

A comparison of two social contract theorists: locke and hobbes



Locke and Hobbes were both social contract theorists, and both natural law theorists (Natural law in the sense of Saint Thomas Aquinas, not Natural law in the sense of Newton), but there the resemblance ends. All other natural law theorists assumed that man was by nature a social animal. Hobbes assumed otherwise, thus his conclusions are strikingly different from those of other natural law theorists. In addition to his unconventional conclusions about natural law, Hobbes was fairly infamous for producing numerous similarly unconventional results in physics and mathematics. The leading English mathematician of that era, in the pages of the Proceedings of the Royal Academy, called Hobbes a lunatic for his claim to have squared the circle. The Grolier encyclopedia contrasts Locke and Hobbes as follows:

Locke's considerable importance in political thought is better known. As the first systematic theorist of the philosophy of liberalism, Locke exercised enormous influence in both England and America. In his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), Locke set forth the view that the state exists to preserve the natural rights of its citizens. When governments fail in that task, citizens have the right—and sometimes the duty—to withdraw their support and even to rebel. Locke opposed Thomas Hobbes's view that the original state of nature was "nasty, brutish, and short," and that individuals through a social contract surrendered—for the sake of self-preservation—their rights [...] Locke addressed Hobbes's claim that the state of nature was the state of war, though he attribute this claim to "some men" not to Hobbes. He refuted it by pointing to existing and real historical examples of people in a state of nature. For this purpose he regarded any people who are not subject to a common judge to resolve disputes, people who may legitimately take action to themselves punish wrong doers, as in a state of nature. Second treatise, <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-two-social-contract-theorists-locke-and-hobbes/>

Section 14 It is often asked as a mighty objection, where are, or ever were, there any men in such a state of Nature? To which it may suffice as an answer at present, that since all princes and rulers of “ independent” governments all through the world are in a state of Nature, it is plain the world never was, nor never will be, without numbers of men in that state. I have named all governors of “ independent” communities, whether they are, or are not, in league with others; for it is not every compact that puts an end to the state of Nature between men, but only this one of agreeing together mutually to enter into one community, and make one body politic; other promises and compacts men may make one with another, and yet still be in the state of Nature. The promises and bargains for truck, etc., between the two men in Soldania, in or between a Swiss and an Indian, in the woods of America, are binding to them, though they are perfectly in a state of Nature in reference to one another for truth, and keeping of faith belongs to men as men, and not as members of society. Second treatise, Section 17, 18, 19 And hence it is that he who attempts to get another man into his absolute power does thereby put himself into a state of war with him; it being to be understood as a declaration of a design upon his life. For I have reason to conclude that he who would get me into his power without my consent would use me as he pleased when he had got me there, and destroy me too when he had a fancy to it; for nobody can desire to have me in his absolute power unless it be to compel me by force to that which is against the right of my freedom- i. e. make me a slave. To be free from such force is the only security of my preservation, and reason bids me look on him as an enemy to my preservation who would take away that freedom which is the fence to it; so that he who makes an attempt to enslave me thereby puts himself into a

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state of war with me. He that in the state of Nature would take away the freedom that belongs to any one in that state must necessarily be supposed to have a design to take away everything else, that freedom being the foundation of all the rest; as he that in the state of society would take away the freedom belonging to those of that society or commonwealth must be supposed to design to take away from them everything else, and so be looked on as in a state of war. This makes it lawful for a man to kill a thief who has not in the least hurt him, nor declared any design upon his life, any farther than by the use of force, so to get him in his power as to take away his money, or what he pleases, from him; because using force, where he has no right to get me into his power, let his pretense be what it will, I have no reason to suppose that he who would take away my liberty would not, when he had me in his power, take away everything else. And, therefore, it is lawful for me to treat him as one who has put himself into a state of war with me- i. e., kill him if I can; for to that hazard does he justly expose himself whoever introduces a state of war, and is aggressor in it. And here we have the plain difference between the state of Nature and the state of war, which however some men have confounded, are as far distant as a state of peace, goodwill, mutual assistance, and preservation; and a state of enmity, malice, violence and mutual destruction are one from another. Men living together according to reason without a common superior on earth, with authority to judge between them, is properly the state of Nature. But force, or a declared design of force upon the person of another, where there is no common superior on earth to appeal to for relief, is the state of war; and it is the want of such an appeal gives a man the right of war even against an aggressor, though he be in society and a fellow-subject. Thus, a thief whom I cannot

