Dissecting the Englishman

Material Changes from Feudalism to Capitalism and the Transitional Philosophies of Hobbes and Locke

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If the abstract to Peter Laslett's edition of John Locke's Two Treatises of Government can be taken at its word, Locke's work should be thought of as the architect for what would eventually become Classical Liberalism, rather than as merely excusing the Glorious Revolution. This is a fair and accurate claim to make, but is also a claim which, at the same time, ignores other significant historical innovations of the time in which Locke wrote. Positions on Thomas Hobbes's work are more varied, but, again, not quite satisfactory in terms of their sensitivity to context. He is credited (and oft dismissed) as bourgeois, or else his name will be dropped in discussions of economic game theory despite his deliberate positioning of the market beneath politics. Hobbes and Locke, though by no means reactionaries, do not square up with the contemporary world quite so cleanly. Even contrasted with each other, their political narratives differ significantly; as do their respective visions of political society, property rights and even human nature. Yet, their philosophies are in agreement that the individual is the beginning, the jumping-off point, of politics. Though their political societies take individuals in drastically different directions, Hobbes's and Locke's natural men structure political society through similar mechanisms with similarly self-centered¹ motivations.

So, in this sense, it's unsurprising that these intersections could influence the capitalism of the modern and post-modern world. The question, then, is "How did they do so?"

This is not merely another new site for comparative political theory to be exercised. The transitional projects in Hobbes and Locke's works should not be underestimated, as it would seem that these theoreticians had to make individuals- at least politically relevant individualsfrom scratch. The political and economic structures of feudalism were profoundly disinterested in the idea that labor needed to be managed as anything more than a homogenous masses bound to particular geographical units. In the turbulent collapse of feudalism, however, the event of politically relevant individuals became a "happy accident" that the philosophies of Hobbes and Locke would first have to domesticate, and then, deploy in a changed England. This context-sensitive deployment would be the Hobbesian and Lockean contributions to liberalism and capitalism. Responding to the political and economic instabilities both during and following English fuedalism Hobbes and Locke created transitional philosophies and politics. Against the background of postplague economics, I will argue that they accomplished this by blueprinting the new phenomena of the rational, self-interested individual, by reinventing property as a natural individual right and by providing the abstract monetary and legal ideas necessary to regulate private business.

The End of English Feudalism

There is more to Hobbes's and Locke's anxieties over rebellion and tyranny than merely their respective memories of the recent Civil War and Glorious Revolution. Preceding these events by centuries was Feudalism's end, a common experience for Western Europe, but one leading to unique power problems for the English. As educated men involved in government, Hobbes and Locke would certainly be familiar with the damage control policies their predecessors crafted to alleviate this economic shift.

The mortal blow for European feudalism, as argued by Richard Lachmann, was the economic upset following successive waves of bubonic plague in the 14th century. Widespread, catastrophic peasant death paradoxically improved the lot of peasants: those who survived the disease found themselves in a better position to bargain with their lords and masters for two reasons: first, the balance of land and labor was tipped in such a way that landowners were unable to extract the wealth they were accustomed to; second, this was exacerbated by peasant flight on account

of these increased demands and the threat of the plague itself. The responses of European feudal elites were ultimately reduced to the forcible reassertion the traditional system, and, depending on the geography, had mixed results. From East to West the "seigneurial offensive" was less and less successful, with peasants securing more rights against their lords and masters in the West.² Russia remained effectively feudal. Between East and West, Western peasants' access to their own political institutions- villages, communes, etc.- proved the decisive factor in securing their interests after the plague.

