

The Early Modern Political Economy of Security

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June 2026

WORKING PAPER: Please do not cite without permission of the author.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the support of Cameron Shelton and the Lowe Institute for Political Economy, and the research assistance of Jasper Langley-Hawthorne.

“Desire of Ease, and sensuall Delight, disposeth men to obey a common Power: because by such Desires, a man doth abandon the protection might be hoped for from his own Industry, and labour. Fear of Death, and Wounds, disposeth to the same; and for the same reason. On the contrary, needy men, and hardy, not contented with their present condition; as also, all men that are ambitious of Military command, are enclined to continue the causes of warre; and to stirre up trouble and sedition [....] Desire of Knowledge, and Arts of Peace, enclineth men to obey a common Power: For such Desire, containeth a desire of leasure; and consequently protection from some other Power than their own”

- Hobbes, *Leviathan*.²

Introduction

One of the main interpretive battles among scholars of Hobbes in the twentieth century revolved around whether the human beings he depicted were bourgeois possessive individualists or not. Although these debates yielded some important insights into Hobbes's theory, as well as the world from which they emerged, they focused primarily on Hobbes's views of individual human beings, or what we might describe as his microeconomics, and largely ignored what he had to say about macroeconomics. This paper argues that Hobbes considered

² 11: 48. All references to *Leviathan* (L) are by chapter and page numbers of the 1651 edition. References to *The Elements of Law* (EL) are by part and paragraph number of the 2024 Sommerville edition. References to *De Cive* (DC) are by chapter and paragraph number of the Warrender edition. For the latter, I have used the Silverthorne translation but have occasionally substituted my own.

the two inextricably linked, and that viewing them in isolation from one another is liable to give rise to significant misunderstandings of his positions on key aspects of his theory that extend well beyond economics.

According to the caricatures that emerged from those misconceptions, Hobbes saw humans as timid beings who would do anything to stay alive, no matter the circumstances.³ They would thus submit unconditionally to a sovereign who could keep them alive even if their life was not worth living. Taking advantage of their submission, that sovereign would enrich himself at their expense and recreate, vis-à-vis other states, the war of all against all that characterized the state of nature. To understand Hobbes's actual views, however, it is necessary to broaden our usual focus, which tends to center on security in terms of defense, and also take into account Hobbes's broader view of the sort of life that is worth living. I use this formulation on purpose, because it is one that one might be inclined to associate with Socrates or Aristotle, certainly not with Hobbes. And yet, already in *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes describes the "general law for sovereigns: that they procure, to the utmost of their endeavour, the good of the people" (EL 2.9.1). In *De Cive*, too, Hobbes advances a conception of safety that extends far beyond security. He also argues that the sovereign has duties under the law of nature (or divine law), and that in a commonwealth worthy of the name the right relationship between sovereign and subjects will be symbiotic, as their respective benefits are interdependent.⁴ Attentiveness to Hobbes's language reveals a sophisticated theory of political economy that usually goes unnoticed.⁵ In it,

³ This line of interpretation goes back to the earliest reactions to Hobbes's works, as evidenced by Hobbes's insertion of a response to critics in the form of a note on fear, in the published version of *De Cive* (1.2, note to "In men's mutual fear").

⁴ Although for the title of the relevant chapter in *Leviathan* (30) Hobbes chose the term "Office," in the body of that chapter he uses the term "duty," just as he did in the *Elements*. Silverthorne is thus justified in translating the term "officiis" as "duties" (DC 13).

⁵ One notable exception is Sorell 2006. See also Malcolm 2005.

macroeconomic and microeconomic considerations go hand-in-hand and serve as one of the foundations of his political theory, often yielding precise—and sometimes surprising—policy recommendations (see Blau 2019).

Separately, international relations theories often make use of Hobbesian concepts, describing states as "Leviathans," their relations as anarchic, and the resulting international landscape as the "state of nature" (see, e.g., Morgenthau & Thompson 1986: 243-44; Waltz 1979: 103; Doyle 1997: 113-16; Haslam 2002: 53-54; Armitage 2013: 59). But why is this the case, given that Hobbes—who wrote much—only wrote a few lines about international relations, most of them buried in a single chapter, in *Leviathan*? This terminology is all the more curious given that Hobbes's state of nature is notably one in which the units of analysis are equal, something that is clearly not the case where states are concerned. The *prima facie* difficulties in applying Hobbes's concept of the state of nature to international relations are perhaps unsurprising. After all, he was primarily interested in the conditions of peace *within* states. Nevertheless, the connection between the state of nature and the international system is, for all of its difficulties, enticing, since the defining characteristic of both conditions is anarchy. It is thus understandable that the state of nature frequently appeals to theorists of international relations, who then try to correct Hobbes's metaphor in light of their observations about actual international relations.

