

Question 1

Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* and T.M. Malthus in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* share similar views on what drives individuals, yet they have very different visions of how the state should be organized. This essay will first examine the assumptions of both men on the innate characteristics of individuals and the ideal organization of the state. It will then explore the ways in which Hobbes and Malthus are similar and different in their assumptions, and will conclude with a discussion of why two individuals with such similar micro-ontological assumptions came to such different conclusions about the organization of the state.

Hobbes' Social Organization

Hobbes believes all people are inherently self-interested and that they are motivated primarily by self-preservation.¹ He uses a thought experiment that he calls the state of nature to demonstrate why his organizational scheme for society (described below) is the only way for individuals to achieve a peaceful existence. Hobbes famously describes life in this state of nature, which is a natural condition before society, laws, or political institutions, as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (pp. 76). In Hobbes’ state of nature, people are constantly in a state of war because they are trying to fight for their own self-preservation and interests and will kill, steal, and essentially do anything in order to preserve these interests.² Hobbes notes that people have “natural rights,” which means they have the right to freedom and therefore *can* pillage, kill, steal, etc. in the name of self-preservation. People living in the state of nature want to escape from it because it is such a terrible, fearful existence, and unless there is some kind of

¹ After self-preservation, they are motivate by material possessions, power over others, and reputation. (pp. 76)

² Although Hobbes’ state of nature is fictional, he did believe that the pre-colonized United States and parts of Africa resembled a state of nature

intervention, the end result will be that everyone will kill each other in their efforts to preserve themselves.

In order to remedy this dire situation, Hobbes believes that people must come together as self-interested beings and turn over their natural rights to a benevolent individual or group of individuals, which he calls sovereign or Leviathan.³ The new state is fear-based, as the reason people decide to give up their rights in the first place is so they can be protected from each other by the sovereign. Hobbes notes that when individuals join this social contract they are saying, “I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all actions in like manner” (pp. 109). In this social contract there is no participation, no civil society or concept of the whole⁴, and everyone is fundamentally equal. The all-powerful sovereign has the right to make the laws and enforce them, appoint “counselors, ministers, magistrates, and officers in times of war or peace,” and make war with other commonwealths (Hobbes, pp.113-115).⁵ The state under Hobbes is not a community or a society, it is merely self-interested people overseen by an all-powerful leader.

Malthus's Social Organization

Like Hobbes, Malthus believes people are inherently self-interested. He thinks they are instinct-driven, like animals, and that these instincts lead them to do two primary things: eat and have sex. The problem Malthus sees with these beast-like instincts is that food is in limited supply, while the ability of the population to reproduce is not. This will

³ People can enter into the contract either by force (acquisition) or voluntarily (institution) (Hobbes, pp. 109-110). The sovereign can be a monarchy (assembly of one), a democracy (assembly of all), or an aristocracy (assembly of a part) (Hobbes, pp. 118). As outlined in Chapter XIX, Hobbes prefers a monarchy.

⁵ All of the rights of the Sovereign are outlined in Chapter XVII, pp. 110-118.

lead to scarcity of food unless there are “checks” on the population, which he puts into two categories, preventative and positive.⁶

It is important to understand Malthus’ concerns about overpopulation because they fit directly into his theory of how society should be organized. As Somers and Block (2005) noted, Malthus does not believe that political intervention can effectively ameliorate social problems because “when left to its own devices, nature creates a perfect balance of supply and demand” (pp. 270). It makes sense, then, that Malthus believes the role of the state should be very limited. He believes that if you “protect” people from the natural laws of the market, you will end up removing scarcity, which will take away the incentive for people to work and make wise decisions. Malthus adheres to something called the “perversity thesis,” which means that if you give people incentives for doing “perverse” things, you will have “perverse” outcomes. This is very clear in his criticism of the Poor Laws in England; he believes that by providing aid to the poor, they will have no incentive to escape poverty and will remain poor, so you are therefore helping them stay poor instead of helping them escape it. Thus, a Malthusian society would be one in which there is very limited role for the state and where the state is driven by the private market, rather than the other way around.⁷

Different Conclusions and Common origins

Hobbes and Malthus are both of the liberal/utilitarian tradition. They have a similar view of individuals on the micro-level: both believe people are rational beings

⁶ Preventative checks are when individuals calculate the “distant consequences” of having children (or more children) and decide not to procreate based on this introspection,⁶ while positive checks involve all of the “natural” phenomena that limit population growth, such as poverty or disease. Specifically, Malthus describes positive checks as, “every cause, whether arising from vice or misery, that contributes to shorten the natural duration of human life” (pp. 23).

