

# Analysis of the British Political Thoughts in the 17th Century

## -- Taking Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's Thoughts as an Example

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### Abstract

The 17th century is a transitional period for Britain from feudal society to capitalist society. During this period, there appeared two major political thinkers in Britain, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Both of them proposed the state of nature and adopted the theory of social contract to analyze the country. However, their interpretations of the state of nature and the social contract were quite different. Hobbes believes that the state of nature is equivalent to the state of war. In this state, people are in danger. Therefore, people need a "Leviathan" state with supreme power. And Locke thinks that the state of nature is a complete state of freedom, in the state of nature, everyone is equal and free, but the state of nature has a lot of inconvenience, so Locke advocates that people need to establish a "limited government".

### Keywords

Britain, Political Thoughts, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, State of Nature, Social Contract.

### 1. Introduction

In the 17th century, Britain experienced the bourgeois revolution. At that time, political thoughts in Britain were extremely rich. There were royalists representing the feudal monarchy and the upper aristocracy, independents representing the bourgeoisie and the emerging aristocracy, levellers representing the middle and lower classes of people, and diggers representing the poor peasants. Among them, Hobbes and Locke were the most dazzling ones. Hobbes' economic freedom concept provided strong support for the development of British capitalism, while Locke's political thought defended the "glorious Revolution". His discussion on consent, delegation and limited government constituted the basic content of modern western political theory. Hobbes and Locke can be regarded as the two main sources of western liberal theory. Both of them started from the description of the state of nature to expend their own theories of social contract. Comparing the similarities and differences between Hobbes and Locke on the state of nature and social contract can help us better understand the emergence and operation of the state.

### 2. Thomas Hobbes' State of Nature and Social Contract theory

Thomas Hobbes made many trips to the European continent, and the scientific developments in Europe provided a new perspective for Hobbes' political thought. Hobbes built his political science on the basis of geometry and physics. He believed that the world was a material world, where all objects moved according to a certain law, and countries and people were governed by a certain law. Hobbes believed that the principle of man's creation of the state came from personal feeling, and the movement of feeling pushed man from behind. The driving force behind people is feeling, while desire or hatred is the feeling that drives people towards or away from something. Therefore, people seek advantages and avoid disadvantages. Hobbes believes

that human movement is in infinite desire and endless pursuit of power, which will eventually lead to hostility and fighting among all people in the state of nature.

In Hobbes's state of nature, people are equal and free, and everyone has the right to preserve his life. It is precisely because everyone has the same power, plus everyone is self-absorbed, so when they want something at the same time but do not want to share it, they will inevitably become enemies. In short, Hobbes's so-called state of nature is actually a state of war, in which everyone is hostile and everyone is in danger. It's easy to see that Hobbes thinks that human nature is inherently evil.

In his book *Leviathan*, Hobbes described the state of nature in this way: "Therefore, in the time of war when men are enemies, everything that comes into being can also come into being when men have no security to gain but by their own strength and creation. In such a state no industry can exist, for its results are unstable. There would be no cultivation of the earth, no navigation, no use of imported goods, no comfortable building, no means of moving and displacing objects that require great force, no knowledge of topography, no record of time, no art, no literature, no society, etc. The worst of all would be the constant fear and danger of violent death, and a solitary, poor, vile, vile, short life." In a state of nature, human civilizations are precarious, they can be destroyed at any moment, and in such a state, everyone is likely to die by accident, and the fear of a violent death hangs over everyone. "Therefore, people live in constant fear of violent death, and their state of life is solitary and ignoble. It is in this state of hostility, of war, that the security of human life becomes Hobbes's most basic and fundamental aim." People's fear of death led them to want to get out of this state of nature, which is a state of war, and so they looked to natural law. But, "since the law of nature cannot guarantee the fulfilment of the contract of peace," Hobbes argues, there needs to be a public authority above all rights to deter people, and that authority is the state, what Hobbes calls the *Leviathan*.

The *Leviathan* represented in the Bible as an evil giant sea monster, and Hobbes used it to refer to the state, because the terror of *Leviathan* could intimidate people just as the authority of the state could intimidate people. People in the state of nature, out of fear of death, long for their own life to be guaranteed, so people will entrust all their rights to a certain person or group, to represent their personality. "Rationality reminds people to find the best way to protect their own life safety, that is, by entrusting the right to punish death to a person or a collective specifically, let him or it as the final adjudicator, so as to protect human life safety to the maximum extent. The state comes into being when men finally abdicate the right to govern themselves and delegate it to a particular person or group." The state consists of a large group of men making a contract with each other, and in order for the state to use all its power and strength, each person must delegate to it, that is, surrender all his or her power. "Just as men, in order to make peace, and thereby preserve their own lives, make an artificial man, which we call a state, so they make artificial chains which become the laws of the state, and by mutual covenants fasten one end of the chain to the lips of the individuals and parliaments to whom they give sovereignty, and the other to their ears. These chains are by their very nature fragile, and they are sustained, not by the impossibility of breaking, but by the danger that would ensue if they were broken."