What often gets lost in this translation is that although much of what Hobbes has to say regarding the state of nature that obtains among individual human beings also applies to states and international relations, his brief description of the latter comes with an important caveat, which opens the door to his political economy of security, which in turn yields surprising insights into Hobbes's economic and fiscal policies, as well as what we now refer to as the Size

of Nations Theory. Hobbes states explicitly that the impetus behind his political theory was the outbreak of the English Civil War (DC Pref. §§18-19). Although that war had a religious dimension, there is little doubt that its main cause was economic, as exemplified in the so-called "Ship-Money" case.⁶ From 1634 onwards, Charles I issued writs demanding that his subjects contribute to their defense by paying for the construction of ships to defend England from the Dutch navy. By 1637, when the policy had moved beyond the coastal communities that it had targeted initially, sheriffs were commanded to report the names of those who refused payment. One of those was John Hampden's, who was sued by the Crown. The Ship-Money case, as it came to be known, became emblematic of the broader dispute over who has the right to determine whether a legitimate threat existed that justified the extra levies.

In what follows, I begin by reviewing how Hobbes's theory of human psychology and its role in the sources of conflict leads him to a conception of the state as a body politic and offers an unexpected account of the respective roles in it of the sovereign and her subjects. Where many commentators see a theory largely indifferent to or naive regarding economics and international relations, I show that *Leviathan* contains the outlines of a sophisticated theory of the political economy of security that reveals deep insight into the mutual dependence of security and growth, and challenges caricatures of Hobbes's thought as overly concerned with fear, authoritarian, and belligerent.

Persons Natural and Artificial

⁶ Tuck argues that the Ship-Money case is likely to have been the practical issue that motivated Hobbes "to explore the political implications of post-sceptical philosophy" (1993: 298). *De Cive* leaves little room for doubt. On the case, see Keir 1936.

By the time he published *Leviathan*, in 1651, Thomas Hobbes had written three comprehensive political treatises in just over a decade. Having barely touched on international relations in the first two works—*The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (privately circulated in 1640) and *De Cive* (privately circulated in 1642, published with revisions in 1647)—in *Leviathan* he devoted a paragraph to that subject, which caused his name to become inextricably associated with Realist international relations theory ever since. Appearing towards the end of Chapter 13, the infamous chapter in which Hobbes described his state of nature, that paragraph was intended as one of several examples of that state, namely, the condition that human beings find themselves in when they are equal and there is no power to “keep them all in awe” (Hobbes 1651: 62). Hobbes’s previous examples ranged widely, from thought experiments to reflections on how our mundane actions signal mistrust, and from the condition of the Indians of America of his day and the savage ancestors of civilized nations, to the descent into civil war (Evrigenis 2014). All such examples, however, had something in common: they described a highly undesirable condition of anarchy and insecurity that Hobbes captured as one in which

there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short (Hobbes 1651: 13:62).

Hobbes’s last, less colorful, example of the state of nature referred the reader back to the famous frontispiece of *Leviathan*, in which a massive body politic vested with both spiritual and temporal authority assumes a protective stance over a peaceful and prosperous territory (Figure 1):

But though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of warre one against another; yet in all times, Kings, and Persons of Sovereigne

authority, because of their Independency, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their Forts, Garrisons, and Guns upon the Frontiers of their Kingdomes; and continuall Spyes upon their neighbours; which is a posture of War. But because they uphold thereby, the Industry of their Subjects; there does not follow from it, that misery, which accompanies the Liberty of particular men (Hobbes 1651: 13:63).

Understandably, where international relations are concerned, it is Hobbes's first caveat that has drawn the most attention. Namely, it is the independence of states that renders international relations uniquely different from any subordinate condition. Indeed, at the top of the frontispiece, above the crowned head of the body politic, a line from the Book of Job tells us that "there is no power on Earth that compares to him" (41:24, Vulgate).

Hobbes's second caveat is largely ignored by theorists of international relations who point out that the condition of equality Hobbes describes as the state of nature is patently untrue of international relations, in which states are wildly unequal. Yet, as Hobbes points out, by assuming the "state and posture of Gladiators" ("thereby"), sovereigns keep the "misery that accompanies the Liberty of particular men" at bay. In other words, by assuming the duties of security and relieving their subjects from them, sovereigns enable them to engage in productive activities that make life commodious. With his second caveat, then, Hobbes is clearly distinguishing between the state of nature writ-small (individuals) and writ-large (states). Both conditions are fundamentally anarchic, but the former makes it impossible to engage in activities requiring too much time and investment, as security remains the preeminent and constant concern. In the latter condition, no longer having to worry about their security all the time, individuals are free to pursue industry, science, and the arts, thus making for a "more contented life" (Hobbes 1651: 17:85). The implication seems to be that the success of this division of labor will determine a state's growth, which will in turn play an important role in its ability to provide

adequate security to ensure the continued productivity of its citizens, thereby making for a virtuous circle. States in the international state of nature will therefore be unequal, depending on how well they perform these tasks. Hobbes does not say as much explicitly in *Leviathan* 13, and the notion that governments can do better or worse might seem contradictory to a theory of absolute sovereignty in which the sovereign is the only judge of good and bad. After all, Hobbes's revolutionary social contract is notorious for the fact that the sovereign is not a party to it, which means that she has no contractual obligation to her subjects, who surrendered their natural right as they entered the commonwealth.