⁷ His society would look similar to that advocated by Adam Smith: limited government, except to protect the functions of the market and wage war against foreign enemies.

driven by their instincts and self-interest. Hobbes believes people are “beast-like” in their natural state (the state of nature), focused only on self-preservation, and that they will do anything in order to survive, including killing and stealing. These individuals are driven by their instincts in order to survive. Malthus also believes people are driven by instinct, although he goes a step further than Hobbes, stating that people are *actually* beasts and are driven by the two base instincts of sex and food. Finally, Malthus and Hobbes both view the state as individualistic – they believe that society is nothing more than the whole of the individuals who live there.

Despite this common origin, Hobbes and Malthus come to very different conclusions about how society should be organized. As noted above, Hobbes believes an ideal state is one that is ruled by an all-powerful sovereign and where people have to surrender their rights to this leader. Individual freedom is not a concern of Hobbes; he wants a state that will protect people from killing each other. Under Leviathan, people in Hobbes’ commonwealth do not have many freedoms, as they have to succumb to the rules designated by the sovereign. Malthus, on the other hand, believes an ideal state is one whose power is very limited and is secondary to the market.

Explanation: Historical Circumstances

One key explanation for the difference in conclusions by Hobbes and Malthus despite similar micro-ontological assumptions is that the two men were influenced by very different historical circumstances. Hobbes’ wrote Leviathan in 1651 as a response to the English Civil War; he was greatly influenced by the chaos of the war and the regicide of King Charles. Once the king was killed, Hobbes saw a resemblance to the state of nature, because there was no one left to control the masses (class lecture, 9.12.07). By looking at what was happening in Hobbes’ world when he wrote Leviathan, it becomes

clear why he was so afraid that people would kill each other off and needed an all-powerful leader to keep them from doing so. Hobbes was afraid that if you started to take power away from the leader, the result would be chaos. If Hobbes had not been writing at the time of the English Civil War, it is quite possible that his vision of a peaceful state would have looked different.

Like Hobbes, Malthus was very influenced by the circumstances in which he lived. *An Essay on the Principles of Population* was published in 1798, and during the late 1700's members of the English upper-class were very concerned about the French Revolution and that a similar revolution might come to England because there was a massive depression and subsequent food riots among the poor. (Lecture, 9.26.07)

In order to ameliorate the frustrations of the poor, a more generous welfare policy called Speenhamland was passed on a county by county basis in England. This frustrated Malthus, who was solidly middle-class and did not feel like he should be taxed more so the money could be redistributed to the poor. (Lecture, 9.26.07) Thus, Malthus' concerns about "perverse" policies that led to "perverse" outcomes was significantly influenced by his frustrations about England's poor laws, as well as the work of prior utilitarians (such as Adam Smith). The issue of fear is largely absent from Smith's organization of society, because he had a different perspective on the biggest issues facing humanity – Hobbes was concerned about people killing each other off, while Malthus focused on overpopulation and the lack of government intervention in the state. Both of these foci can be traced back to the contexts in which each man was writing.

