

## THE FOUNDING IDEAS OF ENGLISH LIBERALISM ACCORDING TO THOMAS HOBBS AND JOHN LOCKE

LUNGU MARIUS ROBERT<sup>1</sup>, URLICA ALINA\*<sup>1</sup>, FIRU-NEGOESCU ADRIAN  
GHEORGHE<sup>1</sup>, SUBA ANKA ROXANA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of  
Romania" from Timisoara, Romania*

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: alina.urlica@usab-tm.ro

**Abstract:** *In this article we will analyze the intellectual genesis of liberalism, at the dawn of the modern world, by discussing the conceptual systems of two great thinkers in the liberalist tradition: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. It is no coincidence that liberalism was born during the 16th and 17th centuries with the advent of Protestantism. During this period, a series of religious conflicts occurred on the continent: the English Civil War between Puritans and Royalists, as well as the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) between Catholics and Protestants. The result of the confrontation in England was a compromise between the king and the parliament that took the form of a constitutional monarchy, in which the two authorities limited each other's power. Freedom of faith and religious practice was one of the first conquests of liberalism. Thomas Hobbes lays the intellectual foundations of the modern state by moving from the right of the most powerful to the power of law. For Hobbes, the natural state of humanity consists in fighting and humans are prone to behave like wolves to each other. But living according to this conceptual basis puts human life in constant danger. Transformation can take place only through the call to human reason, through awareness of the need for the rule of law to ensure compliance with regulations and to protect the life and rights of each individual. John Locke derives the theory of the social contract from Hobbes, but continues to develop it further. Locke is aware of the danger of an absolutist state and therefore supports the separation of powers in the state: parliament, government and justice.*

**Key words:** *political philosophy, English liberalism, conceptual analysis, European history of ideas*

### INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, it seemed that the democratic-liberal cultural model typical of Western states ceased to have any ideological rivalry. Liberalism was bringing its promise of transforming the world into a land of all possibilities on a global scale [4]. But what is liberalism as a conceptual system of thought? The discussion must start at the very foundations of this ideology and inquire into the grounds and rational upon which it rested in order to legitimize this construct,

Liberalism is first and foremost a political philosophy and only afterwards an applied economic doctrine. However, we have discussed the ideas put forth by economic liberalism and capitalist thinking in another article [13]. It is no coincidence that liberalism was born in England, drawing on the Protestant Reformation of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. Until the Reformation, Western states had been in close contact with the Catholic Church. But after the Reformation, religious conflicts started to occur between the Anglican royalists and the Puritan Republicans, and the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) between Catholics and Protestants was taking its toll on the continent.

Thus, the Western states were facing the need to solve the crisis situation and, mainly, the problem of the relationship between the political and the religious spheres. The solution was played out in the conceptual systems proposed by the Protestant philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The affinity between liberalism and Protestantism will make the object of another study.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our approach is interdisciplinary: theoretical, philosophical and historical analysis have been applied to the notions under scrutiny. The material we have used in the research consists in the two main works of the two philosophers: *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes and *Two treatises of government* by John Locke.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 in Westport, England, in the family of a respectable clergyman. In 1608, when he left for Oxford, he entered the service of the Cavendish family. He then spent the next two years traveling through France and Italy as a companion-meditator to Lord Cavendish's son. On his return he had literary interests and translated Thucydides into English. Between 1634 and 1637, Hobbes traveled through Europe again. He met Galileo Galilei in Florence, and in Paris he was introduced by Mersenne to the philosophical circles of the age. "Thus he came to know Cartesian philosophy, and at Mersenne's invitation submitted to Descartes his objections to the *Meditations*" [3].

In 1640, with the outbreak of the English Civil War, Thomas Hobbes took refuge in France due to his royalist sympathies. In Paris he wrote his most important work: *Leviathan or the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*. The cover of the first 1651 edition of this work displays Hobbes' system of thought and the Leviathan acts as a metaphor for state power. The sword is a sign of its judicial and protective power, and the scepter symbolizes the legality of power" [6].

What are, according to Hobbes, the causes of the English Civil War? They are mainly two, one profane and the other one religious in nature. According to Manent (2003), the profane cause consists in the influence of the Universities, which instruct great minds, whereas the religious cause of the Puritans belongs more to the people. On the one hand, the influence of the Universities pertains to classical studies, to Greek and Roman models which hold freedom in high esteem. On the other hand, the influence of the Puritans draws on the religious conception that dictates to the believers their duty of listening to the voice of the divine [14].

The question that must be asked is – what might be the resolution of a situation such as that of England in the time of Hobbes, where different views on the common good generated the civil war. For Hobbes, the war of all against all is the “natural condition” of humankind. Every human being's life is “lonely, miserable, cruel, animalistic, and short”, from Hobbes' point of view in Chapter XIII of the *Leviathan* [10].