To understand the difference between the state of nature writ-small and writ-large, we must begin by understanding their respective units of analysis, individuals and states. Hobbes devotes the first section of *Leviathan* to "Man," that is, to individual human beings (see Evrigenis, 2022), and the second to the "great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended" (L Introduction: 1). As this very first formulation makes clear, while analogous in some ways, the two are also different in important ways that will shape the respective states of nature they occupy. As in Plato's city-soul analogy in the *Republic*, Hobbes's metaphor is complicated by the fact that one side of the analogy contains the other.

Writing in *De Cive*, Hobbes had described his method as animated by questions of distributive justice:

And so when I turned my thoughts to the inquiry about natural justice I was alerted by the very name of justice (by which is meant the constant will to give every man his right) to ask first how it is that anyone ever spoke about something as his own rather than another's; and when it was clear that it did not originate in nature but in human agreements (for human beings have distributed what nature

has placed in common), I was led from there to another question, namely, for whose benefit and under what necessity, when all things belonged to all men, they preferred that each man should have things that belong to himself alone. And I saw that war and every kind of calamity must necessarily follow from community in things, as men came into violent conflict over their use; the thing all seek by nature to avoid. Thus I obtained two absolutely certain postulates of human nature, one, the postulate of human greed by which each man insists upon his own private use of common property; the other, the postulate of natural reason, by which each man strives to avoid violent death as the supreme evil in nature. From these starting points I believe I have demonstrated by the most evident inference in this little work the necessity of agreements and of keeping faith, and thence the Elements of moral virtue and civic duties (Ep. Ded., §§ 9-10).

Hobbes's notorious designation of violent death as the supreme evil in nature perhaps overshadows the economic dimensions of self-preservation, yet we should not lose sight of the fact that his two "absolutely certain postulates of human nature" are complementary: avoidance of violent death is supplemented by the desire to appropriate and accumulate. As Hobbes would later note in *Leviathan*, "The Passions that encline men to Peace, are Fear of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary for commodious living; and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them" (13: 63). While logically prior, fear of violent death is but one of our motives.

Neither self-preservation, however, nor the pursuit of commodious living are possible in the state of nature, for two sets of reasons. The first has to do with the ways in which human psychology creates the conditions for conflict, while the second pertains to the ways in which those conditions interfere with productive behavior. Hobbes begins with a right of nature, which is nothing other than the full liberty a human being has to do what she deems necessary for her self-preservation. The reason for this right is simple: absent an authority that can curb behavior, each individual is free to do whatever she wants (L 14:64). The pursuit of this liberty is animated by the law of nature, which "is a Precept, or generall Rule, found out by Reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same" (L 14:64). Unlike those who "confound" right and law, Hobbes

argues, the two should be distinguished as opposites, since the former signifies liberty, whereas the latter denotes obligation. Beyond the avoidance of harm, the obligation to preserve ourselves leads us to "a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death" (L 11: 47). Although this statement encompasses politics, it is far broader, since for Hobbes "power" is the means towards an end, in the way that air, water, and food are the means towards self-preservation. Thus, when Hobbes proclaims that there is "no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers" (L 11:47), he is not declaring moral relativism, but rather observing that human life consists of the continual pursuit of desires. No matter how rich or poor, secure or insecure, human beings have to feed themselves and think about their next meal. In isolation, this continual pursuit of desire might not amount to much, yet in the presence of others who are similarly motivated we find the makings of competition, which will lead to scarcity. Even if objectively innocent, one's acquisition might appear threatening to another. Being acutely aware of our psychological needs, Hobbes also observes that we tend to assess our success and failure in relation to the achievements of others. Driven by these forces, independent individuals will find themselves in a paradoxical position: while entirely free to do what they deem necessary for their self-preservation, being surrounded by others who are equally free, they will feel insecure.

