

# Chapter 3

## “The Nutrition of a Commonwealth:” On Hobbes’s Economic Thought

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### 3.1 Introduction

Hobbes has an equivocal legacy as economic thinker.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand commentators point out that there is hardly any place for the economy in his political philosophy. We find in his work no sustained effort to provide an account of the economic institutions needed for a flourishing state. As Istvan Hont observes in *Jealousy of Trade*, “It is practically pure politics” (Hont 2010, 2). Accordingly, in histories of the development of the discipline of political economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries he is often allotted a marginal role if he is mentioned at all (Eg. Hirschmann 1977; Appleby 1978; Force 2003; Taylor 2010). On the other hand Hobbes has continued to fascinate those aiming to understand the development of economic thought in the early modern period. C.B. Macpherson, for instance, identifies him as an early apologist of the modern capitalist order in which “market relations ... shape or permeate all social relations” (MacPherson 1962, 48). Hobbes’s account of human nature seems to capture the bourgeois morality of self-interest and unbridled material accumulation. Others add that while he never conceived of the market as a self-regulating mechanism he did contribute to the development

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<sup>1</sup>Abbreviations and editions of Hobbes’s works used: L: *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; DCv: *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; EL: *The Elements of Law*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies. London: Frank Cass & Co, 1969. References are to book (if applicable), chapter and paragraph, and include page numbers.

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classical economic thought by conceiving human motivation and value as based on self-interest (Langholm 1998, 151), and that he explicates “the basic premises underlying rational-choice analyses of human behaviour” (McArthur 2012, 178–79) which are at the heart of so much of contemporary economic theory. Moreover, commentators take note of some of his suggestive assertions regarding the way in which the economic realm should be organised (Eg. Levy 1954). For instance, Hobbes seems to accept that prices must be determined on the basis of agreement of buyer and seller, since there is no objective measure of value over and above the preferences of individuals, and he defends apparently far-reaching economic freedom for individuals to pursue their interests through economic transactions (L 21.7, p. 330, cf. DCv. 13.6, p. 144). Furthermore, since he seems to limit the functions of the state to the provision of peace and defence one commentator goes as far as maintaining that the “sovereign is there, in fact, to remove certain standing obstacles to the secure prosecution by his subjects of their individual aims” and thus that “Hobbes may be regarded as a forerunner of the negative *laissez aller* doctrine” (Taylor 1908, 101).

Although Hobbes’s ambiguous status as an economic thinker has been noted before, to my knowledge no attempt has yet been made to explain what features of his thought may have given rise to it. In this chapter I aim to trace these seemingly incongruent assessments of his philosophy to the nature and application of his scientific method. In Sect. 3.2, I argue that there are two features of his method that should be of particular interest to those concerned with the historical development of the field of economics. First, Hobbes is arguably the first who embraces what has become known as methodological individualism, the view that social phenomena should be studied by reference to the dispositions and actions of individuals (Lukes 1968, 119). Secondly, his study of the motivations and dispositions of individuals bears more than a passing resemblance to the *homo economicus* that populates much of modern microeconomics. Nevertheless, he does not directly apply his method to economic phenomena. In Sect. 3.3, I show why economic questions always have political answers. Hobbes develops above all a *political* science, almost exclusively focussing on the political institutions that must be established for peace to be maintained and human flourishing to be possible. Finally, in Sect. 3.4, I explain why this is the case. While Hobbes in later work comes to realise that he must provide an account of the “art of government” related to the material conditions of the commonwealth, and makes some attempts to offer a guide to government policy in the domain of the economy, he fails to properly integrate these observations into his political science. The use of a pervasive metaphor of the commonwealth as “body politic” to structure these observations prevents him from grounding his reflections on economic governance in his scientific method and conception of human nature. Thus, while he may be credited as having been one of the first to have developed a science of politics, he never did the same for economics.

### 3.2 Human Nature and Methodological Individualism

Hobbes derives both the need for and shape of a commonwealth or political association from an account of the general dispositions of individuals. In the revised version of *De Cive* he gives a clear outline of his method.

