

A People Set Apart: The "State of Nature" in Hobbes and Locke, Land Appropriation and the Autonomy of Aboriginal Groups

Author(s): Nigel Joseph, University of Western Ontario

The "state of nature" is a term we use to discuss a particular debate that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. Thomas Hobbes, in his famous book *Leviathan* (1651), argued that civilized men had emerged from a ruthless and dangerous struggle for existence. This struggle, in which every man was afraid of every other man, he calls "the state of nature." Writing after Hobbes, the philosophers John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau also discuss the state of nature. While they do not quite agree with Hobbes about how dangerous this state actually was, they agree with him, on the whole, that it is necessary for "civilized" people to exit from this state. In the theories of these three influential philosophers, the state of nature becomes something that marks the lifestyles and choices of "savages" and "barbarians": that is to say, it is a way of marking off and separating non-European peoples from Europeans.

My argument is that this way of setting up a distinction between civilized and uncivilized peoples has tremendous consequences. It is very difficult to escape patterns of thinking that have been in place for centuries; patterns which we have accepted all our lives as true, or right. The "state of nature" is one of these accepted ways of thinking in the West. We tend to see people without the same standards of technology as us as inferior. It is the "state of nature" debate that first establishes this way of thinking about the relationship between Western societies and indigenous peoples. Once we have convinced ourselves that a certain society is primitive or inferior, it becomes much easier to justify taking away their land, or refusing to share natural resources with them.

This way of thinking is evident in the writing of John Locke, often thought of as the father of liberalism. Locke is famous for his support of tolerance, and for insisting that we could never be legitimately ruled without our consent. But he also argued that the Amerindian lands could be appropriated by European settlers because the Amerindians, according to him, had not really worked on the land. What he meant, among other things, was that since they did not have fences, ploughed fields, and all the familiar marks of European properties, he did not think they *owned* the land. Ironically, what we might now see as environmentally sound practices ("living lightly off the land") Locke saw as idleness; and he felt justified in arguing that Europeans had a right to forcibly appropriate the land of indigenous peoples like the Amerindian tribes of North America. This is a good example of the way abstract political theory has very real consequences: the European settlers who were driving the Amerindians back wanted a moral and legitimate reason for doing so: and Locke's theory was perfect for them.

Once we accept that the "state of nature" was not so much a description of reality (both Hobbes and Locke are careful to avoid saying that it was) as a way of *separating* Europeans from other societies, and a way of justifying land appropriation, we can see how a number of terms that are associated with the state of nature may also need to be re-examined. One of the arguments I want to underline is

that if we really want change, if we want to live in a world in which justice is available to everyone, we have to re-examine our most basic assumptions. It is not enough to say, for instance, that people who have been driven off their lands should be granted autonomy. Autonomy, at its simplest, is self-rule. Autonomy is an attractive word, one that immediately suggests that a solution is on its way. But autonomy, like "the state of nature" has a history of usage. In fact, I will suggest, autonomy is one of the ways in which the initial separation of "civilized" from "uncivilized" is reinforced. Autonomy is a two-edged implement: both very attractive and worryingly divisive. This arises from the way autonomy is historically derived from the idea of the contract and the "state of nature" that is assumed to precede the social contract. The contract is a device used by Hobbes and Locke (and Rousseau) to explain and rationalize the escape from the state of nature, which is characterized as terrifying, or inconvenient. When "civilized" humans enter into the social contract with other humans, they encounter and experience each other as autonomous individuals, with rights and obligations. So autonomy, in the sense of self-legislation, is a direct consequence of the social contract.

To say that we should be alert to our assumptions when we talk of autonomy is not to say that we should not value autonomy: merely to register that if autonomy is to be really useful to indigenous peoples, for example, we must be careful how we use the term. If autonomy is to be really available to all, its roots in an individualist and often exploitative economy must be made transparent.

"Autonomy," for instance, is often used as though we must all, necessarily, desire to legislate for ourselves. Indeed, it is a part of the identity of the modern human being to believe that it is admirable to be independent, to be self-reliant, to be autonomous, and that it is shameful to be ruled by others, to be heteronomous. And yet it is precisely this belief, I suggest, that must be dislodged. It is probably an excellent thing for indigenous peoples to be autonomous, in the sense that their way of life be as little interfered with by powerful groups as possible: but they must not be *compelled* to be autonomous in ways that are unfamiliar to them.

One of the ways in which autonomy is both offered and refused is to say, in effect: "So and so does not deserve autonomy, because they have strange, perhaps undemocratic, customs." Autonomy is worthless if it is offered as a circumscribed and qualified "gift"; its true worth resides in its being made available as an unqualified right, to any group which does not offer a threat to the lives and traditions of other groups. Indeed, I will argue that in the case of aboriginal peoples everywhere, granting of autonomy becomes not merely an issue of rights, but of a generalized "good." In Locke's argument, not only were the British *not* doing the aboriginal peoples of America a wrong by appropriating their land, they were actually doing everyone a *service*, by intensively farming the land and increasing the output of that land so that more food became available to people everywhere. Today, when the predatory practices of commercial farming threaten to destroy the ecological balance of the world, we can invert the argument: indigenous peoples are not only entitled to autonomy on their terms, they are actually providing a service, in terms of environmentally sensitive land-use-instruction, to the rest of the world.