

2019

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Recommended Citation

Kovacs, Christine (2019) "An Unexpected Hobbesian Defense of the Black Lives Matter Movement," *Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy*: Vol. 6 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/ac/vol6/iss1/8>

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An Unexpected Hobbesian Defense of the Black Lives Matter Movement

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Abstract

Civil disobedience has been a well-known tool for many of the political movements over the past century. Once such movement is called Black Lives Matter (BLM), and its aim is to bring attention to and challenge violence and anti-black racism at a structural and personal level. Like other political movements before them, BLM is often criticized as being immoral when they engage civil disobedience. This is a famously Hobbesian interpretation of morality--that if you break a law, you are immoral. However, this interpretation of Hobbes is oversimplified; in fact, I will argue that, if properly informed, Hobbes would likely support BLM. J. D. C Carmichael, a Canadian philosopher, points out the limits of Hobbes' authoritarian sovereign in his article "Hobbes on Natural Right in Society: The 'Leviathan' Account." Because of our natural right to self-preservation, our obedience to the sovereign is contingent on the sovereign's ability to protect us. If the sovereign punishes violators of a law that harms them, he has done so unjustly. Therefore, any violators of such a law, while still subject to punishment by the sovereign, are not behaving immorally. I argue that BLM fits this criterion: using statistics and testimonials, I will show that BLM members are not currently protected by the sovereign, and therefore they are just in their violation of laws during acts of civil disobedience. I conclude that a properly-informed Thomas Hobbes would not condemn the BLM movement as immoral or unjust.

In contemporary American society, we have found ourselves in a second wave of the Civil Rights Movement. Like the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement uses strategies such as protesting and civil disobedience to demonstrate their frustration with, and call attention to, police brutality in the black community, among other issues of systemic racism ("About"). This has been met with confusion by some Americans, who often make a Hobbesian claim that BLM protesters who break the law are themselves immoral (Green). However, while this claim that roots morality in the law is indeed Hobbesian, it oversimplifies Hobbes' role of the sovereign and its limits. The article "Hobbes on Natural Right in Society: The 'Leviathan' Account," by Canadian scholar D. J. C Carmichael carefully explores Hobbes' understanding of authority and the limits placed on law and punishments. Therefore, because of Hobbes' assertion that the subjects' obligation to obey the sovereign is contingent on the sovereign's protection of them (Carmichael 5), Hobbes, if correctly informed, would likely support the Black Lives Matter Movement and their subsequent civil disobedience.

Arguably, it was Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan that sparked the conversation about conceptions of morality and society in the early modern era. Almost all other philosophers including John Locke, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Bernard Mandeville, and Adam Smith are responding to Hobbes' somewhat radical approach to morality. In the Leviathan, Hobbes' sets a particular image of human nature. He famously writes that there is "a general inclination for all of mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, ceaseth only in death" (Hobbes 33). It is natural for us, then, to be entirely selfish creatures, striving only for our own power and

possessions. According to Hobbes, humanity's natural state is a state of war, "...and such a war, as is of every man, against every man" (36). This means that "every man is enemy to every man" (36), and all humans have the right to every other man's possessions; there is no justice, no rights, and no morality (Hobbes 38). Through a selfish desire to protect ourselves and our lives, family, and belongings, Hobbes explains that man makes a decision to enter into a society, to relinquish our right to everyone and everything and to limit our own power (Hobbes 38). Hobbes' then infamously writes that our own morality comes from the laws created by a sovereign in society: in our natural state of humanity "the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice" (38). Hobbes does not believe that we have any innate ability to be moral; our morality is socially constructed to protect us from one another, but would not exist otherwise. Clearly, this must mean that those who violate the law are unjust, wrong and immoral, for "he that endeavoureth [the law's] performance, fulfillith them; and he that fulfilleth the law, is just" (Hobbes 50). When the laws are the source of justice and morality, to follow them would be to be just, and to violate them would be to be unjust.