I should begin with the matter of which a commonwealth is made and go on to how it comes into being and the form it takes, and to the first origin of justice. For a thing is best known from its constituents. As in an automatic Clock or other fairly complex device, one cannot get to know the function of each part and wheel unless one takes it apart, and examines separately the material, shape and motion of the parts, so in investigating the right of a commonwealth and the duties of its citizens, there is a need, not indeed to take the commonwealth apart, but to view it as taken apart, i.e., to understand correctly what human nature is like, and in what features it is suitable and in what unsuitable to construct a commonwealth, and how men who want to grow together must be connected (DCv Preface, p. 10).

In order to provide an account of the appropriate institutions of the commonwealth we must first know the dispositions of individuals. In *De Cive* he simply posits two such principles “well known to all men by experience” (DCv Preface, p. 10), without further defending them. In *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan* (as in *De Homine*) Hobbes develops a more or less complete mechanical psychology that is consistent with his materialistic-deterministic ontology and from which general conclusions may be drawn about “those qualities of man-Kind, that concern their living together in Peace, and Unity” (L 11.1, p. 150). This psychology is sometimes taken to include a form of (predominant) egoism, which is not unreasonable given Hobbes’s repeated emphasis, also in his later work, that “of all Voluntary Acts, the Object is to every man his own Good” (L 15.16, p. 230), which indeed suggests that Hobbes takes individuals to display at least a predominant concern for their own well-being (Eg. Kavka 1986). From this account of human motivation he draws a number of general conclusions regarding human dispositions, and in particular attributes to individuals a “perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death” (L 11.2, p. 150), a desire “of Ease, and sensuall Delight,” and an overwhelming fear of death (L 11.4, p. 152).

These dispositions form the basis for his argument establishing both the possibility and the necessity of entering into a political association. He presents these conclusions of his political science as principles or dictates of reason, also called the laws of nature. These laws are derived from the “known naturall Inclinations of Mankind” (L Review and Conclusion, p. 1139) and outline what individuals must do to enduringly establish a peaceful society. On the one hand, in the state of nature where there is no powerful sovereign to keep individuals in awe, their passions and dispositions will lead them inevitably to war. Indeed, he maintains that nothing less than an absolute sovereign is necessary to counteract the unsociable dispositions of men that lead them to revolt and war. On the other hand, he shows the possibility of creating a stable association, since “all men, by necessity of their nature, want to get out of that miserable and hateful state, as soon as they recognize its misery” (DCv, Preface, p. 12). Their passions are such that they are willing to submit to a sovereign that is dictated by his theory.

Hobbes thus purports to derive the political institutions necessary for human flourishing from “what human nature is like,” from the passions and dispositions of the individuals that would populate the commonwealth. This amounts to what in recent times has become known as methodological individualism (Lukes 1968). He provides an analysis of the institutions of the commonwealth and what he conceives as the only realistic alternative, the state of nature, as the aggregate of the many individual actions of individuals which in turn are the result of their dispositions that may perhaps be ultimately reduced to the fundamental desire for their “own Good” (L 15.16, p. 230). Hobbes here reveals a certain affinity with those economists that laid the groundwork for orthodox economic theory in the late nineteenth century, such as Stanley Jevons and F.Y. Edgeworth. These economists develop mathematical systems to model economic phenomena in which they draw on basic principles about the individual psychology. In the words of Jevons, economics aims to “investigate the condition of a mind, and bases upon this investigation the whole of economics” (Quoted in Udehn 2001, 50). In particular they embrace the principle that all agents pursue their “self-interest” as first principle of the discipline. Like Hobbes they attempt to calculate the aggregate of the actions of individuals with certain dispositions given the constraints within which they act. In this sense these theorists are closer to Hobbes than to Adam Smith, whose *Wealth of Nations* (1776) usually is considered to have inaugurated the economic discipline. Smith explicitly rejects that the humans are only moved by self-interest in favour of a more subtle account of human dispositions and is much less than Hobbes drawn to treating the sciences in analogy with the physical sciences as a system of strict deduction (See eg. Force 2003; Fleischacker 2004).