Early capitalism, however, is not the result of this. As much as the Black Death can be retroactively constructed as the advent of market forces in a static system – introducing competition for suddenly scarce and commodified labor – this incomplete narrative ignores the anomaly of England, as well as the gap between the 14th and 16th centuries,³ which were neither perfectly feudal, capitalist nor static. Furthermore, England's political structures did not, at this point, coalesce into an absolutist state as occurred in France, where similar peasant organization took place. Still furthermore, absolutist states, such as those in the mold of Hobbes', are neither built upon nor friendly to free markets. Rather, they are implicitly opposed to them because of the power without status that free markets allow and generate. A gap remains to be filled. What set the end of English Feudalism apart from the rest, and produced the circumstances that Hobbes and Locke respond to, is not found in the English peasantry but rather in its elite class. In France, for example, the absolute monarchy was built and fortified in response to the plague, eclipsing smaller landlords and nobles. England's crown- or for that matter, any challengers to it- did not have the power necessary to solidify an absolute state. As such, post-plague England was pulled in three directions by its feudal elites: the crown, landlords and the church; their respective demands and legal institutions.⁴

England's tripartite upper-class was stable insofar as peasant labor was sufficient enough to satisfy the minimum material demands of all three groups. Following the plague, this ratio would not return until the 1600s. The intensified interim feudal conflict between English elites was taken advantage of by enterprising peasants,⁵ who secured for themselves, under common law, far greater rights of ownership and personal freedom than their continental peers. In particular, peasants sought to acquire the plots of their deceased fellows and often travelled to find superior land for rent or purchase. This unsettling of tradition and production produced a two-pronged response by landlords: either peasant demands were accommodated or suppressed. Here is where England witnessed the dawn of Hobbes and Locke's political individual:⁶ suppressive measures could not contain the mass dissolution of peasants throughout England. The effect was a general dismissal of the state as the final, preeminent force in English politics. Peasants secured their new rights not through organization and collective bargaining, but through personal mobility.

At this point in history the English state remained decentralized, comparatively weak, and it faced the task of taming an unorganized mass of freely moving units of labor. These arrangements would not be alleviated by Henry VIII's removal of the Catholic Church as a third elite, as lay landlords continued to challenge the crown's absolute authority.⁷ Hobbes would be born during the crown's long systematic dismantling of landlord power, though the peasants remained as a problem for him to solve. Who the changing state would rule was clear. The question, to Hobbes, was a much more fundamental one: *what* will the state rule?

Hobbes: Confronting Man and Nature

Leviathan founds itself on an exhaustive answer to that very question and produces a goal sympathetic to the project of the time: the consolidation of the absolute monarchy. As such, it's tempting to see Hobbes as a retreat from the capitalist future, or perhaps as an advocate of the failed policy of peasant suppression. However, it is more accurate to look at *Leviathan* as fulfilling two political functions: explaining the workings of the free individual peasant, and constructing the political structures that can confine, stabilize and exploit the peasant where feudal structures had failed. Hobbesianism, then, is designed to extract feudalism's outputs from post-feudal inputs.

Such a set of new inputs, as elaborated by Hobbes, became central to the capitalist narrative. Hobbes's concepts of the individual and the state of nature account for the English peasantry's newfound uprootedness in ways that traditional and Scholastic notions of one's natural or proper place – or of the natural order of things – cannot. The political tradition Hobbes begins discards the teleology of Aristotle and scholasticism to instead place exceptional emphasis on the negative liberties of individuals. Hobbes's infamous state of nature, the war of all against all, places no obligations or demands upon individual persons except for what obligations arise from their own desires and what demands are forced upon them coercively. In no uncertain terms, Hobbes says, "there is no *finis ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *summum bonnum* (utmost good)."⁸ That is, until provoked, human beings have no projects to speak of. But provoked they will be, as there is no place for contentedness in Hobbesian ontology; this description of desire itself is perhaps Hobbes's most important contribution for the capitalism to come. Immediately after scrapping the thought of any grand narrative or finite ends being present in all human beings, Hobbes instead attributes to each individual a *telos* unto oneself- the eternal progress of his or her own desires. Every action stems from some desire, great or small; each towards not only temporary satiation of appetite, but towards the promise of new and future appetites, as well as the security and leisure needed to enjoy them.⁹ Furthermore, Hobbes suggests that the acquisitiveness and escalation of desire in humans is both the product of reason and responsible for making humanity more reasonable- a claim that will certainly resonate in Locke and in free market discourse in general. On the history of philosophy, Hobbes argues that philosophers, and by extension reason:

...were at first but few in number... It was impossible, till the erecting of the great commonwealths, it should be otherwise. *Leisure* is the mother of philosophy; and *commonwealth*, the mother of *peace* and *leisure*.¹⁰

This passage, in the oft-overlooked latter half of *Leviathan*, links wealtheven opulence- with reason and character, a significant part of early capitalist narratives.

