

Ella Grady

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Second Essay

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15th Century to Today: Renaissance and Enlightenment Thinkers on Modern Political Issues

Today, issues such as gun regulation, universal health care, and immigration have become politically decisive, creating a deeper partisan divide in American politics. Arguments on these topics can usually be simplified to opinions about the necessary levels of government involvement. In America, there is a need for stronger gun regulation, such as more comprehensive background checks and assault weapon bans, as the gun violence epidemic has proven. Those against gun control, however, cite the Second Amendment to the Constitution to argue in favor of the government staying out of individual ownership. Another prominent issue currently is the need for universal healthcare that provides equal access regardless of socioeconomic status and improves public health, whether that means moving all citizens on to a public plan or maintaining private plans while forming a more comprehensive and accessible public option than the current Medicare, but opponents argue that healthcare is not a given right to be provided by the government and that a universal system would be too costly. Despite wanting less government involvement, many in the opposition tend to also fight for greater government regulation of immigration, believing immigrants negatively impact the country, taking jobs and resources from American citizens. There is little evidence of these claims, and it is wrong to turn away immigrants, especially in cases of refugees and asylum seekers. Immigration programs need to be expanded, and the government must put an end to the treatment of illegal immigrants, such as the detention facilities along the southern border. Whether arguing for or against these issues, many call upon the ideas of political theorists Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau for support. Despite the centuries separating these thinkers from these divisive modern issues, their broader arguments on social structures and responsibilities of government can be applied to determine whether these renowned thinkers would agree to expand gun regulation, universal healthcare, and immigration programs.

While *The Prince* was originally written as a guidebook for a ruling prince, Niccolò Machiavelli's ideas of state unity, stability, and strength can be applied to other forms of government, including the modern political society (*Machiavelli*, slide 5). Using his established ideas, it is likely he would have argued in favor of gun regulation and universal healthcare, but against expanding immigration programs. With his focus on fostering the people's goodwill through government provisions (*Machiavelli*, ch. 3), he would agree there is a need for universal healthcare to ensure the preservation of the state if the benefits of providing for the people did not outweigh the impacts it could have on the economy or state's defenses. This argument can be seen in common debates over universal healthcare, as proponents argue that providing healthcare is more beneficial for the state than any negative impacts, while opponents argue it is not worth the increases in debt and taxes that could eventually lead to a weaker economy or reduced military defenses, opening the state up to foreign attacks. Additionally, Machiavelli explains his views on arming members of the state, arguing that a ruler should never disarm members of their populous, as it would create distrust and hatred (*Machiavelli*, ch. 20). In a time where society was less connected, keeping individuals armed was logical, as disarming them would have exposed them to other dangers that could have been prevented with personal arms, but in today's age, where members of society have closer connections and the government has a greater responsibility to ensure the safety of its people, there is no need for anyone to have weapons of war for personal use and defense. Furthermore, with his view that the moral choice is not always the best (*Machiavelli*, ch. 15), Machiavelli would apply that idea to argue that while allowing refugees and asylum seekers into the state may be the moral and virtuous choice, it is not the best choice if it weakens the state's defenses to outside attacks or interior conflicts (*Machiavelli*, ch. 19). Similar arguments to Machiavelli's are used by those who disapprove of increasing immigration programs, as many tend to claim that immigrants, especially those from Central and South America, are "drug dealers," "rapists," and "murderers." If those types of people were coming into the United States it would certainly be true that allowing more immigration would be a weakening of the state, however, there is no guarantee or concrete proof that all immigrants are in fact "drug dealers," "rapists," and "murderers," and as such the morality of aiding people to survive and avoid persecution far outweighs any other argument. However, until a majority

consensus can be reached on immigration, Machiavelli's argument that immigration weakens the nation to interior conflicts continues to remain true.