### 3.3 Political Science

Nevertheless, Hobbes limits his scientific method to political institutions and never subjects economic phenomena to such a scientific analysis. The conclusion of his analysis of human nature is that it is necessary for individuals to submit virtually unconditionally to the authority of a sovereign. He conceives the resulting political association or commonwealth as essentially a set of juridical relations (of right and obligation). That is to say that a commonwealth exists if and only if the rights of sovereignty exist. This is most evident in *Leviathan* where he claims that the rights of sovereignty “make the Essence of Sovereignty” (L 18.16, p. 278) and “in him [i.e., the sovereign] consisteth the Essence of the Common-wealth” (L 17.13, p. 260). On this basis one may conclude that rights of sovereignty form the essence of the commonwealth. Indeed, Hobbes summarises the first two parts of *Leviathan* as accomplishing the derivation of “the Rights of Sovereigne Power, and the duty of Subjects” (L 32.1, p. 576). These obligations are artificial or contractual, in the sense that they come into being through the willed agreement of individuals who are formerly unbound by such obligations (L 18.1, p. 264). In order to create a commonwealth they must contract with one another to let themselves be governed by

the sovereign. The covenant brings life to the commonwealth because it creates the juridical relations of right and obligation associated with sovereign power.

Since his premises require him to defend an absolute sovereign, Hobbes cannot bestow on the economy organising principles that are independent of political dictates. This is clear, for instance, from his views on the regulation of property. From the first expression of his political philosophy in *Elements of Law*, circulated in 1640, onwards he maintains that the existence of all property depends on the state. He writes for instance that “before the institution of sovereign power *meum* and *tuum* implied no propriety, but a community, where every man had right to every thing, and was in state of ware with every man” (EL 2.8.8, p. 174). In the state of nature there can be no property because one is constantly liable to violent invasion of all others. From this follows that all economic questions have fundamentally political answers. The organisation of the economy, the system of ownership and production, the distribution of property rights and the rules according to which property can and should be exchanged, all are subject to, and dependent on the absolute authority of the sovereign. Thus, the relationship between, on the one hand, the premises of his account of human nature and his scientific method, and on the other hand his economic views must necessarily be indirect and mediated by his politics. Coordination and cooperation are always dependent on the power and legislative authority of the sovereign.

This, I take it, is Istvan Honts explanation as to why for Hobbes there is hardly any room for the consideration of economic questions in his philosophy. Hobbes’s politics is “anticommercial,” Hont maintains, because Hobbes focuses all his energies on avoiding the state of nature as the result of his denial that man is a “naturally social or political being.” He denies “the political efficacy of natural sociability ... including the utilitarian bonds created by commercial reciprocity” (Hont 2010, 20). Given his dim view of human nature Hobbes is unable to see how order could be attained without an absolutist state. Social order can only be established by political means. Accordingly he refuses to consider the economy as an important consideration in politics and does not include “in his political theory a need-based concept of commercial society as a secondary cause of state formation” (Hont 2010, 43).

The argument establishes that the economic realm, insofar as it supports state formation, must be the object of government policy: economics belongs to the “art of government.” However, it does not fully explain why Hobbes does not apply his scientific method to economic questions. As he notes in *Elements of Law*, it is not his aim to “enter into the particulars of the art of government, but to sum up the general heads, wherein such art is to be employed, and in which consisteth the duty of him or them that have sovereign power” (EL 2.9.1, p. 179). Accordingly, he makes some very brief and general observations about relevant responsibilities of the sovereign based on the dictum that “*Salus populi suprema lex*” (EL 2.9.1, p. 179). Since the good of the people consists, among other things, in “Commodity of living” (EL 2.9.3, p. 179), and commodity of living consists in “liberty and wealth” (EL 2.9.4, p. 180) he suggests that the “well ordering of trade, procuring of labour, and forbidding the superfluous consuming of food and apparel” are “in sovereign authority” (EL 2.9.4, p. 180). In *De Cive* he similarly notes that for the

citizens' prosperity there are three things necessary: "*products of earth and water, hard work and thrift*" (DCv 14.13, p. 150), and maintains not just that the sovereign has authority to legislate on these issues but that they are the objects of "sovereign's duty" (DCv 14.13, p. 150). The sovereign ought to devise laws that promote agriculture, fishing, and industry, and prohibit idleness and the "extravagant expenditure on food and clothes" (DCv 14.13, p. 150). However, more generally the sovereign "can do no more for citizens' happiness than to enable them to enjoy the possessions their industry has won them, safe from foreign and civil war" (DCv 13.6, p. 144). While Hobbes thus notes in these early works that a flourishing commonwealth requires certain material conditions that must be maintained by sovereign action, he apparently does not think it necessary to apply his scientific method in aid of concrete and precise instructions for appropriate legislation.