In a move that would profoundly shape future political thought, Hobbes argues that human beings are naturally equal, both physically and mentally. Despite acknowledging that some are stronger or more knowledgeable than others, he points out that no one is sufficiently superior to assert lasting dominion over another. In short, even the strongest person will eventually have to turn his back or go to sleep, at which point even the weakest could kill him. And while some

are better biologists or mathematicians than others, no one thinks others wiser than himself in matters of good and evil or questions of how to live one's life (L 13: 60-61). This "effective equality" (Hoekstra 2012) makes for a condition of diffidence, since anyone could pose a potential threat. It also makes for competition, because a natural right of all to everything amounts to an effective right to nothing. To make matters worse, no one will receive from others the value that he believes he is due. Taken together, these amount to what Hobbes considers a condition of war. This pronouncement, which has attracted centuries' worth of criticism, nevertheless contains an important economic observation: war, as Hobbes understands it, consists not only in actual fighting, but also *in any activity signaling the intent to fight*, so long as "there is no assurance to the contrary" (L 13: 62). In other words, it is a condition of insecurity that does not permit serious investment of time and effort in productive activities. As Hobbes puts it,

where and Invader hath no more to feare, than an other mans single power; if one plant, sow, build, or possesse a convenient Seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossesse, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life, or liberty. And the Invader is in the like danger of another (L 13: 61).

When human beings live in a condition, in which they have no other security than what they can provide on their own, life will be bare and miserable, rife with anxiety. As we have seen, the basic problem is that "In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain" (L 13: 62; emphasis added). In short, *potential* threats to security require so much attention and effort that productive activity, especially such as requires great investments in time and effort, becomes impossible. If, by chance, one were able to produce something of lasting value, that product would increase the risk of invasion, a realization that would further disincentivize engagement in productive activities.

It is clear that Hobbes's theory of the state of nature is rooted in the principles of what we have come to describe as microeconomics. Competition over what actors perceive as scarce resources informs decisions not just about individual accumulation and consumption, but also about interaction with others, in which questions of risk and trust are front and center (Evrigenis 2023). Although Hobbes's focus on insecurity is temporally and logically justified, it is worth emphasizing that his conception of security goes well beyond physical safety and includes the material conditions for as much commodious living as can be expected. The job of the state, then, is not simply to keep physical danger at bay, but also to cultivate the conditions—institutional, material, and psychological—that will allow its citizens to be as productive as possible.

The Body Politic

One can certainly point to examples of significant risk-taking that would challenge Hobbes's claim, but the important point here is the rule, rather than the exception. It is clear that no significant economy or market could emerge under such conditions of radical, widespread uncertainty. Individual efforts would only go so far. What is required, then, is a basic division of labor between security and industry, in which reasonably reliable provision of security allows those no longer having to worry about it to devote their efforts to productive activities. As Hobbes puts it,

The only way to erect such a Common Power; as may be able to defend them from the invasion of Forraigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their owne industrie, and by the fruites of the Earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly; is to conferre 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 (L 17: 87).

Hobbes's solution to this problem is captured by the body politic that adorns the frontispiece of *Leviathan*. That body is formed through a covenant, in which individuals promise to give up their natural right to a third party, so long as all other individuals who join promise to do the same. By generating this "great LEVIATHAN" and authorizing the bearer of this artificial person, that is, the sovereign, individuals confer upon him such power as is necessary to do its *Business*," which Hobbes calls "*Salus populi* (the *peoples safety*)" (L, Introduction: 1). In this organism, the relationship between the parts is symbiotic, with sovereignty acting as the commonwealth's soul, "giving life and motion to the whole body," while the "*Wealth and Riches* of all the particular members, are [its] *Strength*," that is, the means by which the commonwealth can do its job. Already at the outset, then, Hobbes links economic growth to safety. Thus, while the concentration of all coercive power in the hands of the sovereign carries the danger of not only authoritarian government (Lloyd 2009), but also of neglect of the people's welfare, Hobbes's metaphor of the body politic paves the way for a direct connection between security, growth, and good government.

Despite having exempted the sovereign from contractual duties, Hobbes nevertheless devotes Chapter 30 to her "office," a term that in both Latin and English means "duty."⁷ In all three of his political treatises, Hobbes is quite clear that the duty of the sovereign is to ensure *salus populi*, or, the "safety of the people" (EL, 2.9; DC, 13; L 30:175):

The Elements of Law, 2.9	<i>De Cive</i> , 13	<i>Leviathan</i> , 30
<i>Salus populi suprema lex</i> ; by which must be understood, not the mere preservation of	For all the duties of those who govern are contained in this one saying: <i>Salus populi suprema lex</i> (§2).	The OFFICE of the Sovereign, (be it a Monarch, or an Assembly,) consisteth in the end, for which he was

⁷ That Hobbes thought the terms interchangeable is evident not only from the fact that for the majority of Chapter 30 he speaks of the sovereign's "duty," but also from the fact that the equivalent chapters in his earlier treatises respectively speak of "the duty of them that have sovereign power" (EL 2.9) and "De officiis eorum qui summum imperium administrant" (Of the duties of those who hold sovereign power, DC 13).