Question 2

Two themes are present in much of Karl Marx's writing: his dislike of political and economic liberalism and his belief that reality is often not what it appears on the

surface and that one must dig deeper in order to see what is really happening, i.e. that people have “false consciousness.”⁸ Political and economic liberals adhere to such notions as “unintended harmonious consequences” (the notion that when markets are unregulated by society, the result will be harmonious) and “private vices and public benefits” (de Mandeville’s notion that society is better off without government interference, even thieves are beneficial because they provide business for locksmiths (Collins, pp. 129)). These notions go directly against Marx’s core beliefs, as he feels that without interference from the state, laborers will inevitably be exploited by capitalists and that the entire capitalist system should be overthrown and replaced by a communist state. This essay will examine the relationship between these two concepts (Marx’s dislike of political and economic liberalism and the hidden reality), and will specifically explore how anti-positivism is used by Marx to critique political and economic liberalism in four of his writings: *The Jewish Question*, the *1844 Manuscripts*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Capital*. The essay will conclude with a discussion of what is unique about the way Marx develops this argument in the context of his study about the capitalist labor process in *Capital*.

On the Jewish Question

In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx strongly critiques the ideas of political and economic liberalism. He notes that instead of being concerned with religious freedom or political freedom (i.e. political liberalism), individuals should be focused on emancipating people from the slavery of capitalism, or human emancipation, so they can escape alienation and embrace their true human selves. On p. 32, he states, “the limits of political emancipation appear at once in the fact that the state can liberate itself from a

⁸ This is also known as anti-positivist thinking.

constraint without man himself being really liberated; that a state may be a free state without man himself being a free man.” Political emancipation is the highest form of emancipation within the capitalist system, but in order to achieve real human emancipation, the system must be overturned (p. 35). Political liberty, or civil rights, include, “equality, liberty, security, and property” (p.42), but Marx notes that “none of these supposed rights of man go beyond the egoistic man” (p. 43), meaning that they just help people continue to live selfishly. So a society can achieve political liberty, but is no closer to human emancipation.

Marx demonstrates both his critique of political and economic liberalism and his belief that individuals are led by false consciousness in *On the Jewish Question*. Because of the focus on achieving religious freedom and political and civil rights, individuals are steered away from a focus on human emancipation and freedom from capitalism. As a result, they do not focus on the true goal of trying to overturn the present system, and have a sense of false consciousness about what is truly in their best interest. People may believe they are free with political and economic liberalism, but according to Marx, this freedom is merely an illusion, and workers will continue to be enslaved by capitalism until they can see past it and work toward human emancipation. He uses anti-positivism to look below the surface reality at what is really happening.

The 1844 Manuscripts

The 1844 Manuscripts further examines the issue of human emancipation by focusing on one of its key components: the concept of alienation. Marx believes capitalism leads workers to be alienated in various ways, and that as a result of this alienation they have a sense of false consciousness about their worlds. Under capitalism, workers become more of a commodity the more they produce (pp. 71), and this leads

them to become even more out of touch with the reality of what is happening to them. On pp. 72, Marx notes, “so much does labor’s realization appear as a loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to death.”

Marx believes workers experience four specific types of alienation in a capitalist system: alienation from the product of one’s labor⁹, alienation from the act of labor¹⁰, alienation from one’s species being¹¹, and alienation from each other¹² (pp. 72-77). The liberal economic system he so despises, which keeps state control far away from production, alienates workers so they do not see that as a class, they really live as slaves under the capitalist system. It is only when workers recognize that they are part of an oppressed and alienated class that they can gain class consciousness and break free from the chains of capitalism and toward a communist state. Thus, Marx is arguing that it is the capitalist system that perpetuates the estrangement of men and prevents them from seeing the reality of their circumstances and recognizing their oppression.

The Communist Manifesto

While *On the Jewish Question* and *The 1844 Manuscripts* showed Marx’s philosophic side, *The Communist Manifesto* reveals that Marx is also a political activist. Marx outlines the rise of the capitalists, called the bourgeoisie (who gained power from feudalism), and the workers, the proletariat. He notes that as the means of production in capitalism become more technologically advanced and the capitalists become engaged in

⁹ **Alienation from the product of one’s labor** means that even though a worker puts his or her life into the things they produce, their labor is estranged from them since they do not own the items they create and the items are turned into a commodity by the capitalists (p. 74)

¹⁰ **Alienation from the act of labor** means that the work done by the laborer is not done because of creativity or spontaneity, but out of a need to survive. The individual’s entire self has to be used to work; he or she cannot leave their brain at home and take their body to work, their individual’s entire person has to be alienated (p. 74)

¹¹ **Alienation from the species being** means that because one’s labor has a spiritual component, which is taken away when one is forced to sell one’s labor in order to meet his or her material needs, he or she is essentially no different from an animal who merely labors in order to survive. It takes the human component out of the labor (pp. 76).