The purpose of a state is to resist foreign aggression and prevent internal strife. The state represents the unified personality of the people, which is assumed by the sovereign, while the rest of the people become subjects. Once people enter into a contract, they are seen as handing over all their rights to the sovereign, but Hobbes argues that there is no attainer of the right of people to resist encroachment in order to preserve their lives, so "what they surrender is actually the right to punish, to infringe upon others." And Hobbes argues that the sovereign has absolute power, because the sovereign is not involved in the contract, but because The sovereign is created by people entering into contracts, so the sovereign is limited by the purpose of the contract (natural law). After a contract has been made, no man can return to his

state of nature or re-enter into a contract with another man without the consent of the Sovereign, nor can he be disobeyed, accused, punished, or put to death on the pretext of revoking his sovereignty. "One may feel many undesirable consequences, but the consequences of the absence of such power are far worse than that of a perpetual war between all men." So Hobbes advocates the supremacy of the sovereign, and the complete submission of the people to the sovereign, except for the right to secure their own lives.

### 3. John Lockes' State of Nature and Social Contract theory

John Locke experienced the bourgeois revolution in Britain and had close contacts with the political figures at that time, which gave him a clearer understanding of the political construction in Britain. Although both Locke and Hobbes adopted the methods of the state of nature and the social contract to elaborate their political thoughts, they came to completely different conclusions.

Locke refuted Murphy's theory of the divine right of Kings in the first Treatise, while the second Treatise is regarded as the founding work of modern government theory. It takes the state of nature as a starting point and uses the method of social contract to demonstrate the state. Locke proposes that the goal of the next Treatise on Government is to "seek another account of the birth of government, of the origin of political power, and of the means used to arrange and define who enjoys that power." In order to find out the origin of government and political power, it is necessary to discuss from the "state of nature".

Locke regarded the state of nature as a "complete and free state". He described the state of nature in the next chapter of the Treatise as follows: In order to properly understand political power and trace its origin, we must examine the original state of nature in which human beings are situated, a complete and complete state of nature in which they are determined as they see fit within the bounds of natural law To act and dispose of their property and person without anyone's permission or subject to anyone's will is also a state of equality, for in this state all rights and jurisdiction are mutual, and no one has a higher status or jurisdiction over another. In this state, Locke believes that everyone is equal and free, and they can act and dispose of their property according to their own wishes within the scope of natural law, and no one has more rights than others. In the state of nature, people do not have a unified government. They carry out activities and live according to the constraints of natural law. "Natural law guides human behavior, so that they can enjoy freedom and equality of life, its contents mainly include: preserve their own life; The preservation of the life of others; Private property rights; Limitations on property: not allowing what is acquired to rot, but leaving enough for others to have equally good things; The duty of parents to love and care for their children; And the duty of children to care for, protect, comfort, and honor their parents." Locke believes that natural law is a kind of reason that governs human activities in the state of nature. "Reason, that is, the natural law, teaches all human beings who intentionally obey reason; Since all human beings are equal and independent, no one may infringe upon the life, health, liberty or property of others."

Given that people have natural rights in this state of nature, and the state of nature seems wonderful, why does Locke advocate that people need to get out of this state of nature? According to Locke, there are many inconveniences in the state of nature, such as the lack of clear laws and impartial judges, the lack of institutions to enforce the laws... In the state of nature, people cannot obey natural law voluntarily due to their lack of understanding of natural law, so a government is needed to put an end to this state, and this government is produced by people signing contracts.