their lives, but generally their benefit and good (§1). ... For the temporal good of people, it consisteth in four points: 1. Multitude. 2. Commodity of living. 3. Peace amongst ourselves. 4. Defence against foreign power (§3).	... For by safety one should understand not the mere preservation of life in whatever manner, but a happy life, as far as possible. ... Citizens' advantages that concern this life can be divided into four kinds: 1. That they be defended from external enemies. 2. That internal peace be preserved. 3. That they enrich themselves as much as is consistent with public security. 4. That they enjoy innocent freedom (§6)	trusted with the Sovereign Power, namely the procuration of <i>the safety of the people</i> [...] But by Safety here, is not meant a bare Preservation, but also all other Contentments of life, which every man by lawful Industry, without danger, or hurt to the Common-wealth, shall acquire to himself (175).
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But how can the sovereign both have and not have duties at the same time? Although the sovereign has no *contractual* duties to her subjects, she is accountable to God "and to none but him" (L 30:175). Some readers have largely written off the sovereign's accountability to God as effectively immaterial for citizens, who would thus become prey to the otherwise unchecked sovereign's whims.⁸ Yet Hobbes adds another important caveat, noting that "the profit of the sovereign and subject goeth always together" (EL, 2.5.1).

In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes argued that the "duty of a sovereign consisteth in the good government of the people; and although the acts of sovereign power be no injuries to the subjects who have consented to the same by their implicit wills, yet when they tend to the hurt of the people in general, they be breaches of the law of nature and of the divine law" (2.9.1). If the threat of eternal death for those sovereigns who violate this duty seems anodyne, Hobbes

⁸ See especially the "Taylor-Warrender Thesis" and reactions to it (Taylor 1938; Warrender 1957; Brown 1959), as well as interpretations emphasizing the roles of human psychology and natural law (Gauthier 1969; Lloyd 1992; Lloyd 2009; Zagorin 2009; Lloyd 2016).

notes that self-interested sovereigns should be aware that "as the art and duty of sovereigns consist in the same acts, so also doth their profit[;... f]or the end of art is profit and governing to the profit of the subjects, is governing to the profit of the sovereign" (2.9.1). More explicit in *De Cive*, Hobbes argues that

although those who hold sovereign power among men cannot be subject to laws properly so called, i.e., to the will of men, because sovereignty and subjection to others are contradictory, it is nevertheless their *duty* to obey right reason in all things so far as they can; right reason is the natural moral and divine law. And since governments were formed for the sake of peace, and peace is sought for safety, if the incumbent in power used it otherwise than for the people's safety, he would be acting against the principles of peace, that is, against natural law. And just as the people's safety dictates the law by which Princes come to know their *duty*, it also teaches them the art by which they look after their own interest. For the power of the citizens is the power of the commonwealth, that is, his power who holds the sovereignty in the commonwealth (XIII.2).

Still, what sort of deterrent against abuse of power is adherence to natural law? Hobbes's most powerful formulation of the force of natural law comes in *Leviathan* 31, as he is completing his discussion of the laws of nature that began in Chapter 14. There, Hobbes argues that "Naturall Punishments" follow breaches of the law of nature in the same way that punishments follow breaches of the law. No human action is without consequences and all actions are the beginning of "more Harme than Good" (L 31: 193).

Crucially, human beings are incapable of grasping the full extent of their actions' consequences, which means that while we may not appreciate the ways in which natural punishments follow violations of the law of nature, their advent is not arbitrary. Hence, Hobbes argues, "Intemperance, is naturally punished with Diseases; Rashnesse with Mischances; Injustice, with the Violence of Enemies; Pride, with Ruine; Cowardise, with Oppression; Negligent government of Princes, with Rebellion; and Rebellion, with Slaughter" (L 31: 193). This statement is remarkable, because it runs counter to the widespread misperception that there is

no such thing as bad government for Hobbes. While there is no such thing as bad government by the standard of that government's own laws, there can be "negligent government" by princes who are violating their duties according to natural law. Moreover, even for Hobbes there are such things as good laws and bad laws, as we will see below. The rebellion that follows negligent government is not one that Hobbes legitimizes (see L 24: 1280, but merely the natural consequence of extreme oppression and poverty. Similarly, rebellion will be followed by slaughter. Natural reason should thus reveal to both sovereigns and subjects that their respective interests and wellbeing are inextricably intertwined.

