back to the state of nature.

5. The Role of Reason in the Social Contract

Hobbes emphasizes that accepting the social contract is a rational decision. He argues that humans, driven by fear of death and a desire for security and well-being, rationally choose the social contract. This rationality leads individuals to recognize that surrendering their freedoms to a strong authority benefits everyone.

6. The Impact of Leviathan on Social Contract Theory

Hobbes' Leviathan introduced the first comprehensive and structured theory of the social contract, laying the groundwork for modern political philosophy. This theory inspired later philosophers, such as Locke and Rousseau, who developed differing perspectives on the social contract.

4. Is Man a Wolf to Man? (Critiques and Reflections on "Man Is a Wolf to Man")

The famous statement by Thomas Hobbes, Homo homini lupus ("Man is a wolf to man"), which refers to the natural state of humans as self-centered, competitive, and conflict-driven, has been criticized by numerous philosophers and thinkers. These critiques primarily stem from Hobbes' pessimistic view of human nature and his emphasis on the necessity of absolute government. Here are some notable examples of such critiques:

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau directly challenges Hobbes' concept of the state of nature, arguing that it is inaccurate. According to Rousseau, humans in the state of nature are

inherently kind, peaceful, and optimistic. He claims that selfishness and competition are consequences of social life and civilization, not human nature itself. Rousseau portrays the natural state as one where humans, due to their simplicity and lack of societal conflicts, possess a "natural nobility."

2.   John Locke, in contrast to Hobbes, describes the state of nature as a condition of freedom and equality governed by natural law (reason). Locke believes that humans are inherently rational and moral, capable of living in peace. For Locke, the main problem in the state of nature is the absence of a judicial and executive authority to enforce justice, not any inherent wickedness in human beings.

3.   David Hume points out that Hobbes' analysis of the state of nature overlooks the social and moral aspects of human behavior.

4.   Karl Marx critiques Hobbes' view of human nature, asserting that selfishness and competitiveness are products of the social and economic conditions of capitalist systems, rather than intrinsic human qualities. Marx sees these traits as the result of societal structures and relations of production.

Critique of Hobbes from the Perspective of the Divine Nature Theory in Religions

In contrast, from the perspective of Abrahamic religions, especially Islam, all beings, particularly humans, are endowed with a "divine nature." According to this worldview, humans are created with an inherent goodness, a natural inclination toward virtue and righteousness. Within humans, sound reason ('aql salim) is seen as the source of understanding what is good and a guide toward it.

Interestingly, historical evidence also contradicts Hobbes' deeply pessimistic depiction of humanity. Many individuals, even in the most challenging circumstances, have exhibited kindness and altruism. Even people who behave wolfishly toward others dislike being treated in such a manner themselves or having their children subjected to such treatment. Religions argue that humanity's survival owes much to this inherent inclination toward goodness in natural conditions.

In the divine nature theory, education plays a vital role in nurturing and preserving this natural disposition. Through proper upbringing, individuals can distance themselves from tendencies that conflict with their innate nature.

This belief in a divine nature strengthens human responsibility to improve collective life and strive for peace. Thus, from this perspective, the idea that humans are universally and inherently "wolves" to one another can only be attributed to deviations from their natural state, guided by sound reason. Such behavior should not be considered a universal or inevitable rule.

What Is the State of Nature?

A critical question arises here: does accepting Hobbes' view of the state of nature imply that humans, before the formation of society, lived without any sense of moral value? In other words, did "pre-societal humans" lack ethics, and are morals merely constructs of human society created to meet its needs?

Answering this question remains complex. However, a deeper exploration of humanity's inherent qualities in the state of nature might shed some light. If we accept that sensory perceptions, intuitive reason, and moral conscience are intrinsic to humans, it follows that even in the state of nature, humans possessed moral judgments, albeit in an undeveloped form. These moral capacities grow exponentially after the formation of society and evolve further as societal complexities increase.

From this perspective, the claim that ethics or values are solely constructs of society seems flawed. At most, it can be argued that society accelerates and enhances the development of morality. Consequently, morality and values are not entirely artificial; rather, society serves as a platform for their growth and refinement.

