

The Role of Education in Political Stability

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Currently the dominant interpretation of Hobbes in the field of moral and political philosophy is as a social contract theorist: that he legitimates moral rules and sovereign power by arguing that we would agree we are better off obeying a sovereign than living in a state of nature, and that we are best off if that sovereign is an absolute monarch. There are interesting alternatives to this reading of Hobbes—Warrender's divine-command interpretation and Boonin-Vail's virtue theory interpretation, to name just two—but it is not my purpose here to debate their relative merits. Rather, I want to comment on one of the main features of the social contract view, namely, the means of maintaining political stability.

According to the contract view the state of nature can be seen as a prisoner's dilemma or some similar game situation in which the players find it rational to break their agreements and consequently generate a war of all against all. The solution is to set up a sovereign who will make it rational to cooperate, and the way the sovereign does this is by threatening them with punishment if they fail to keep their word.¹ The textual support for this emphasis on punishment as the keeper of order is both ample and memorable. For example, Hobbes says that

the laws of nature...of themselves, without the terror of some power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions.... And covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all. (L 17.2²)

¹ See David Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 83, 106; Jean Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 132-4; Gregory S. Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 88, 171-2, 245, 310.

² References to Hobbes will be as follows. References to B are to pages in the Holmes/Tönnies edition of Hobbes's *Behemoth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 1679). References to L, DCv, and DH are to *Leviathan*, *De Cive*, and *De Homine* respectively and are of the form x.y, where x = chapter number (or the Introduction, Preface, etc.) and y = paragraph number. References to EL are to *The Elements of Law*, published by Oxford (1994, J.C.A. Gaskin, ed.) as *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, and are also of the form x.y. This differs from the commonly used reference scheme for EL because unlike other editions, which divide EL into two parts with chapter numbers restarting at 1 for the second part, the Oxford edition runs the chapter numbers through without restarting. The equivalent chapter number can be found by subtracting 19 (the number of chapters in Part I) from any chapter number over 19.

and, even more explicitly:

by [the] authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, [the sovereign] hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad. (L 17.13)

Attentive readers will notice that Hobbes clearly thinks there is more a sovereign should do to maintain the state than that; he says, for instance, that a prudent sovereign will choose good counselors, rule justly, see to it that citizens are contented and materially well off, and educate them in their duties (L 30.3-25). But given the emphasis placed on punishment both by Hobbes and many of his commentators, the other measures Hobbes discusses receive relatively little attention and are apt to sound like mere afterthoughts or helpful hints.³ A full account of Hobbes's views on political stability would need to consider all such measures, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. What I want to argue here is that Hobbes thinks education is particularly important to keeping a state stable. In fact, while it is theoretically possible for a state to remain stable without the citizens being properly educated, Hobbes provides reason to believe that it is extremely unlikely.

The way education helps to maintain order may be understood by examining how the lack of proper education contributes to disorder. Consider the following passages from Hobbes's history of the English Civil War, *Behemoth*:

Truly, I think, if the King had had money, he might have had soldiers enough in England [to prevent rebellion]. For there were very few of the common people that cared much for either of the causes, but would have taken any side for pay or plunder. But the King's treasury was very low.... (B 2)

... the people in general were so ignorant of their duty, as that not one perhaps of ten thousand knew what right any man had to command him, or what necessity there was of King or Commonwealth, for which he was to part with his money against his will;

³ A striking exception is S.A. Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan: The Power of Mind Over Matter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), which argues that "It is education, and not might, that makes for social order in Hobbes's system" (p. 2). According to Lloyd, Hobbes thinks that threats of punishment cannot be effective *in principle* because rebellious people are willing to sacrifice their safety for their cause, and thus that education is the sole means of long-term stability. As will be apparent from this paper, I agree that education is crucial to long-term stability; however, I believe Hobbes thinks threats of punishment are also crucial, and I disagree with Lloyd's thesis that "transcendent interests" (interests for which people will sacrifice their lives) play a major role in Hobbes. A portion of my dissertation argues this point at length.

but thought himself to be so much master of whatsoever he possessed, that it could not be taken from him upon any pretence of common safety without his own consent. (B 4; cf. L 29.10)

Notice the roles played by apathy and ignorance here. Widespread apathy meant that people would not fight for the king out of loyalty, and would have to be induced with money. But widespread ignorance of the sovereign's right to command and of the need to pay taxes helped prevent the king from raising a large enough army.