As we noted above, Hobbes claims that he began his inquiry into natural justice from the point of appropriation, that is, the emergence of private property. To the shock of many, Hobbes also claims that because in the state of nature there is no common power, there is no law and, hence, no injustice. Justice and injustice, he argues, pertain only to human beings in "Society, not Solitude" (L 13: 63). It therefore follows that in the state of nature there is "no Propriety, no Dominion, no *Mine* and *Thine* distinct," but only that which one "can get; and for so long, as he can keep it" (L 13:63). This follows from the fact that each individual has a natural right to everything (L 14: 72). Hobbes thus asserts that *propriety* is what everyone "may enjoy, and what Actions he may doe, without being molested by any of his fellow Subjects" (L 18: 91). It is the sovereign who puts an end to the war of all against all, by designating what is one's own and what another's, as well as what is lawful and unlawful. The important difference between precarious possession in the state of nature and reasonably assured property in civil society is the legalization of a claim and the state's capacity to defend it, which allow individuals to worry less about protecting things they have appropriated, by deterring those who might wish to steal them. Getting and keeping something by force, Hobbes argues, "is neither *Propriety*, nor

Community; but *Uncertainty*," citing *even* Cicero as having argued, "*Take away the Civill Law, and no man knows what is his own, and what another mans*" (L 24: 127).⁹ Hobbes notes that the word νόμος (law) comes from νέμω which means to distribute, which proves that the ancients "defined Justice, by *distributing* to every man *his own*" (L 24: 128).

Indeed, here Hobbes is building on a long-established tradition, extending at least as far back as Aristotle's *Politics* (1.2) and extended by Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* 1.2.95-96; 2.2.66.2), according to which the acquisition of property is natural to human beings and justice is found in a political association.¹⁰ As Garnsey puts it, "in virtually all allusions to, or accounts of, the early development of human life on earth, it is taken for granted that in the state of nature the resources of the world were equally available and accessible to all, and private ownership had no place" (2007: 108). Hobbes is in good company, then, when he argues that property is only meaningful in conditions in which it is acknowledged and can be defended by others. As Schumpeter notes, however, Hobbes took this line of thought further when he laid out the consequences of a universal natural right to everything, namely a state of paralyzing insecurity that would render productive activity virtually impossible (1954: 115). Distribution of property, therefore, belongs to the sovereign power (L 24: 127-28) and anyone claiming that subjects have an absolute right to their property is preaching a seditious doctrine that endangers the sovereign and, therefore, the common peace (L 29: 170; 173). Similarly, monopolies are to be avoided as they can lead to outsize wealth, which may in turn destabilize the internal balance of power and impede the sovereign's ability to perform her duties (L 29: 173).

⁹ The original source is Cicero, *Pro Caecina*, 25.70 f.

¹⁰ In *On Duties*, Cicero argues that "[t]here is, however, no such thing as private ownership established by nature" (1.21).

Just as the human body needs nutrition, so too does the commonwealth. Its own nutrition consists of the "*Plenty, and Distribution of Materials* conducing to Life: In *Concoction*, or *Preparation*; and (when concocted) in the *Conveyance* of it, by convenient conduits, to the Publique use" (L 24: 127). Following a basic analysis of commodities along Aristotelian lines, Hobbes notes that the distribution of property begins with the distribution of lands; property in land consists in the ability to exclude others from using it, but not the sovereign (L 24: 128). The logic behind this argument is that the sovereign distributes land with a view to the preservation of the common peace and security, and that any attempt to exclude the sovereign from it would be contrary to the will of everyone who joined civil society for peace and security. At first glance, this stipulation might appear antithetical to growth, since one could reasonably argue that there is no greater threat to property and productivity than that posed by a government towards its subjects (indeed, Hobbes acknowledges that a government of any type may act in pursuit of its passions). It is worth keeping in mind, however, that Hobbes's sovereign exception here is offered within the context of his broader argument couched in natural law. It thus might be easier to see his point by reflecting on the concept of eminent domain, which, even in the most accountable governments, preserves the right to override a claim to private property for the common good, perhaps with some form of restitution, or by considering justifiable need for commandeering private property during emergencies.

While the sovereign's distribution of land is to be done in accordance with the demands of "Equity, and the Common Good" (L 24: 128), it is important to remember that use of land or revenues for the commonwealth cannot be limited by claims of private property. Commonwealths, argues Hobbes, "can endure no Diet" and the extent of their need is typically determined by "externall Accidents, and the appetites of their neighbours," and, "the nature of

men being as it is," governments can be "negligent of mony, or too hazardous in engaging the publique stock, into a long, or costly war" (L 24: 129). Even mismanagement, however, should not distract from the ultimate purpose of the commonwealth, which is peace through security. As the provider of security and determinant of property holdings, the sovereign is therefore both the de facto and de jure market regulator, appointing the places and manner in which foreign trade (L 24: 128-29; see Jakonen 2024) and domestic transactions between subjects can be made (L 24: 129-30).

One of the many ways in which the sovereign regulates the market is by standardizing the means of exchange, in issuing currency.¹¹ Just as blood nourishes "every Member of the Body of Man," money is the blood of the commonwealth, going "round about, Nourishing (as it passeth) every part thereof (L 24: 130). Although no individual sovereign can affect the value of precious metals, states have the capacity to enhance or debase the value of common currency. Moreover, they have the capacity to make commonwealths "move, and stretch their armes" into foreign countries by enabling subjects to travel and armies to move, but debased coins that are mainly valuable for their stamp at home mean very little abroad (L 24: 130).