### 3.4 The Nutrition of a Commonwealth

In what follows I wish to provide an explanation as to why Hobbes did not integrate economic governance into his political science. One should start by recalling that on his view the essence of the commonwealth consists of a set of rights and obligations. A perfect commonwealth exists when all individuals have submitted (and have recognized to have submitted) their will and judgment to the sovereign in the way outlined by Hobbes in the contract argument. Scientific knowledge in the realm of politics therefore consists of knowledge of the rights of sovereignty and duties of subjects. However, in order to know what rights and duties individuals have it is not necessary to know anything about the material conditions of their lives, that is, whether they have access to food, cloths, shelter and other means to commodious living. Due to this conception of political science as consisting only of knowledge of juridical relations of right and obligation there may be a tendency to ignore the role of material production as essential for the maintenance of the state.

This tendency is visible, for instance when Hobbes in *Elements of Law* discusses taxation and comes close to equating citizens' *obligation* to obey the sovereign with the sovereign being able to acquire the *resources* he demands of them. The defense of a state, he writes, requires "the obedience and unity of the subjects ... in which consisteth the means of levying soldiers, and of having money, arms, ships, and fortified places in readiness for defence" (EL 2.9.9, p. 184). If citizens are obedient and act in accordance with the commands of the sovereign, he seems to suggest, resources such as soldiers, money, arms, and ships can be at any moment employed in aid of the defense of the state. This is, of course, is rather too quick. While the conscription of soldiers may perhaps be solely dependent on their obedience, money, arms, and ships require a complex system of material production that cannot be secured by simple command. This is not a structural weakness in his theory, though. I have already noted that Hobbes introduces the governance of the economy in his account of political science as a set of duties of sovereignty. The good of the people should be the aim of sovereign action; sovereigns ought to do what they can

“to ensure that the citizens are abundantly provided with all the good things necessary not just for life but for the enjoyment of life” (DCv 8.4, p. 144). This should lead one to wonder why Hobbes says so little about what these duties precisely are.

From *Elements of Law* onwards, Hobbes shows himself to be above all concerned with the problem of order from the perspective of citizens who do not correctly perceive their own obligations and benefit. In *Leviathan* he maintains that it is his aim to “set before mens eyes the mutuall Relation between Protection and Obedience” (L Review and Conclusion, p. 1141). Accordingly, he spends considerable energy defending the practically absolute obligation of citizens to obey any sovereign that is capable of reliably securing their peace and safety. When writing *Elements of Law* and *De Cive* Hobbes must have thought that the corresponding duties of sovereignty, including the duty to promote citizens’ commodious living, were less contentious and urgent to require an elaborate treatment.

This changes in *Leviathan*. In *Leviathan* Chapter 24 on “the Nutrition and Procreation of a Commonwealth,” Hobbes significantly expands a discussion of the material conditions of state formation that were in embryonic form present in the earlier works, which gives a clear indication that he came to see the need to engage more forcefully with issues concerning economic policy. This is may be due to both shifting concerns and shifting audiences from the early *Elements* and *De Cive* to *Leviathan*. In the latter work Hobbes puts additional emphasis on the importance of “peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living” (L 15.40, p. 242) besides the avoidance of violent conflict, and treats resolving such conflict as necessary precondition for comfortable living. *Leviathan* may also have a different intended audience. Noel Malcolm has recently suggested that *Leviathan* could have been written for Prince Charles (future King Charles II) when Hobbes tutored him in mathematics when they were both exiled in Paris in 1646–48. Malcolm maintains that “overall, the first half of *Leviathan* contains significantly more material than might be placed under the heading “advice to princes” than either of its predecessor texts” (Malcolm 2012, 56). In particular he suggests that Hobbes’s use of an extended metaphor, comparing the commonwealth to a human body, which is first introduced in *Leviathan*, may be “designed to capture the interest of, and at the same time to entertain” (Malcolm 2012, 58) the future King. In this context it is notable that Chapter 24 of *Leviathan* on “the Nutrition and Procreation of a Commonwealth,” is entirely couched in terms of this metaphor. It addresses the task of the sovereign to make good “distributive laws” and so to aid the health and wellbeing of the commonwealth. New in these passages are a number of specific claims about the way in which the economy ought to be organised, in aid of the “Distribution of the Nourishment, to the severall Members of the Common-wealth” (L 174). For instance, he maintains that for the “Sustentation of a Commonwealth,” it is “necessary that men distribute that which they can spare, and transferre their propriety therein mutually one to another, by exchange, and mutual contract.” New is too the emphasis on the circulation of money, which he describes as

