

Example of thomas hobbes and the social contract argumentative essay

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Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) was a key work of political philosophy because for the first time a writer argued that nations and societies work best when there exists a social contract between all members of a society and those that rule them or the individual that rules them. Hobbes was writing just two years after the execution of Charles I of England and Scotland – a king who had tried to rule as an absolute monarch. Charles I had been tried by Parliament and found guilty of treason: a strange charge we might think, because at the time treason involved the betrayal of the monarch. However, the judges in Parliament argued that he had committed treason against the country: in Hobbesian terms he had broken the covenant that should exist between the ruler and the ruled. Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532) seems at first glance a world away from Hobbes: it seems essentially to be a guide book on how to be an effective absolute ruler, but as we shall see, their ideas, although expressed very differently, have much in common – although their emphasis is different and the terms they use seemingly opposed.

There are countless examples throughout the course of human history and even in more recent times of successful regimes based upon absolute power. Before the death of Tito, the former Yugoslavia enjoyed relative prosperity, stability and unity. After Tito died, the whole country degenerated into internecine strife and civil war with all the horrors of ethnic cleansing and the economic disruption that ensued. Tito's rule was absolute, but arguably he fits Machiavelli's definition of a good prince. Iraq under Saddam Hussein hardly enjoyed stability, because of external conflicts, sanctions and his own murderous oppression of Kurds and Shias, but it is undeniable that more

people have died in Iraq since the coalition invasion than would have done under his continued rule. [Machiavelli could not imagine a situation where a war was waged to impose an ideology - democracy - that he would have found bizarre.] Stalin ruled as an absolute leader in the Soviet Union for decades and is the epitome of Machiavelli's advice to an absolute ruler that "it is much safer to be feared than loved" (Machiavelli, p. 4), because fear "preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails" (Machiavelli, p4). Despite our Cold-War-warped view, despite the purges and the gulags, Stalin appears to have retained the trust of the majority of Soviet citizenry, if recent surveys of his continuing popularity are to be believed: as Machiavelli wrote an absolute ruler "ought not to mind the reproach of cruelty" - "so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal" (Machiavelli, p4).

Hobbes' ideas, by way of contrast to Machiavelli, seem to be more broadly democratic in their assumptions, but he allows for rule by one man provided he rules with the agreement of the whole community. Hobbes is not calling necessarily for an elective monarch. In order to have a working society, where citizens obey the law and keep the peace, Hobbes argues that it is necessary to have "a common power to keep them [the citizens] in awe and to direct their actions to the common benefit" (Hobbes, p. 18). He goes on: The only way to erect such a common power is to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will which is as much to say, to appoint one man, or assembly of men, to bear their person. (Hobbes, p18 - 19) [My italics.]

Firstly, Hobbes' use of the word "awe" is very close to Machiavelli's

pronouncements on the need to be feared; indeed, both writers implicitly believe that without strong, effective government, in Hobbes' words "the condition of man is a condition of war of every one against every one" (Hobbes, p. 11). "One assembly of men" is italicized above to show that, although at the end of Chapter XVII Hobbes calls the one man "the sovereign" (Hobbes, p. 19, he qualifies it by also using the term "sovereign power", possibly invested in an "assembly of men" (Hobbes, p. 19). In other words, Hobbes is arguing as much for a democratic or oligarchic government as he is for an elective monarch - or he appears to be.

However, there are inherent problems in Hobbes' ideas here. Since absolute power is then given to the sovereign, there must be a mechanism for removing that one man when or if he loses the trust of the people. Having lived through a bitter civil war, Hobbes would surely prefer to avoid that: indeed, his description of the natural state of man with "no common power to fear" leads, he asserts, society "to degenerate into a civil war" (Hobbes, p. 11). This seems to contradict his argument, since he seems to be suggesting that the English Civil War would not have occurred had Charles I had been stronger and possessed sufficient "power to fear"- a view that Machiavelli would surely have agreed with. However, this is in direct contradiction of the whole idea of a social contract.

There is a further problem relating to the "assembly of men" granted absolute power, and Hobbes in this extract does not address the problem. How shall this "assembly of men" be chosen and by whom? If the assembly of men lose the trust of the citizenry, how shall they be replaced? Should

they be replaced on a regular fixed basis every few years? Hobbes is writing at a momentous and fluid time when England was in the throes of being a republic, and in his articulation of ideas here, we can see, al-be-it in retrospect, a deep thinker grappling with problems of civic and social governance which were to be resolved and evolved in England by the gradual evolution of a constitutional monarchy, a dissolvable parliament and a widening of the franchise over time. Hobbes' contemporaries, the Levellers, were arguing in this period for universal suffrage, but that did not occur in the United Kingdom until the General Election of 1928. Nor could Hobbes foresee the expansion of what was to become the British Empire which afforded dissident groups, such as the Pilgrim Fathers and the Quakers, who were "at war" with the "sovereign power" simply to leave to set up their own communities run on political, religious and ideological lines that they approved of.

Now in the early 21st century representative democracy, Hobbes' "assembly of men", is the default political position of the developed world. However, it is only because of the "liberality" (Machiavelli, p. 3) and power (military and economic) of the developed world that it is able to proselytize its values across the globe. One might add that Hobbes and Machiavelli are as relevant today as ever and that democracy - taking a global view - is not always the best form of government - it is merely the one which has evolved in the world's most developed nations.

Bibliography

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