Hobbes draws this conception of the fallen nature of human beings, on the same level as animals, from the influence of Protestant theology. Only divine grace can repair human nature, which has been corrupted by sin. However, the English philosopher does not see religion as the solution to the problem. The starting point is the very fear of death of each individual in such circumstances. Human reason, which remains the only constant in this conflict, will seek the means of achieving peace. As for the rational component of this process of getting out of the anarchy of the civil war, Hobbes defines natural law as a dictate of reason [1]. This natural law has a history of thousands of years and it represents the universal moral law par excellence, across cultures: Behave with your fellow human beings as you would like them to behave with you.

Thus, there is a paradigm shift in political theory that we are confronting with this new philosophy. In the moral and political language developed by Hobbes, law takes the place of the good. Instead of the emphasis placed by the ancients and by Christian thinkers on the value of the good, from Hobbes onwards, modern thinkers emphasize the rights of the individual. Burelli (2018) emphasizes Hobbes' moral psychology, as well as the

universality of the laws of nature [2]. Moreover, the system of moral philosophy construed by Hobbes as a “Civil Philosophy” [7], a set of imperatives prescribe how humans should behave in order to survive. Also, Kavka deems that Hobbes conceptualizes his moral rationality in terms of “disaster avoidance” rather than maximization of social utility [11].

The idea of representation through political power is another important concept introduced by the English philosopher. This abstract representative of individual human beings embodies and represents the will of the people in the natural state and what they desire is peace [14]. The distinction between civil society and the state already appears in Hobbes’ thinking system, where the only political legitimacy is given by civil society. Civil society is the locus of equality in rights, while the state is the “instrument” of this civil society, which ensures order and peace for all [14].

Another conceptual metaphor introduced by Hobbes is that of “the contract” in which a multitude of people co-participate and by which they jointly recognize political authority. The legitimacy of such a sovereign power is conferred only “by the consent of all the assembled people” [10]. The philosopher also speaks of the right of the majority to decide in the representative assembly.

John Locke (1632-1704) was a very important philosopher, who is considered today the father of empiricism, forerunner of the philosophy of language and the most important founding father of liberalism. He was born into a lawyer’s family in a small town near Bristol. He was ten years old when the civil war broke out and was also present in London when King Charles I was beheaded in 1649. He studied at Christ Church, the most famous college in Oxford, the place where Britain’s political elites were traditionally educated.

On the occasion of a mineral water cure he meets Lord Ashley, future Baron of Shaftesbury, and will share with him for twenty years, as secretary, physician, educator, and counselor, the changing destiny of the noble family. When the lord was forced to take refuge in Holland, Locke accompanied him. Later, in 1689, he returned to England after the Glorious Revolution, when William of Orania ascended to the throne. Locke held a comfortable position that allowed him to deal with his intellectual activity. He died in 1704 on the estate of a friendly family, where he spent most of his time. Locke was a prominent intellectual leader of the English Liberal Party called the Whig. His system of thought can be considered the foundation of modern liberal ideology, as examined by Dworetz, who makes a “critical examination of the republican revision and a reassessment of the role of Lockean-liberal ideas” [5].

In his most important work on political philosophy, *Two Treatises of Government*, published in 1690, John Locke refines the concepts of liberalism put forth by Thomas Hobbes. Locke detects an issue in Hobbes’ idea of the absolute political power of the master in that power, which in its natural state leads to conflict, does not lose its negative force if transferred to a master or an organism of mastery [6]. Thus, Hobbes’ concept of natural state is also reformulated from Locke’s standpoint, as the latter does not agree that humans are by nature completely selfish beings. “In the natural state, there is a natural law that constrains everyone. And the reason for which this law corresponds, teaches people that no one should threaten the life, property, health and freedom of another, because they are all equal and free. For all men are the work of a unique and infinitely wise creator” [12]. This translated [author] citation indicates that Locke bases his ideas of freedom and natural equality of all human beings on the religious notion that they are all children of the same God father figure. Furthermore, by means of reason, human beings have access to the moral laws given to them by God. We should not forget that, much like Newton and almost all the significant thinkers of the age, Locke did not abandon religious moral thinking [15]. For that reason, Hancey (1976) considers Locke’s theory of natural law a continuation of

the ideas of natural law already established by the classics and resilient throughout medieval scholasticism and the Reformation [9].

According to contemporary philosopher Jurgen Habermas, the whole modern political discourse is derived from and heavily draws on the secularization of medieval Christian concepts [8].