¹² **Alienation of man from man** occurs because each worker is estranged from themselves and their labor; as a result they feel alienated from other (pp.77).

free trade, the workers become united as they begin to share similar low wages and wretched working conditions regardless of the occupations they held previously. On pp. 476, he notes, “the bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science into its paid wage laborers.” Distinctions between different groups of workers are eliminated, and the result is that the proletariat increases in size, becomes more concentrated through increases in technology and communication, develops a sense of class consciousness and creates unions, and eventually overthrows the capitalist system.¹³

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx is arguing that because liberal economic systems are oppressive, they will eventually lead the workers within them to see past the false consciousness of their lives, gain a sense of class consciousness, and band together to overthrow the capitalist system and develop a communist state. Marx notes that although it is the capitalist system that deceives the workers from the outset about their oppression, it is the same capitalist system that will eventually reveal the truth to workers about their circumstances and allow them to achieve human emancipation through communism. He is critiquing capitalism through anti-positivism.

Capital

Finally, *Capital*, which showcases Marx the economist, provides an in-depth explanation of exactly how the capitalist labor process (and a liberal political system, for that matter)¹⁴ exploits workers. He argues that in a capitalist system, workers are only paid enough to reproduce themselves (which means they receive the minimum amount

¹³ This is clearly a very simplified version of Marx’s thesis.

that makes it physically possible for them to keep coming to work every day), and that even if it only takes X hours per day to reproduce a worker (calculated by the amount of time it takes an average worker in society to create a particular commodity, or labor power), the capitalist can still keep the worker as long as he or she desires, with everything after that considered surplus labor. Capitalists are always looking for a way to make more money, so they will consistently produce innovations to make workers more productive, and these increases in technology will eventually lead to the overthrow of the capitalist system.¹⁵

Marx notes that unlike under feudalism, where it was clear when the serf was producing for himself and when he was producing for the lord, it is not clear at all under capitalism who the worker is producing for – he is producing for his own reproduction for a certain number of hours, but his surplus labor is purely for the benefit of the capitalist. Under this system, it *appears* that the worker is going to work every day in order to make a living, but by peering under the surface it becomes clear that the worker is actually only doing a small amount of work for his own benefit and that the rest of it is merely exploitation. Marx argues that the worker is being exploited terribly under this system, yet under economic liberalism, which advocates limited intervention into the market, this oppression is perfectly acceptable. Thus, Marx is critiquing economic and political liberalism¹⁶ while at the same time showing that in order to see what is truly happening, one has to look beneath the surface.

Marx's development of the two-stage argument is unique in *Capital* because unlike in his previous works, he actually develops a specific formula that demonstrates

¹⁵ Again, this is a highly simplified version of Marx's actual argument about the process that leads from technology to overthrow, but it cannot be detailed in this paper due to space constraints.

how workers are being oppressed by the capitalist system, as well as how this oppression remains hidden from the worker (by showing that the work is split between reproduction and surplus). This specific argument is very useful because it allows one to show empirically that exploitation is occurring, and allows one to mathematically see the degree of exploitation for certain workers. This systematic demonstration is far more powerful than merely asserting that exploitation is present.

In all four of the writings discussed in this essay, Marx uses anti-positivism to critique political and economic liberalism. He shows that workers are inherently oppressed by capitalism, yet that the workers are given a sense of false consciousness about their oppression because of political and/or economic liberalism. Marx's use of anti-positivism is very effective in critiquing these systems, and this same methodology can be used to critique how economic and political liberalism exploit the poor in countries like the United States today.

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