The circulatory system of the body politic runs in two main directions: one towards the public coffers and the other outwardly, through public payments (L 24: 130-31). Sticking with his overarching metaphor, Hobbes argues that the former represents the flow of blood towards the heart, which renders it vital and then sends it out again to "enliven, and enable the motion of all the Members" of the commonwealth (L 24: 131). Not least because of the Ship Money controversy, Hobbes recognizes that taxes are one of the most challenging points of interaction between sovereigns and subjects. He also knows well that subjects tend to complain about their

¹¹ Bodin pronounced the issuing of money one of the marks of sovereignty (1606: 175-77).

treatment at the hands of any government, no matter whether monarchical or democratic, especially if sovereignty is absolute. Hobbes's aim, however, is to remind his readers that sovereign power is never as bad as its complete absence (L 18: 94) and that "man by nature chooseth the lesser evil" (L 14: 70). Because nature has endowed us with magnifying glasses that allow us to see up close, he argues, we tend to focus on what is right in front of us, such as a tax bill. Lacking prospective glasses, however, we are incapable of accurately seeing and weighing "the miseries that hang over [us], and cannot without such payments be avoyded" (L 18: 94). A properly-informed cost-benefit analysis and assessment of risk would make it clear to a subject that his tax bill represents a bargain unlike any other, for never has so little bought so much. Just as the sword on the frontispiece symbolizes the collective power of individual subjects brought under one will, the collective funds of individual subjects that on their own would amount to very little allow for the provision of public goods that those individuals rely on and, perhaps, come to take for granted. Chief among these is security, but the list extends well beyond that, to include infrastructure and other public goods and services that are beyond the means of even the richest of subjects on their own.

Having discussed the nutrition of the body politic, Hobbes briefly addresses its procreation. Hobbes experienced the transformation of sovereignty that marked the beginning of the seventeenth century first hand, as his patrons were investors in the Virginia Company and Hobbes was charged with representing their interests there (Malcolm 2002; but cf. Evrigenis 2014; see also Springborg 2015). While Hobbes made use of America in relation to the state of nature in all of his political treatises, he did not do so in the manner of Locke (see Liu 2024). This is something of a paradox, given the widespread perception that Hobbes's account is misanthropic (see DC, Pref. §12) whereas Locke's is not, for unlike Locke Hobbes does not use

his assessment of Native Americans to justify taking their land and resources from them. In fact, while Hobbes pronounces colonies and plantations the "Children of a Common-wealth" (L 24: 131), he notes that they settle on land that is either vacant or made so by war, but that war is a means of last resort (L 30: 181) and that commonwealths should beware of "*Bulimia*, of enlarging Dominion" (L 29: 174; see also Springborg 2018).¹²

If the very notion of negligent government seems strange in light of the widespread caricature of Hobbes's authoritarian and unaccountable sovereign, it is nevertheless consistent with his broader approach to good government in accordance with natural law and his further distinction between good and bad laws. Proclaiming that "It is a weak Sovereign, that has weak Subjects; and a weak People, whose Sovereign hath Power to rule them at his will," Hobbes argues that unnecessary laws are "trapps for Mony: which where the right of Sovereign Power is acknowledged, are superfluous; and where it is not acknowledged, unsufficient to defend the People" (L 30: 182). Once again presaging Locke, Hobbes argues that good laws act as "hedges" (L 30: 182), facilitating the lawful and profitable movement, not least of money, goods, and people. Among these, laws (νόμοι) that encourage not only distribution (νέμω), but also redistribution are important. The first means is through what Hobbes calls "Equall Taxes," namely, a consumption tax of sorts, meant to encourage industry and thrift (see Sorell 2006).

Pointing to what I described as the fundamental division of labor between sovereign and subjects, Hobbes calls taxes "nothing else but the Wages, due to them that hold the publique Sword, to defend private men in the exercise of severall Trades, and Callings" (L 30: 181). Hobbes prefers this type of taxation for its ability to tax everyone and prevent the "defrauding"

¹² Hobbes warns that colonists should not exterminate native populations but rather push them to occupy smaller tracts of land, at least until overpopulation becomes a global problem (L 30: 181).

of the commonwealth by luxurious waste of wealthy individuals (L 30: 181). At the same time, Hobbes recognizes that some citizens may be unable to maintain themselves through their own labor and industry. These citizens must not be left to the charity of private individuals but provided for by the sovereign, in the name of the commonwealth (L 30: 181). The sovereign, however, must ensure that public charity does not become an incentive for idleness and should pass laws that "encourage all manner of Arts; as Navigation, Agriculture, Fishing, and all manner of Manufacture that requires labour" (L 30: 181). Although brief, these recommendations confirm that Hobbes means what he says when he describes the task of the sovereign as providing for as good a life as possible, for as many subjects as possible.