Besides ignorance and apathy, Hobbes felt that false beliefs are an important cause of disorder. He claims several political and religious doctrines are especially pernicious, so much so that he lists them among those causes of disorder that are "of the greatest, and most present danger" (L 29.18⁴). To see why, let's examine a passage describing the consequence of allowing doctrines to be spread which split people's loyalties between spiritual and civil authorities:

When [spiritual and civil authorities] oppose one another, the Common-wealth cannot but be in great danger of Civill warre, and Dissolution. For the *Civill* Authority being more visible, and standing in the cleerer light of naturall reason cannot choose but draw to it in all times a very considerable part of the people: And the *Spirituell*, though it stand in the darknesse of Schoole distinctions, and hard words; yet because the fear of Darknesse, and Ghosts, is greater than other fears, cannot want a party sufficient to Trouble, and sometimes to Destroy a Common-wealth. (L 29.15)

The fact that certain doctrines could be used—whether by sincere believers or cynical manipulators—to attract a large following, coupled with their content (which held that the king could or should be defied) made them dangerous. Despite spiritual authorities' use of obscure language, they are able to frighten people into following them in numbers great enough to threaten the sovereign power.⁵ But although spiritual doctrines receive the most emphasis, they are not the only ones which can be used to draw followers away from the sovereign. Hobbes was also concerned, e.g., about the belief that the greatness of ancient Greece and Rome was due to their popular forms of government (L 29.14).

Since the spread of the wrong sort of doctrines among an ignorant populace can have such dire results, Hobbes believed it was crucial that they not be spread, and that the right sort of doctrines take their place—not only among

⁴ The doctrines themselves are discussed in L 29.6-15. See also the parallel sections in EL 27 and DCv 12. Harmful doctrines are also listed L 44-46, B 14-16, and elsewhere.

⁵ Interestingly, elsewhere Hobbes says that it is in part *because* of their use of obscure ideas that spiritual authorities gain power over others. See, e.g., B 40ff.

those who might lead rebellions, but among the general populace as well. An examination of Hobbes's work in *Leviathan* and elsewhere shows ample evidence of this concern. As noted above, *Leviathan's* Chapter 29 discusses threats to the commonwealth; the chapter immediately following discusses how the sovereign is to maintain the commonwealth and is largely taken up with a discussion of how the sovereign must teach subjects about their duties. Many passages of *Behemoth* also reflect the importance Hobbes places on education. In one, Hobbes says that it is impossible for a state to remain stable unless its government applies the "infallible rules" of the civil science Hobbes himself presents in his earlier works:

A. ...for the government of a commonwealth, neither wit, nor prudence, nor diligence, is enough, without infallible rules and the true science of equity and justice.

B. If this be true, it is impossible any commonwealth in the world, whether monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy, should continue long without change, or sedition tending to change, either of the government or of the governors.

It is the lack of civil science that makes stability impossible; but immediately afterwards Hobbes makes clear that these infallible rules require reforming the educational system to protect against the spread of dangerous doctrines:

A. It is true; nor have any [sic] the greatest commonwealths in the world been long free from sedition. The Greeks had for awhile their petty kings, and then by sedition came to be petty commonwealths; and then growing to be greater commonwealths, by sedition again became monarchies; and all *for want of rules of justice for the common people to take notice of; which if the people had known* in the beginning of every of these seditions, the ambitious persons could never have had the hope to disturb their government after it had been once settled. For ambition can do little without hands, and *few hands it would have, if the common people were as diligently instructed in the true principles of their duty, as they are terrified and amazed by preachers, with fruitless and dangerous doctrines...*that tend...only to the direction towards the clergy of that duty which they ought to perform to the King.

B. For aught I see, all the states of Christendom will be subject to these fits of rebellion, as long as the world lasteth.