Whereas for Hobbes, any kind of state is better than the absence of a state, for Locke absolute monarchy is worse than the natural state. What must be done to prevent the establishment of absolute power in the state? The English philosopher's solution is to divide the power of the state into three: parliament, government and justice. "Although the legislature is delegated to government by individuals who submit to it, and although the legislature is the supreme power in the state, people have the right to remove or change the legislature" [12]. Locke thereby inaugurates the modern idea of the supremacy of civil society over the state.

A final fundamental concept of liberalism defined by Locke is private property, which will be further discussed in a future study. As for the foundation of private property although the earth and all the creatures are considered to "belong to all people in common", each individual has a property over their own person, as well as the work issued from their own hands. In conclusion, by adding to that which nature has provided for them, human beings are legitimized in possessing whatever they have added to the bare state of nature [12].

## CONCLUSIONS

Liberal democracy today continues to be the dominant political paradigm in the world, even if it is under the assault of nationalism or religious extremism. Western European states, the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea are strong liberal democracies. The concepts of liberalism have become the paradigm of the modern state. These have ensued ideas such as the separation of powers in the state, individual rights and freedoms, private property, multi-partisanship, regular democratic elections. Furthermore, the manner in which liberalism has been applied in economics may be called capitalism. It is a widely recognized fact that the welfare of the West is due to the capitalist economy, which has largely been considered a successful paradigmatic model for our societies. It seems that liberalism has remained without an ideological rival. Even China, the largest communist country in the world, despite maintaining communist political ideology, has taken the capitalist model for economic development, in addition to the communist doctrine.

From a modern perspective, it now appears that the democratic-liberal conceptual domain might not be compatible with any religion and culture. The United States has failed in its twenty years of occupation to implement liberal democracy in oriental nations where Islamic religion still remains forceful. It remains to be seen whether the European Union will succeed in implementing a liberal democratic state in areas like Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnically and religiously divided populations are still in conflict with one another. The liberal model of the religious neutral state, which guarantees the practice of all religious denominations, remains a desideratum for the time being.

Finally, we may conclude that political liberalism and capitalism do not work well without each other. However, several Eastern European politicians believed that communist economy was compatible with liberal democracy. After the collapse of communism in Eastern European states in 1989, it was believed that a smooth path to the Western model of development would follow, resting upon two pillars: capitalist economy

and liberal democracy. However, as we have seen, a ruling class which had been communist until yesterday can hardly become liberal in thought overnight.

In our case, Romanian society has found resources to choose a new political class. It integrated Romania into NATO in 2004 and into the European Union in 2007. While national security is ensured by the NATO forces, the country's economy has become predominantly capitalist, and liberal democracy has begun to function by alternating parties in the government.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. **AVRAMESCU C.**, 1998, De la teologia puterii absolute la fizica socială, Editura All, Bucuresti
- [2]. **BURELLI C.**, 2018, Subjectivity is objective. Thomas Hobbes on normative truth. *Notizie di Politeia* 34(129), 98-113. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325286612\\_Subjectivity\\_is\\_objective\\_Thomas\\_hobbes\\_on\\_normative\\_truth](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325286612_Subjectivity_is_objective_Thomas_hobbes_on_normative_truth) [accessed on May 10, 2021]
- [3]. **COPLESTON F.**, 2008, Istoria filosofiei. Filosofia britanică, Editura All, București
- [4]. **CRĂIUȚU A.**, 1998, Elogiul libertății, Editura Polirom, Iași
- [5]. **DWORETZ S.**, 1990, The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution. Durham, Duke University Press
- [6]. **FURST M., TRINKS J.**, 1997, Filosofie, Editura Humanitas, Bucuresti
- [7]. **GAUTHIER D.**, 2000, Logic of Leviathan: the Moral and Political theory of Thomas Hobbes, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- [8]. **HABERMAS J., RATZINGER J.**, 2005, Dialectica secularizării. Despre rațiune și religie, Editura Apostrof, București
- [9]. **HANCEY J.**, 1976, John Locke and the Law of Nature, *Political Theory*, 4(4)
- [10]. **HOBBS T.**, 2017, Leviathan. Materia, forma și puterea unei comunități eclesiastice și civile, Editura Herald, Bucuresti
- [11]. **KAVKA G.S.**, 1986, Hobbesian Moral and Political theory, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- [12]. **LOCKE J.**, 1999, Al doilea tratat despre cărmuire, Edirura Nemira, București
- [13]. **LUNGU M. R., BRAD I., URLICA A., MILIN I. A.**, 2021, Adam Smith: about capitalism and the ethics that makes it possible?, *Lucrări Științifice. Management Agricol*, Editura Agroprint, Timișoara
- [14]. **MANENT P.**, 2003, Istoria intelectuală a liberalismului, Editura Humanitas, Bucuresti
- [15]. **SIMON W.**, 1951, John Locke: Philosophy and Political Theory, *The American Political Science Review*, 45(2)