passeth from Man to Man, within the Common-wealth; and goes round about, Nourishing (as it passeth) every part thereof; In so much as this Concoction, is as it were the Singuification of the Common-wealth: For naturall Bloud is in like manner made of the

fruits of the Earth; and circulating, nourisheth by the way, every Member of the Body of Man (L 24.11, p. 394).

Hobbes here echoes a discussion of the vital motions in the human body that “begun in generation, and continued with interruption through their whole life; such as are the *course* of the *Bloud*, the *Pulse*, the *Breathing*, the *Concoction*, *Nutrition*, *Excretion*, &c. to which motions there needs no help of the Imagination” (L 6.1, p. 78). It is in the context of this extended metaphor of society as living body that leads him to consider advice for the prince as to the appropriate organisation of the economy to guarantee the material conditions of the commonwealth.

This late addition nevertheless remains poorly integrated in the overall structure of his science of politics. This can be shown by comparing the organisation of the economy with other policy questions of relevance to the Hobbesian sovereign, such as importantly the management of the legal system, including legislation, adjudication, and enforcement. These functions are discussed in terms of “dictates of reason,” that is, as (implications of) natural law. In chapter 30 of *Leviathan*, titled “Of the OFFICE of the Sovereign Representative,” Hobbes notes a number of duties of sovereignty. For instance, it is required of the sovereign that “Justice be equally administred to all degrees of People,” in which “consisteth Equity; to which, as being a Precept of the Law of Nature” (L 30.15, p. 534). This refers to the eleventh law of nature, which outlines the requirement of “Equity” or the “Justice of an Arbitrator” (L 15.15, p. 230). Similarly Hobbes notes that the sovereign has a duty to “make a right application of Punishments” which refers to the seventh law of nature which requires that punishments are only employed in aid of the “correction of the offender, or direction of others” (L 15.19, p. 232). These duties can plausibly be understood as forming an integral part of his science of politics since they are, at least in theory, derived by means of certain reasoning from indubitable premises about human nature and the dispositions of man.

But his account of economic governance is not included in the discussion of the laws of nature. Rather it is prompted by the metaphor of the commonwealth as human body. This means that Hobbes does not relate the fundamental principles of his philosophy, including those that some commentators have associated with rational choice theory, to conclusions about the appropriate organisation of material production in society. The analogy between the human and political body may be evocative, but the mode of argument does not conform to his account of scientific method in which conclusions about the appropriate social institutions are derived from a consideration of the aggregate of the many actions individuals given determinate constraints.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Hobbes’s late venture into the realm of economics shows that he was not just narrowly concerned with the nature of political institutions but was willing to consider broader questions of governance in terms of the duties of sovereignty. He should therefore not be faulted for failing to include “economics” as independent science in his classification of forms of knowledge and neither should this fact, by itself, be taken to say anything about Hobbes’s attitude to economics (as Taylor 2010, 430 apparently does). He makes questions of the “nutrition of a commonwealth” subordinate to politics, but this is to be expected. He conceives of any institutional organisation to be impossible without the existence of an absolute sovereign, and he accordingly takes the governance of the economy to be the task of a legislator.

I think this explains the equivocal nature of Hobbes’s legacy as economic thinker. It explains why Istvan Hont has with reason maintained that in Hobbes’ philosophy there is no place for the economic organisation as cause of state formation. But it also shows the limitation of that interpretation. Perhaps prompted by his desire to write *Leviathan* as handbook for princes, Hobbes does come to realise the need to discuss the material conditions of a flourishing state. But due to the pervasive metaphor that structures those reflections, he does not appropriately integrate these discussions into his scientific system. That is why he fails to tie the premises of his political philosophy, premises that share affinity with those thinkers in the late nineteenth century like Jevons and Edgeworth that formalise economic analysis, to his recommendations to the sovereign with regard to the economic institutions that would ensure the safety and prosperity of the people.

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