With a stronger focus on the responsibilities of the state, it is easier to apply Thomas Hobbes' ideas to the issues of gun regulation, universal healthcare, and immigration. If presented with the issue of gun regulation in the context of the gun violence epidemic, Hobbes would argue in favor of gun regulation if it would support the protection of individuals to promote the preservation of the state. In *The Leviathan*, Hobbes determines that all people are naturally in a state of war until joining a social contract that requires the acceptance of sacrificing certain rights for state protection (Hobbes, 72 - 73), and would follow that logic to say it is individual's responsibility to sacrifice their natural right to own a gun for state preservation. Continuing that idea of protecting individuals and state preservation, Hobbes would also agree on a need for universal healthcare but may favor creating a state-funded public option, while allowing for private plans, as he argues that those who cannot "maintain themselves by their labor... ought not to be left to the charity of private persons but to be provided for by the laws of the commonwealth," while "those who have strong bodies... are to be forced to work and to avoid the excuse of not finding employment" (Hobbes, 185). Applying this idea to the current issue would mean creating a stronger, more comprehensive public healthcare option than the current Medicare system for those in need, but still for private health insurance plans. Finally, in terms of immigration, Hobbes continues his discussion of government provisions, declaring that while "the multitude of poor and yet strong people [are] still increasing, they are to be transplanted to countries not sufficiently inhabited...to court each little plot with art and labor to give them their sustenance in due season" (Hobbes, 185). His argument allows for migrant workers and immigrants willing to do the jobs many Americans refuse to do, despite the arguments of those against increasing immigration into the United States, while his provisions for those who cannot provide for themselves covers anyone escaping persecution. Hobbes, with his theories on the commonwealth's responsibility for protecting the state and its people, would argue in favor of provisions that provide for the preservation and contentment of individuals.

John Locke's arguments are built upon those begun by Hobbes, focusing on the individual natural rights of life, health, liberty, and possession (*Locke (I)*, slide 23). He determines that some rights, such as liberty and possession must be given up when entering a social contract in exchange for welfare preservation under the common laws and power in that society (Locke, 112). These ideas can be easily seen in the issues of gun regulation, universal healthcare, and immigration. Assessing Locke's arguments, he would have viewed gun regulation as a necessary sacrifice of possession rights to preserve the welfare of other individuals when entering a social contract and would have approved of universal healthcare as a government provision for individual welfare, protecting the natural right to life and health. On the topic of immigration, if it were a matter of protecting the natural rights of life, health, and liberty, Locke would favor allowing immigrants to enter the social contract if they are willing to sacrifice the same rights as others in favor of protection, especially for refugees and asylum seekers. Furthermore, Locke discusses his belief that no government can punish someone from another country, as that person is not signed to the social contract, and as such the government has no authority over them (Locke, 109). Using this idea, Locke would condemn the US government's treatment of illegal immigrants in detention centers and deportation hearings. Interestingly, those who argue for limiting provisions for these issues, tend to be a part of the religious right, with conservative Christian values like those Locke argues against involving in the conduct of civil society in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (*Locke (II)*, slide 25). With his view that toleration should be kept out of civil society past the extent of necessary inclusion (*Locke (II)*, slide 18), Locke would disagree with many of the "far right's" arguments using religion against gun control, healthcare, and immigration, seeing those arguments as an inappropriate introduction of religion into civil issues.

If Jean-Jacques Rousseau was presented with the issues of gun regulation, universal healthcare, and immigration, he would argue in favor of provisions for these issues if it would allow the sovereign to work towards the general will for the common good but argue against if it would cross over into matters of private concern. In the case of gun regulation, if the general will decreed it, he would argue it is a necessary provision to protect the common good, which he believes must always be the goal of the sovereign state (Rousseau, 150). Similarly, in the case of

universal healthcare, if the general will was in support, he would argue for it. However, if no consensus of will was reached, he may agree with opponents that universal healthcare is a private issue. In his view, the sovereign is responsible only for matters of public concern (Rousseau, 162), and would apply this to healthcare, determining that it has a greater influence on individual interests and limited impact on the common good, and so is not to be managed by the sovereign. Finally, the issue of immigration would follow the same argument as depending upon the general will, however, he may have argued that as inequality is an artificial creation of social systems based on property ownership and labor (Rousseau, 81), immigration should be allowed if it provides for equal treatment and protection of all.

Although political theorists Niccolai Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were writing in Europe centuries ago and it can seem like their ideas have little relevance to modern political issues, it is important to remember that it is their ideas that the Founding Fathers designed the political structure of this nation on. Additionally, while today's issues of gun regulation, universal healthcare, and immigration, at closer inspection, are different from those issues the founders thought of, the same ideas can be applied both in support of and against solutions for these current controversies. With the bipartisan political divide growing deeper as these issues become more pressing, some form of action must be taken while it is still possible before the split becomes irreversible. Being able to call on these theorists for support of one side or the other provides evidence that similar issues to these have been relevant to most societies throughout history, and there are proposed solutions to heal the divide.

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