In regards to historical context, it should be noted that this ceaseless natural acquisitiveness towards securing and maintaining goods and power was not only present in a dramatic way during the English Civil War. It was also found in the warring factions as well as the tripartite elite and the mobile peasantry they sought to control. So when critics accuse *Leviathan* of being bourgeois,¹¹ they are perhaps only partially right. Hobbes's account of ceaseless desire is not merely an account of the English rich, but also of the poor who, as discussed earlier, were able to play off of the unique internal struggles of their masters for their own material gains. Hobbes's society does not begin with castes of exploiters and exploited, but rather a mass of roughly equal exploiters and consumers.

However, such consumers and exploiters do not desire, consume and exploit towards the good of all, as Hobbes's dreary state of nature illustrates. In an exceptionally anti-capitalist move, Hobbes decries competition for wealth and power as a wound in peaceful society which will naturally fester into hatred and war.¹² So Hobbes introduces a limited teleology upon the state of nature: its transition into the commonwealth, where the free individual is forced, internally or externally, to obey. Though Hobbes's individual resonates with the acquisitive, selfish motivations of the archetypal capitalist, Hobbes's state does not. The project of Leviathan is quite literally to unmake the individual- or at least permanently suppress it- and institute a consolidated form of feudal hierarchy, as absolutist states did elsewhere in Europe. In Mark Neocleous' words, "the person of the state ... is made in order to deny the multitude its own subjectivity. The political function of the multitude is to cancel itself."13 Though acquisitiveness improves individuals, it throws them into conflict with one another over limited goods.¹⁴ Rationality, as suggested by Hobbes's account of the history of philosophy, is rare outside of established political orders. In response, Hobbes forms his politics upon an observation confirmed today by experiments in game theory,¹⁵ that any one person's thoughts are at the mercy of his experiences and the fallibilities of his imagination.¹⁶ Hobbes's solution: rationality must be taught to or forced upon individuals. Hobbes's absolutist state explicitly regulates, standardizes and limits the experiences and interactions between subjects to enforce common modes of interaction and common interpretations of phenomena. The Sovereign is gifted power over everything except the arbitrary taking of his subject's lives, but Hobbes pays particular attention to the Sovereign's power over ideas. The Sovereign determines what ends his subjects are allowed to pursue, what they learn and worship, with whom they may assemble, what laws apply to them and what legal precedents clarify this application.¹⁷ The Sovereign right to arbitrarily distribute and seize land and goods only further divorces Hobbes's politics from the liberal-democratic systems paired with early capitalism. As such, it is necessary to turn to Locke's Treatises to complete the transition from feudalism.

Locke: Domesticating Man and Nature

Locke, unlike Hobbes, is willing to accommodate England's newly uprooted peasants, due, in part, to his significantly sunnier conclusions on the commands of reason. Most importantly, as Locke states, his,"state of liberty ... is not a state of license" as it is in Hobbes. Imperatives to respect the rights of others and to be concerned for their wellbeing, which are secondary and externally enforced in *Leviathan*, are commands as intrinsic to an individual as self-preservation in Locke's *Second Treatise*.¹⁸ The acquisitive nature of humanity also differs significantly. There is an absence, in Locke, of Hobbes's explicit and allconsuming drive to acquire and dominate. Individuals are more interested in protecting what property and freedom they have than they are

in consuming more.¹⁹ Locke also adds a third option to human interaction where Hobbes does not: individuals can choose not to interact with one another, which, as proven in dilemma-with-exit games in game theorv,²⁰ drastically reduces the attractiveness and necessity of conflict. Furthermore rights to property and power are not secured through force, but rather, through particular labor, practically by accident. The mere gathering of something ownerless- or held in common- secures an individual the exclusive right to it.21 Furthermore, Locke, unlike Hobbes, does not view this as a site for contention. The brutal state of war is not a descriptive truth or a command of reason in Locke's state of nature as it is in Hobbes.^{'22} Rather, a state of war in Locke stems from a violation of the commands of reason, where one attempts to appropriate from another that which cannot rationally be made theirs- which is to say, it occurs where one attempts to appropriate another as a slave.²³ Natural conflict in Locke is particular, rather than general. It is the violators, rather than the adherents, of natural law that make political society attractive. This more optimistic view of humanity, unregulated, will create the conditions for Locke's liberalism. Also, due to conflict's particular character, Locke's philosophy is more individualistic in scope than Hobbes's.