In order to get rid of the inconvenience of the state of nature and to better protect individual rights, people voluntarily give up their right to punish, and give it to a special person or group

to exercise according to the rules agreed upon by the people. Locke advocated a "limited government." He emphasized that the power of government comes from the people, because the people signed a contract to form the government, so the power of government will be limited by the contract. In Locke's view, the state and the government are more like a trust institution, and the people are the principals. Once the government violates the will of the people, the people can withdraw their entrustment and entrust a new government. Locke believed that people had the right to oppose tyranny. He advocated "force against force," "and claimed that the cause of the mess or predicament was rooted in the government, and that the revolutionary party should not be blamed." From this, we can see that Locke's argument about entrusting the new government is actually defending the bourgeois revolution in England. Unlike Hobbes, Locke believes that people have reservations about the power they hand over, and therefore the power of government is not unlimited. Locke attached great importance to the property rights of the people. He believed that the goal of government was to protect people's liberty, life, and property. "What Locke means here is very clear, that is, this kind of political power must not become an absolute and arbitrary power over people's life and property, and cannot override people's free life and property and act arbitrarily, the reason is that people's life and property are protected by every possible means." He especially stressed that the government should protect the property rights of the people, so that even the government representing the supreme power could not take any part of the property without the consent of the people.

#### **4. Comparison of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's political thoughts**

From the above, we know that Hobbes and Locke both assumed that there was a state of freedom before the emergence of the state and government (their descriptions of the state of nature were different), and they both believed that there were natural laws to restrict people's behaviors under such a state. However, despite the existence of natural laws, the state of freedom would still have some defects, so they both advocated a public power to lead The people. Moreover, they both use the method of social contract to discuss the legitimacy of such public authority, but they reach very different conclusions.

As for the state of nature, Hobbes believes that human nature is inherently evil. In the state of nature, people are in fear of sudden death, they will ignore the constraints of natural law, and in order to preserve their own lives and interests, they will often harm others. This would lead everyone to be in a state of hostility and struggle, and the state of nature means the state of war, so people need to give their natural rights to the sovereign to ensure their lives. Locke believed that human heart was originally a blank SLATE, and human knowledge and moral concepts were acquired, "while Locke advocated the theory of the goodness of nature, which believed that the natural state was acceptable. Although conflicts and disputes in the society inevitably existed, the relationship between people was not sharp and incompatible, but relatively mild." In Locke's state of nature, everyone is equal and free, and no one enjoys more rights. Under the constraint of natural law, the state of nature does not lack of beauty. However, Locke believes that there are many inconveniences in the state of nature, and people need to entrust their power to a government in order to solve these inconveniences.

Hobbes and Locke had very different ideas about the state and government. Hobbes advocated a "Leviathan" state with supreme power, while Locke advocated a "limited government". Hobbes believed that once people had delegated their natural rights to the sovereign, they became subjects of the sovereign, and delegated all their rights to the state except the right to their own liberty of life. The sovereign is not bound by the contract because he is not involved in the contract. "In order to secure political order and maintain social stability, Hobbes gave the sovereign power over the laws and subjects, as head of state, maker of laws, leader of the church,

and master of the life of the whole society. His subjects must obey all judgments and actions of him, whether approved or not, and regard his actions as their own, without dissent, still less resistance." The power of the state, therefore, is Paramount; Locke, on the other hand, believed that in order to get rid of the inconvenience of the state of nature and to better protect their natural rights, people would voluntarily give up their own right to punish and entrust it to the government. "In stark contrast to Hobbes, Locke held a relatively complex dual contract theory in the process of transferring rights." The people sign a contract with the government, and the government is also a participant in the contract, so the government cannot do whatever it wants and its power is limited by the contract. Locke believed that the legitimacy of the government comes from the people, and when the government violates the will of the people, the people have the right to change a new government. In fact, Locke believes that the government is more like a trust institution, to which the people entrust their power, and when it displeases the people, the people can withdraw the trust and give it to the people they think can ensure their security, that is, entrust a new government.

## 5. Conclusion

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were both British political thinkers in the 17th century. They had similar derivation methods about the generation of public power, but their results were quite different. By comparing their differences, we can learn more about the creation and operation of the state and government.

Thomas Hobbes integrated geometry, mathematics, physics and other sciences into the field of political philosophy. He was also the first person to use the social contract theory to discuss the origin of the state, which directly inspired Locke, who was later than him. Hobbes' discussion on the integrity of state sovereignty marked the formation of the theory of state sovereignty in the history of modern western political thought.

John Locke is regarded as the founder of liberalism. He first systematically discussed the basic principles of liberalism from the aspects of natural rights, private property, limited government, justice and separation of powers by law, etc. His political ideas influenced Voltaire, Montesquieu and other enlightenment thinkers, and his discussion on state power even influenced Point Soo. Locke's Treatise on Government effectively defended the bourgeois revolution in England. Therefore, Marx and Engels called him "the representative of the emerging bourgeoisie in all its forms".

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke are undoubtedly the two shining stars in the history of western political thought, and the comparison of their political thought is still of reference significance for today's national operation.

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