5. The Difference in the Social Contract Theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are prominent theorists of the social contract, but their views on the state of nature, the reasons for establishing the social contract, and the nature of governance differ significantly. Here's an overview of their key distinctions:

1. The State of Nature

    •   Hobbes describes the state of nature as a "war of all against all." He believes humans in this state are inherently selfish and violent, making life "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The primary goal in this state is survival.

    •   Locke, on the other hand, views the state of nature as a condition of freedom, equality, and natural law. He argues that humans are rational and capable of living peacefully together. For Locke, the main issue in the state of nature is the lack of a judiciary and executive authority to enforce natural law.

    •   Rousseau presents a different perspective, describing the state of nature as an ideal and simple condition where humans are free, equal, and uncorrupted by society. For Rousseau, inequality and conflict began with the advent of private property.

2. The Reason for the Social Contract

    •   According to Hobbes, humans establish a social contract to escape the perpetual violence and chaos of the state of nature. The purpose of this contract is to secure safety and order. People surrender all their rights to an absolute sovereign (Leviathan) in exchange for protection.

• Locke believes the social contract arises to protect natural rights (life, liberty, and property) and to prevent injustice. The goal is to safeguard individual rights and ensure justice. In Locke's view, the authority of the ruler is limited and remains subject to the will of the people.

• For Rousseau, the social contract is a response to the crises brought about by private property and inequality. Its purpose is to return to the general will and achieve true freedom. Rousseau sees the social contract as a means of creating a society where individuals are both free and bound by laws that reflect the collective will.

3. The Nature of Governance

• Hobbes advocates for an absolute monarchy. He argues that the sovereign (Leviathan) must hold absolute power, and disobedience should not be permitted, as it would lead to a return to the chaos of the state of nature.

• Locke supports constitutional governance. He believes the ruler's power is limited, and if they violate the rights of the people, citizens have the right to revolt.

• Rousseau promotes governance based on the general will. He contends that true power belongs to the people and that laws must reflect the general will. In Rousseau's view, governance cannot diverge from the collective will of the people.

4. View on Individual Rights

• For Hobbes, individual rights are sacrificed to the absolute ruler. In exchange for security, individuals must relinquish their freedoms.

• Locke maintains that natural rights are inalienable and that the government's role is to protect and uphold these rights.

• Rousseau also emphasizes freedom but defines it within the framework of the general will. Individual freedom, in his view, is realized when individuals align themselves with the collective will that represents the common good.

As evident, Hobbes adopts a pessimistic and pragmatic view, prioritizing security over freedom. Locke is more optimistic, emphasizing individual rights and liberty as the core of the social contract. Rousseau envisions an ideal society where the general will takes precedence. These differences form the philosophical foundations for modern theories of government, individual rights, and social justice.

6. Hobbes and the Justification of Tyranny and Totalitarianism

As previously mentioned, Hobbes has often been accused of legitimizing tyranny due to his emphasis on the absolute power of the state. Hobbes believed that the state must wield unquestionable authority to maintain order and security. In his view, liberty without security is meaningless; thus, people should submit to absolute sovereignty to avoid a return to the chaotic

state of nature. For this reason, many philosophers and political theorists argue that Hobbes' philosophy has historically provided justification for authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, as it discourages resistance against absolute power.

7. Modern Militarism and Hobbes' Leviathan

Hobbes' views on power and the necessity of central authority have been interpreted by some as reinforcing militarism. According to this perspective, Hobbes' Leviathan can be seen as a philosophical foundation for militaristic states that rely on military power to preserve security and order. Today, many governments expand their military capabilities under the pretext of national security, a rationale that aligns with Hobbesian logic.

Can Militarism Lead to Lasting Peace?

The reality cannot be ignored: achieving lasting peace through militarism is exceedingly difficult. Militaristic approaches primarily focus on power and the use of force to ensure security, rather than addressing the root causes of conflict. While militarism may provide short-term deterrence or a fragile stability, in the long run, it often escalates arms races, deepens mistrust among nations, and fuels new cycles of violence. The world has experienced this repeatedly, with millions of lives lost over the past decades, yet it seems to have learned little from these tragedies.

8. Hobbes and Modern Tyranny: Present and Future

Although many consider Hobbes' ideas to be confined to the pages of philosophy history, the reality is that his theories on power and sovereignty continue to resonate in contemporary political and social structures. Hobbes' vision of absolute state power has not only inspired totalitarian systems but has also reemerged in new forms in the era of advanced technologies.

