UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 2

# Rights, Order and Political Authority

*From Hobbes to Locke*

Oxter Press · Teaching slides · Version 1.0, October 2026

THE CHAPTER'S QUESTION

# How can anyone have the right to rule others?

## Hobbes

Starts from insecurity: without a common power, life is war.

## Locke

Starts from rights: government exists to protect what people already have.

## Wollstonecraft

Asks who has been formed to consent at all.

## HOBBES · THE STATE OF NATURE

> *“During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man.”*

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13

The cause is the absence of a common power, not a claim that people are evil.

# Three causes of quarrel

### Competition

People want the same scarce things.

### Diffidence

Distrust: strike first before you are struck.

### Glory

Reputation: looking weak invites attack.

The problem is assurance. Even the peaceful cannot rely on others’ restraint.

> *“I authorise 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 authorise all his actions in like manner.”*

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 17

“Thou” is a fellow subject. The sovereign is not a party, so cannot break the covenant.

> *"The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them."*

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 21

**Discuss:** protection of whom, and judged by whom?

LOCKE · NATURAL FREEDOM

> *“A state of perfect freedom to order their actions … within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.”*

Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 4

“A state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence” (sec. 6).

LOCKE · PROPERTY

# Labour makes property, within two limits

*“He hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property” (sec. 27).*

## Spoilage

Nothing beyond what you can use “before it spoils” (sec. 31).

## Sufficiency

Only “where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others” (sec. 27).

LOCKE · WHERE THE ARGUMENT STRAINS

# Money and colonial land

## Money

By agreeing to money, “men have agreed to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth” (sec. 50).

Is using money consent to every distribution it produces?

## America

“The wild woods and uncultivated waste of America” … “in the beginning all the world was America” (secs 37, 49).

Is the labour criterion neutral between ways of using land?

LOCKE · TACIT CONSENT

# Three ways to consent without saying so

## Owning land

Possession “to him and his heirs for ever”.

## A week’s lodging

“A lodging only for a week”.

## The highway

“Barely travelling freely on the highway”.

**Discuss:** which is weakest? Is this consent, or simply benefit received? (sec. 119)

# Power held for purposes, and who judges

### The trust

The legislative is “only a fiduciary power to act for certain ends” (sec. 149).

### The judge

“Who shall be judge …? To this I reply, The people shall be judge” (sec. 240).

### The threshold

“A long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices, all tending the same way” (sec. 225).

> *“Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.”*

Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ch. 3

Education produces the dependence that is then called natural. Consent theory presupposes independent agents.

COMPARISON

# Three accounts of political authority

| | Hobbes | Locke | Wollstonecraft |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Problem** | Insecurity | Protecting existing rights | Formed dependence |
| **Basis** | Authorisation | Consent and trust | Developed rational agency |
| **Limit** | Failure to protect | Breach of trust | Unequal formation of citizens |

SEMINAR TASK · 20 MINUTES

# Is Hobbes’s sovereign too powerful to be legitimate?

1. Group A defends Hobbes using chs 13, 17 and 21.
2. Group B attacks using Locke secs 149, 225 and 240.
3. Group C judges: which argument survives the other’s reply?

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY

# Does Locke succeed in justifying private property?

## Plan

Define "succeed". State a thesis. Reconstruct secs 25–51 at their strongest.

## Test

Press one decisive objection: mixing, money or colonial land. Give Locke's best reply.

## Judge

Conclude clearly and say what would change your verdict.

1,500 words maximum · Student Pack: essay questions and planning guide