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harm, but by appeal to the law, for having stolen all that I am worth, I may kill when he sets on me to rob me but of my horse or coat, because the law, which was made for my preservation, where it cannot interpose to secure my life from present force, which if lost is capable of no reparation, permits me my own defense and the right of war, a liberty to kill the aggressor, because the aggressor allows not time to appeal to our common judge, nor the decision of the law, for remedy in a case where the mischief may be irreparable. Want of a common judge with authority puts all men in a state of Nature; force without right upon a man's person makes a state of war both where there is, and is not, a common judge. Hobbes, on the contrary, asserts that without subjection to a common power, men are necessarily at war: Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man. In on this issue, and also on the meaning of civil society, Hobbes's position is the same as the fascist position: Peace is actually war in disguise. This is why Hobbes argued that corporations should be suppressed and replaced by the direct exercise of state power. This is why Hitler thought that declaring war on America was merely a meaningless trivial symbol. It was not merely a symbol. Peace is not merely maneuvering preparatory to predatory attack. Unlike the communists and the fascists Hobbes had no specific concrete plan for suppressing competition and the pursuit of conflicting goals, and he might well have disapproved of the details of the fascists plans, but he clearly regarded their objectives as a desirable and popular part of any good state Locke was the seventeenth century precursor of classic liberalism, and Hobbes was the seventeenth century precursor of modern totalitarianism, <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-two-social-contract-theorists-locke-and-hobbes/>

particularly fascism. Hobbes argued that what we today call civil society should exist only by the power of the state, and to the extent that it existed independent of the state, for example private associations, corporations, and political discussion, it should be suppressed. This measure is the distinctive characteristic of modern totalitarianism, both communist and fascist, though Hobbes's reasoning in favor of this measure is fascist, rather than communist. Chapter 29 of Hobbes's *Leviathan*: For men, as they become at last weary of irregular jostling and hewing one another, and desire with all their hearts to conform themselves into one firm and lasting edifice [...] I observe the diseases of a Commonwealth that proceed from the poison of seditious doctrines, whereof one is that every private man is judge of good and evil actions. [...] Another infirmity of a Commonwealth is the immoderate greatness of a town, when it is able to furnish out of its own circuit the number and expense of a great army; as also the great number of corporations, which are as it were many lesser Commonwealths in the bowels of a greater, like worms in the entrails of a natural man. To may be added, liberty of disputing against absolute power by pretenders to political prudence; which though bred for the most part in the lees of the people, yet animated by false doctrines are perpetually meddling with the fundamental laws, to the molestation of the Commonwealth, like the little worms which physicians call ascarides. Hobbes's theory has far more in common with fascism, than it does with Locke's theory. To say that they were both social contract theorists is like saying that Adam Smith believed in the labor theory of value and Karl Marx believed in the labor theory of value, therefor Smith was a Marxist or Marx was a Smithian. Locke's social contract had as much in common with Hobbes's social contract as Ricardo's labor theory of value

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had with Marx's labor theory of value. Fascism is largely corporatism, indeed many fascists argued that fascism simply was corporatism, that race theory was irrelevant. Certainly Mussolini and Franco held this view. Corporatism derives from "one body" (corpora= body), not from corporation. Same metaphor as Hobbes's Leviathan, and the cover of Hobbes's book, and, in the case of fascism, the same rationale. The race, the nation, the folk, or whatever, are to be welded into a single entity, by the application of whatever force necessary Hobbes favored unlimited power for the state, and he favored it for the purpose of ending all conflict and contention. He saw all non-state society as simply bad happenings that should be suppressed. If people go about their material lives freely they will come in conflict, and Hobbes regards it as the duty of the state to prevent such conflict. Locke argues that government is legitimate, but only legitimate in so far as it acts within the limits of this implied contract. Like any unwritten contract, it is not at all clear just what precisely the limits of Locke's contract are, and Locke clearly considered that his contract could stretch a long way, but is equally clear that modern twentieth century governments are substantially breaking it, for the majority of disputes that an ordinary citizen finds himself involved in are disputes with the state, and in these disputes, for example with the IRS, the state acts as judge in its own cause, a clear violation of the Lockean contract. A state cannot be as large and intrusive as modern states are without finding it necessary to substantially violate Locke's implied contract in many ways. Locke's contract was for a judge. Hobbes's contract was for a master. While in some situations the distinction between these two roles may be fuzzy, it is clear that vast majority of people today encounter the state in the role of master, rather than judge, thus the modern state is far

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more Hobbesian than Lockean, though it is still very far from the absolutist government that Hobbes commended.