Hobbes' point of view is a prevalent one in our current social landscape as we face an onslaught of moral conundrums including: the ethics of presidential tweets, the healthcare crisis and importantly, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM began as a hashtag in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who allegedly murdered unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin in 2012 ("About"). Since then, the hashtag has grown into a movement whose mission is to "build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" ("About"). In 2017, notable protests have occurred across the country: in September protests lasted over a week in St. Louis, MO after the acquittal of a former white police officer charged with the fatal shooting of a black man in 2011 (Eligon); in August, protests against the removal of confederate statues in Charlottesville, VA by radical white nationalists sparked counter-protesting by BLM (Schmitt). While BLM raises awareness through many regional peaceful protests and the use of its hashtag, they have also been known to engage in acts of intentional civil disobedience to demonstrate their discontent.

One instance of civil disobedience perpetrated by BLM was done in December of 2015, in which protestors shut down heavily populated Chicago streets in response to the murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald and the subsequent cover-up of his death by mayor Rahm Emanuel (Harper). Nearly eight months later, in late July of 2016, another, more strategic act of civil disobedience took place again in Chicago, this time at Homan Square. Protesters chained themselves to a secret police facility where they claimed suspected criminals are taken, interrogated, tortured and sometimes never seen again (Bowean). Protesters stayed chained together at Homan Square for over a week, calling it "Freedom Square." This resulted in the arrest of many of the demonstrators, who were mostly sawed out of their chains by police (Bowean). According to Charlene Carruthers, national director at Black Youth Project 100, an affiliate group of BLM, the protesters wanted "a full divestment from policing and a full investment in black communities" (Bowean). Other prominent BLM leaders reiterated this sentiment, expressing that the purpose of the Homan Square occupation was to spread awareness of the suffering of black Americans under standard policing practices.

Predictably, this form of protest was criticized by some Americans. Regan Pifer, a history educator wrote an op ed article that denigrated the peaceful civil disobedience protests promulgated by the BLM community. She writes that "their actions obstruct official police business and the opportunity for the police to do their job and protect all citizens," asserting that Martin Luther

King Jr. would support #AllLivesMatter (Pifer). Derryck Green, a political commentator and member of Project 21--a national leadership group of black conservatives, also expressed a similar sentiment. He writes that BLM is not an offshoot of the Civil Rights Movement, as it lacks the moral authority and moral agenda. Specifically, Green says “the social disruptions of Black Lives Matter are simply hostile demonstrations of racial identity politics and the look-at-us melodrama that descends directly from the black power movement.” Green is critical of the social disruptions--also known as the civil disobedience--by the BLM movement because he sees it as counterproductive to disobey the laws of without having what he calls a ‘moral essence’. It is here that both Pifer and Green are relying on a typical Hobbesian conception of morality; those who break the laws constructed by the sovereign--the U.S government--are themselves immoral and therefore indisputably in the wrong.

However, this reading of Hobbes, while common, oversimplifies the limits Hobbes places on the sovereign. The dominant narrative on Hobbes makes him “‘the monster of Malmesbury’ [who] is thought to have squashed civil rights more than he respected them” (Carmichael 3), but that ignores the Leviathan’s emphasis on true liberties, liberties that we have regardless of any declarations of law. In part one of the Leviathan, in chapters 14 and 15, Hobbes outlines rights that he considers to be “non renounceable,” namely they surround our right to self-preservation (Hobbes 41). Canadian scholar, D. J. C. Carmichael, writes that “although authority is absolute the obligation of the subjects is not, because the right of nature--self preservation--itself cannot be laid aside” (4). So, in chapter 21 of the Leviathan, Hobbes lists seven rights that allow a subject to refuse to comply with certain laws without being unjust, and therefore immoral (Carmichael 5). Of particular importance to this paper is the seventh liberty that we may exercise without injustice: Hobbes writes, “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). Essentially, because self-preservation is so important to Hobbes, when the sovereign society refuses to protect you, then you have the right to justly disobey laws that compromise your self-preservation.

Carmichael elaborates on that in his article, “Hobbes on Natural Right in Society: The ‘Leviathan’ Account.” In this article, Carmichael argues that according to Hobbes natural rights and natural laws are “logically independent but systematically complementary” (15). This may seem contradictory, but when understood thoroughly “the result is a distinctively two-tiered conception of natural right and political authority” (15). So, while we may have a natural right to justly defy laws which violate our own true liberties, the sovereign’s declaration that forbids the exercise of that liberty, and any subsequent punishment imposed on violators, is indeed still authoritative and absolute. Simultaneously though, the sovereign’s use of his power in this way is also improper (Carmichael 12). Hobbes would recognize any punitive action taken against these violators to be “an act of hostility: a recognizable misuse or abuse of the sovereign’s proper authority” (12). It is important to note here, however, that while subjects, like BLM protesters, are not obligated to obey a sovereign who creates laws that harm them, they are not permitted by Hobbes to rebel against the sovereign (Carmichael 16).