A. Like enough; and yet the fault, as I have said, may be easily mended, by mending the Universities. (B 70-1, emphasis added)

Lest there be any doubt about the importance of “mending the universities” Hobbes has more to say:

The core of rebellion, as you have seen by this, and read of other rebellions, are the Universities; which nevertheless are not to be cast away, but to be better disciplined: that is to say, that the politics there taught be made to be, as true politics should be, such as are fit to make men know, that it is their duty to obey all laws whatsoever that shall by the authority of the King be enacted, till by the same authority they shall be repealed... (B 57)

Here again we see the function of education in maintaining stability: without it, ambitious persons will find a following among the people which they can use to overthrow the sovereign. Conversely, with it—and by means of the very universities from which sedition has spread in the past—would-be rebels will remain few in number, and thus unlikely to seriously threaten the government.⁶

The foregoing helps us to understand the nature of the problem Hobbes believes sovereigns will face if they fail to properly educate citizens in their duties. But it does little to help us assess the *likelihood* that a lack of proper education will cause instability in the state. Without some sense of this likelihood, it is not yet clear why education is so important to Hobbes. We have seen him suggest that it is impossible for a state to survive without it (cf. B 70, above) but unless we can find corroboration for this claim we might dismiss this as an overstatement.

From what Hobbes himself says elsewhere, there is reason to believe he overstated. Recall his famous description of the miseries of the state of nature in *Leviathan*'s chapter 13:

In such condition, 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, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

⁶ Given Hobbes's tendency sometimes to say apparently inconsistent things in different places, it is worth noting that Hobbes expresses much the same ideas elsewhere in his work, even in books written many years apart (cf. EL Epistle Dedicatory, 28.8; DCv Preface.2; L 29.14, 30.3-14).

These miseries result from a lack of security against others. Hobbes evidently wants us to infer that if there is security against others we may expect that people will engage in the sort of cooperative behavior that would generate the goods we are deprived of in the state of nature and enjoy “the fruit thereof.” Effective threats of punishment, by providing the needed security, can (assuming reasonably favorable material conditions) lead us to a reasonably contented standard of living. And contented people, according to Hobbes, are unlikely to rebel; in fact in *The Elements of Law* he says rebellion is impossible without discontent.⁷

However, there are several countervailing considerations which combine to make the prospect of achieving long-term stability by threats alone very dim. The first thing we may notice is that the sovereign’s sword is two-edged. Presenting a population with a credible threat of punishment requires a great deal of money—to pay the soldiers or police, to procure their arms, to feed and house them, and so on. Raising money means levying taxes, which tends to generate discontent because even though taxes are simply the reward for those “who watch in arms for us,” most people fail to appreciate it. Rather the reverse:

For they suffer the same thing with them who have a disease they call an incubus; which springing from gluttony, it makes men believe they are invaded, oppressed, and stifled with a great weight. Now it is a thing manifest of itself, that they who seem to themselves to be burthened with the whole load of the commonweal, are prone to be seditious; and that they are affected with change, who are distasted at the present state of things. (DCv 12.9; cf. DCv 13.10)

People, greedy to keep what they have, perceive the demand to pay taxes as an oppressive burden. So the more menacing—and hence effective—the sovereign’s threat of punishment is, the more expensive it is to maintain it, and the greater the tendency for subjects to see the sovereign not as the protector of their prosperity but as the obstacle to it.

Secondly, as we have seen above, there may be beliefs or doctrines in circulation which have the effect of undermining the sovereign’s ability to maintain a sufficient threat of punishment. Examples include the belief that one’s

⁷ EL 27.1. On the other hand, it is worth noting that at L 17.11 he says “man is then most troublesome, when he is most at ease: for then it is that he loves to shew his wisdom, and control the actions of them that govern the commonwealth.” This would seem to undermine the argument I am making in this paragraph, but since Hobbes makes this claim as part of his argument for the need for a sovereign’s coercive power (L 17.4-13) it looks as if he thinks the threat of punishment can put an end to this trouble.

property rights are absolute and hence that the sovereign has no right to demand taxes, the doctrine that when the commands of sovereign and God conflict the sovereign must be defied, and many others. Citizens may come upon them inadvertently, but it must be kept in mind that there will always be people who wish to have more power than others (EL 14.3, 27.3, e.g.) and such people will find it in their interest to actively spread such ideas in order to attract a following.