Political Economy and the Size of Nations

The epigraph to this paper encapsulates a key observation that undergirds Hobbes's conception of security, namely that it begins with a fundamental division of labor between the sovereign and subjects, in which the former assumes the task of protection (broadly conceived, that is, not just protection from external threats, but also domestic peace and the means, both material and institutional) that frees the latter to engage in industry, all with a view to such commodious living as human limitations permit. This division of labor allows the units of analysis in this scenario (commonwealths) to escape the constraints faced by individuals in the basic conception of the state of nature. Chief among these constraints is the limit to growth, which for solitary individuals is prohibitive of commodious living. *Caeteris paribus*, policies aimed at good government consistent with natural law will recognize that the welfare of the sovereign is directly linked with that of her subjects, because, as Hobbes puts it, "the profit of the sovereign and subject goeth always together" (EL 2.5.1).

Modern Size of Nations Theory broadly confirms this view. As Alesina and Spolaore (2003) note, the sizes of national states are due to trade-offs between the benefits of scope and scale and the costs of heterogeneity of preferences over public goods and policies provided by government. Thus, i) per capita costs of public goods are lower in large countries; ii) *caeteris paribus*, a large country can better protect itself; iii) the size of a country affects the size of the economy; iv) large countries provide "regional insurance;" and v) large countries can build redistributive schemes. Moreover, Alesina and Spolaore point out that conflict encourages consolidation, leading to larger states. Paradoxically, by encouraging secession, the absence of conflict creates more borders that need to be defended by more armies, as well as more targets that appear attainable, thereby ultimately making for greater conflict (Alesina and Spolaore 2003: Chapters 7 and 8). Indeed, recent research confirms Alesina and Spolaore's claim that since the Cold War "local military conflicts have increased" (2003: 13). Davies, Petersson, and Öberg show that not only is that the case for the period 1989-2025, but that at present there are more conflicts globally than at any other time since World War II (2026).

Preliminary Conclusions

Where the history of ideas is concerned, reconstructing Hobbes's views on the political economy of security has several important implications. First, attention to this element of his thought debunks widespread caricatures of his broader theory and its purpose. Contrary to these caricatures, Hobbes's theory takes subject welfare seriously and ties it to that of the sovereign in material ways that have policy consequences.¹³ Without needing to resort to a

¹³ Even Alesina and Spolaore cannot resist the temptation to label "Leviathans" states that "do not care about their subjects directly;" they claim to be "[f]ollowing a tradition that goes back to Thomas Hobbes (2003: 69).

reading centered on natural and divine law as bearing consequences for sovereigns in a hypothetical afterlife, one can see that Hobbes proposes a correction to our generally problematic assessment of short-term and long-term risks and costs. Through this prism, broad distinctions between domestic and international politics, micro- and macro-economics, or economics and politics are little more than heuristic devices that ultimately become hindrances to understanding the complex interactions between innumerable factors, many of which are hard to discern. These distinctions may seem strange in 2026, but as Brooks points they are alive and well: "to properly comprehend world politics," he argues, "we must develop a better overall understanding of economic factors" (2026: 1).

I noted in passing that historians of political economy tend to think of Hobbes as a precursor to political economy proper. While this classification makes sense in light of the shift in emphasis that characterized the eighteenth century, especially by such thinkers as Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Smith, it is nevertheless deceptive, because it presents as a rigid break what, in fact, was more of a gradual shift in emphasis. Correcting this narrative means not simply noting the ways in which Hobbes pays attention to economic questions, nor also just observing the ways in which these subsequent thinkers built their economic theories on Hobbesian foundations, but merging these two strands to compose a more detailed, revised history of economic thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Evrigenis in press; Boyd 2021).

Where economics research is concerned, next steps would involve diving more deeply into the particular claims advanced by Hobbes on specific policy recommendations, to assess them both in isolation and as parts of a broader economic policy. For instance, there is substantial research on the benefits and drawbacks of the kind of tax system that Hobbes is proposing, as well as

lots of data and vigorous disagreement on the merits and shortcomings of globalization and outsourcing. Finally, as recent conflicts have shown, technological and financial developments are beginning to introduce some new questions into the relationship between individuals and the state. For instance, how should we think of sovereignty and security as they are increasingly dependent on private initiatives (space exploration, AI use on the battlefield, drone development)? In some ways, these changes appear to increase the distance between ourselves and the Early Modern Period. In others, however, they bring us closer, since Early Modern Sovereigns faced new challenges to sovereignty as well (discovery and claiming of previously-unknown lands; massive influx of new and expensive raw materials; disputes over open or closed seas; reliance on wealthy individuals to fund the bulk of state activity, including defense). These affinities add an important dimension to what began as a historical inquiry and call for further exploration.

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