So, for Hobbes to defend BLM, two things must be clear. First, it needs to be the case that the group of marginalized people who BLM represents are not being protected by the sovereign. Second, BLM’s engagement with civil disobedience must prove to not an example of intentional rebellion. As to the first point, the sovereign defined for BLM is the American government, and even more expansively, American society. BLM’s official stance is in opposition to “state-sanctioned violence and anti-black Racism” (“What We Believe”). It’s clear that BLM and its

supporters believe that the violence perpetrated against them is done by society at large, meaning that our societal institutions are inherently racist. During the protests in Homan Square, Carruthers articulated her frustration with society, “what we have done is called out the amount of power (police) have in our lives. At this moment, black families are also grieving, and our actions continue because black people continue to be killed, live in poverty and live in communities that are hyper-surveilled and policed” (Bowean). The statistics back up this claim. White people make up around 64% of America’s population, but only 49% of the people killed by police annually. On the flipside, black Americans, who make up only about 13% of the population, are 24% of those shot and killed by police (Lowery). Black Americans are statistically 2.5 times more likely to be shot by police than their white counterpart. BLM and most of its supporters believe that this is a pattern of anti-black racism that has permeated society and created an image of the young black man, both in a hoodie and without, as inherently dangerous. Clearly, the members of the BLM community do not see themselves as being protected by the sovereign, and the numbers are on their side. As a result, Hobbes would likely see them acting on their natural right to preserve themselves, and in this capacity, he would approve.

Secondly, BLM, while protesting for change, is not rebelling against the authority of the United States. While BLM does believe that police brutality is only a part of the state sponsored violence against their race, they still consider themselves Americans. Carruthers states, “We want a world where we don’t deal with conflict with police and prisons. It’s a process. It’s not just about tearing things down but building up alternatives, institutions and practices that deal with conflict and harm without punishment” (Bowean). This was in response to the volatile tension in 2016 that stemmed largely from five cops being shot down by an alleged radical member of BLM. Carruthers, among many other BLM members, wanted to make it clear that “[her] our movement has never called for the execution of police officers” (Bowean).

Kristiana Rae Colon, co-founder of the Let Us Breathe Collective, also spoke about her frustration with the system, but this frustration is for change, not for an overthrow. While police brutality in black communities is certainly a part of the problem, she sees violence being perpetuated at the state level as well. According to Colon, the state is both mismanaging and refusing to listen to the voices of mostly or all-black communities. She advocates for a reallocation of funds in Chicago that would better serve that community, “Chicago is investing in what it deems necessary, which is different from what the people deem as necessary” (Bowean). Colon’s organization does not want to overthrow American society as we know it, rather they want to change it so the sovereign does protect them.

So, BLM protesters are not rebelling against the United States police or government, rather they are looking for ways to improve those agencies. They draw attention to it by disobeying the laws set forth by the sovereign. Their civil disobedience is protected under Hobbes’ understanding of the natural rights of the subject and the limits of the sovereign. Therefore, when subjects are punished by the authority for exercising their natural right to self-preservation, like BLM refusing to comply with laws that aim to silence them, the authority still has absolute power to punish them for breaking that law, although to do so would be an abuse of the sovereign’s own power and would thus be unjust.

We can then see that black people in contemporary American society are largely not being protected by the sovereign. When BLM participates in civil disobedience, as they have done at Homan Square in Chicago, they are not being immoral, rather, according to Hobbes, they are

just in defying these laws. The conception of Hobbes as an “authoritarian monster,” is shown by D.J.C Carmichael to be largely a myth, and from this I can deduce that Hobbes would approve of the BLM movement if he truly understood who they were and why they protest at all. Ultimately, matters of morality are not necessarily defined by law, but sometimes even when they are, a closer reading can reveal that even the most stringent philosophers would concede to us the right to justly preserve our own lives.

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