It may be pointed out that the sovereign could (and should, according to Hobbes—cf. L 17.9) use the threat of punishment to censor pernicious doctrines. But Hobbes points out that coercive censorship creates a problem of its own. When people believe they are in the right, attempting to suppress their ideas has the effect of fortifying their resistance:

A state can constrain obedience, but convince no error, nor alter the mind of them that believe they have the better reason. Suppression of doctrines does but unite and exasperate, that is, increase both the malice and power of them that have already believed them. (B 62)

However, let us suppose for a moment that the sovereign can effectively prevent the spread of the “wrong” sort of idea in the state, and yet does not see to it that people are educated in their duties. Under these circumstances threats of force are still counterproductive, but for another reason. Hobbes says that

the grounds of [the sovereign’s right to rule] need to be diligently, and truly taught; because they cannot be maintained by any civil law, or terror of legal punishment. For a civil law...is not...any obligation, but by virtue only of the law of nature, that forbiddeth the violation of faith; which natural obligation if men know not, they cannot know the right of any law the sovereign maketh. And for the punishment, they take it but for an act of hostility; which when they think they have strength enough, they will endeavour by acts of hostility, to avoid. (L 30.4)

In other words, if the people are not “diligently and truly taught” the reasons for the sovereign’s right to rule, they will not see the sovereign’s penalties as legitimate exercises of power but as acts of aggression which they will oppose in self-defense.

No one of the factors mentioned here—(a) discontent over taxes, (b) the spread of destabilizing beliefs, (c) the resistance generated by censorship, or (d) seeing the sovereign as a threat to safety—appears very likely to undermine the state by itself. But notice that (a) and (d) are inherent in a system where the sovereign’s only instrument of control is punishment. They will be present even when threatening punishment is as successful as it can be,

because they flow not from misapplying punishment but from human nature—in particular, from our desire to hold on to our money and our desire to protect ourselves from perceived threats. So the sovereign will always have opponents, and we can expect that at least some of them will try to organize some sort of resistance. They will likely find ways to persuade others to join them, perhaps with nothing more than the promise of freedom from taxes. And so on. So if Hobbes overstated when he claimed stability is impossible without proper education, it was not by much. The argument I have constructed here from Hobbes's work may not prove the impossibility of maintaining a state without educating the citizens, but does suggest its unlikelihood.

Up to now, we have concentrated on how the lack of proper education contributes to disorder. To help complete our picture of education's role in political stability we should at least briefly consider the positive contribution Hobbes believes it can make. As we have seen already, it can prevent would-be rebels from gathering a following. It does this by instructing people in their civic duties so that they understand the legitimacy of sovereign power and see how it benefits them to submit to it. This helps to counteract factor (d).

Proper education also helps ensure that the people do not fall for the specious doctrines often used as pretexts for disobedience. Hobbes appears to have at least three strategies for this. One is simply for the sovereign to see to it that subjects are taught the grounds of their duties (L 30.4), including their duty to remain loyal to the sovereign rather than be tempted to disloyalty by the charisma of others (L 30.8). Another is for the sovereign to control who is allowed to speak publicly and what is published (L 18.9). Yet another is for the sovereign to allow potentially dangerous doctrines to be read, but not “without present applying such correctives of discreet masters, as are fit to take away their venom” (L 29.14). Together these serve to counteract factor (b), and the latter would sidestep (c).

Hobbes thinks there are several ways in which education can shift the blame for discontent away from the sovereign and thus help keep it from becoming a serious problem. One historical example he gives of this is when rulers in Rome and Peru convinced the subjects that sovereign edicts were of divine origin (L 12.20). Hobbes argues at length that we should take a similar attitude and look to the sovereign as the authoritative interpreter of God's word. Another way is by persuading the people to blame themselves for their misfortunes. Hobbes points out that the Romans and others managed to get the people to see their problems as the result of their own neglect or disobedience (L 12.21). A third way Hobbes thinks education can deal with discontent (and one perhaps more palatable to those accustomed to secular government) is by showing the people that their obedience to the laws, including

paying their taxes, is not to be seen as an inconvenient burden but as the price they pay for their safety, i.e., by persuading them that although the government restricts their liberty and takes some of their money it is, on the whole, their benefactor.⁸

As important as Hobbes thinks education is to political stability, we should note its limitations. Although threats of punishment alone are unlikely to maintain stability for long they can at least be effective in the short term, while education alone would not be effective at all. Consider that perfectly-educated Hobbesians would understand that “covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all” (L 17.2) and therefore that without a sovereign’s threatened punishments they are not bound to keep many of their covenants, and cannot reasonably be expected to do so. Rather, given the argument of *Leviathan* Chapter 13, they should expect others to cheat and attack them. Thus, absent a threatening sovereign, Hobbesians would recognize themselves to be in a state of war with each other.