For instance, the rise of artificial intelligence and the expanding influence of multinational corporations have raised concerns about the emergence of modern forms of tyranny—a centralized and pervasive power that, like Hobbes' Leviathan, demands security and order in exchange for curtailing freedoms.

Some theorists argue that major tech companies such as Google and Meta have become modern-day Leviathans. Unlike traditional Leviathans, however, their power does not stem from direct social contracts but from implicit agreements between users and these platforms. These companies, through their extensive control of information, digital surveillance, and monopolistic ability to shape social behaviors, have attained a kind of unchallenged authority.

This immense power in managing information and monitoring societies resembles Hobbes' vision of absolute sovereignty. The unaccountable dominance of these entities could lead to the rise of new authoritarian structures, posing risks even greater than those of traditional totalitarian regimes.

9. The Importance and Reconsideration of the Social Contract Theory for the Present and Future of the World

The theory of the social contract remains one of the fundamental principles of political and social thought. However, as a cornerstone of political philosophy articulated distinctly yet complementarily by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it now requires reexamination and adaptation to address the challenges of globalization, advanced technologies, and human rights.

In an era where humanity is rapidly moving—voluntarily or involuntarily—toward globalization and the notion of a "global city," the social contract theory faces limitations when addressing certain global issues. Below are some of these challenges:

1. Global Issues Beyond National Borders

The classical social contract theory was designed primarily within the framework of the nation-state. However, global issues like climate change, mass migration, and cyber threats transcend national boundaries and demand transnational cooperation and governance. Traditional social contract frameworks lack the tools to regulate relationships between nations or non-state actors such as multinational corporations.

2. Challenges of Emerging Technologies

The rise of advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, big data, and blockchain, has reshaped the boundaries of political and economic power. Social contract theory appears ill-equipped to address phenomena such as data misuse, mass surveillance, or the undemocratic influence of technology companies on public life.

3. Neglect of Global Inequalities

Classical social contract theory focuses primarily on justice within a single society. However, in today's world, the economic and social disparities between developed and developing nations require a more global approach to justice and resource redistribution.

4. Exclusion of Marginalized Groups

Early social contracts often excluded large segments of the population, including women, minorities, and colonies. Any reconsideration of the social contract must ensure inclusivity on a global scale.

The Need for Revisions

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau each shaped aspects of social contract theory that were innovative for their time. However, the limitations of this theory are increasingly evident in today's globalized, digital, and multipolar world. A 21st-century social contract must be flexible, inclusive, and global, striking a sustainable balance between freedom, security, justice, and

social solidarity. Only through such revisions can the social contract become an effective framework for addressing today's critical challenges and shaping the future of the world.

10. Principles for Revising the Social Contract

To respond to the aforementioned needs, some key principles for revising the social contract are clear. Below are five essential recommendations:

1.   Drafting a Universal Social Contract

Develop a globally inclusive social contract that ensures impartiality toward people of all races, colors, ethnicities, religions, and other distinctions. Such a contract must be robust enough to withstand critical scrutiny.

2.   Ensuring Human Rights as a Global Consensus

Redesign the social contract to reform international institutions, eliminate discrimination within their structures, and make human rights a universally enforceable principle. This requires eliminating double standards and establishing effective guarantees.

3.   Beyond the Nation-State

Expand the social contract to regulate relationships not only within states but also among states, multinational corporations, and international organizations.

4.   Regulating Emerging Technologies

Create mechanisms within the social contract to govern advanced technologies, ensuring user rights are protected and systemic abuses are prevented.

5.   Promoting Global Justice and Sustainability

Focus the social contract on addressing global inequalities—economic, social, and environmental. This would aim to expand sustainable peace and contribute effectively to saving the planet from destruction.

As a conclusion, the social contract theory, though born in a specific historical and political context, remains a foundational concept for political philosophy. However, in an interconnected world facing unprecedented challenges, it must evolve to meet the demands of our era. By embracing inclusivity, global justice, and the regulation of emerging power structures, a revised social contract could serve as a vital framework for addressing the pressing issues of today and ensuring a sustainable future for humanity.

Thank you for your attention.