Furthermore, we have reason to be skeptical of some of Hobbes’s optimistic claims about education’s efficacy. For example, can he really think that “the common people’s minds, unless they be tainted with dependance on the potent, or scribbled over with the opinions of their doctors, are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by public authority shall be imprinted in them” (L 30.6)? Some students are thick, some are inattentive, and some—like Hobbes himself—reject what they are taught.

But then again, he doesn’t really have to believe his own hyperbole. Long-term stability, on Hobbes’s view, does not require unanimous belief in all the points of Hobbesian doctrine. It only requires that *enough* people subscribe to at least the rudiments of civil science and therefore obey the sovereign at least in part because they understand that doing so is their duty and in their interest. If the government has them, it will have sufficient power to coerce those who do not willingly obey.

In closing, I would like to briefly suggest some of the ramifications of taking Hobbes’s view of education into account. First, it seems to me that it gives us an account of instability and a solution to it that is both more sophisticated and more plausible than they are generally taken to be. More sophisticated, because Hobbes believed that force is not the sole source of order and that to endure, a government needs to appeal to our intellects as well as to our fears. More plausible, because we can expect that a society in which the government

⁸ That Hobbes thinks obedience, including tax-paying, is the price of safety and indeed of well-being is clear from his whole social contract argument as well as from specific remarks; see esp. EL 5.2 and L 30.17. That he thinks it beneficial for people to be *taught* that this is the case can be inferred from his general claim that people should be taught the grounds of their duties and of the laws (L 30.4, 30.22).

has the willing support of the governed will be more stable than one in which fear of punishment provides the only means of ensuring cooperation among its members. As we have seen, attempting to coerce the unwilling generates dangerous resistance, whereas when people are no longer deceived by seditious opinions there is a greater tendency for them to willingly obey the law. According to Hobbes, an important reason why faulty education is so dangerous is that, once inculcated, beliefs are very difficult to eradicate and those who hold them act upon them habitually (EL 10.8, 28.8; L 18.9). If, however, people are properly brought up, they will have the same stable disposition but it will be directed toward upholding the state rather than toward sedition.

Considering the role of education in his system also puts Hobbes's view of human nature in a more favorable light. Hobbes's belief in the importance of education implicitly expresses more faith in our ability to control ourselves than is standardly attributed to Hobbesian agents: it shows that he believes it important to appeal to reason (as opposed to just fear), and that if properly brought up we can, under the appropriate circumstances, willingly control ourselves within the bounds required for a commonwealth to function rather than having those boundaries set entirely for us by the sovereign's big stick. On the "threats maintain stability" view, the most prominent aspect of human nature is our fear: our fear of death or other punishment is the means by which the sovereign gains our obedience and we, in turn, gain the many fruits of society. The apparent presumption is that our obedience to law cannot be brought about any other way. This presumption is apt to be reinforced by the many passages in which Hobbes describes us as superstitious, ambitious, foolish, and so on. But when we examine his views more carefully we find that Hobbes believes we are only contingently so—that our bad traits are, to a large extent, due to our failing to use capacities we have and/or due to the influence of false, absurd, or seditious beliefs. These bad traits can therefore be altered, prevented, or neutralized by proper upbringing and by the sovereign's exercising power in such a way as to influence our attitudes and channel our ambitions (EL 1.10; DCv Dedicatory, 13.12; L 2.8, 4.13, R&C.16, DH ch. 13). Such a view of human nature is both more generous and more plausible than the view one is apt to get from some of Hobbes's interpreters, and may redeem Hobbes from some criticism he has received. For example, Gauthier thinks Hobbes's argument for absolute sovereignty fails in part because Hobbesian agents are too intractable for social order to exist among them.⁹ But although Hobbes says we are not born tractable, he believes we can be made so; our natures are malleable, and it is the sovereign's duty to exploit this fact lest the commonwealth suffer the consequences (L 18.9, 30.2, 42.67, 47.18).

⁹ Gauthier 1969, p. 169.