Locke's liberalism is more willing to accommodate the new material arrangements- and support the change in legal rights- between peasant and landlord in post-plague England. Political society in Locke protects the ends of rational individuals while allowing them the freedom to labor and enjoy their property as they wish, as opposed to Hobbes's commonwealth which forms a barricade against the inevitable war caused by acquisition of goods which Hobbes's ontology predicts. For Locke, natural processes can be trusted and humans left to their own devices, "join hands with nature", and improve nature and themselves,²⁴ rather than consuming and destroying. In an English context, where plague has left plots of land unworked, Locke's treatises argue that whatever peasants wish to work them deserve them, and landlords are obliged by divine command to see their plots worked, rather than wasted.²⁵ Though both land and property originally initially belong to no particular individual in both philosophers' work, land and property are not the state's to distribute in Locke, but rather, distribute themselves naturally, with governments obliged to protect that distribution in law. Locke's philosophy, unlike Hobbes', separates economic rights from political rights- and both from royal blood- and embraces the rights won by the peasantry, as well as the new opportunities presented to non-nobles to become property owners.²⁶ This is his most significant break from the absolutism Hobbes endorses. In essence, he is domesticating Hobbes's

acquisitive man into one whom will be more decent in a free society- and free market.

Yet Locke's theory of value does not cleanly square with those of economists to come, and his stress on ownership and practicality as the source of value will be problematic to a capitalist economy built on the values of exchange and demand. What Locke actually values can initially seem unclear. Though prototypical market forces of "quantity" and "usefulness" are present in his works, and the *Treatises* in particular place great emphasis on labor improving the value of the natural world, the value of goods are attributed to their utility, rather than the labor necessary to make it or its value in exchanges.²⁷ In fact, Locke views means-ofexchange as a sort of absurdity; money is not created by order of natural law, but rather by accident: people simply find precious metal, gems or other tokens fanciful²⁸ and exchange useful goods for them in an error in judgment;²⁹ their widespread use in exchange being not a so much a rational convenience but instead, despite it's usefulness and necessity, a collective insanity easily victimized by counterfeiters and coin-clippers,³⁰ or, in Lockean terms, individuals who irrationally violate the rights of others. This is an arena where Locke's liberal government is obliged to get involved by regulating the symbolic components of free-market commerce.

Economic Blood in the Body Politic

Given that the legal regulatory structure Locke will use is a tradition inaugurated by Hobbes, it makes sense to return to the philosophy of the latter to discuss it. Upon returning to Hobbes, we find that his absolutism belies a seemingly odd respect for money, given that he does not accept the decoupling of economic rights from political authority as Locke does.³¹ A glimmer of capitalism is shown in Hobbes's use of blood as metaphor for money:32 money must continually circulate, must continually return to the heart- that is, the public coffer- and that the repeated exchange of money nourishes a state. Money, for Hobbes, is not a disease of the mind but instead a natural function of the body politic.³³ Although it would be too forward to read a full-fledged exchange theory of value into Hobbes's limited forays into economics, it should be clear that Hobbes does not share Locke's suspicion about the nature and usefulness of exchange, This is likely due to his accepting of intrinsic value in precious metals,³⁴ if only because of the tacit agreement amongst existing states that such metals should be valued. Hobbes characteristically goes a step further and finds, unsurprisingly, another opportunity for the Sovereign to exercise his power through the standardization of currency, whereas Locke regulates out of reluctant necessity to uphold natural law. However, Hobbes's regulations in regards to money are very limited, admitting that "money cannot easily be enhanced or abased."³⁵ Though sovereign governments are, of course, empowered to weigh and stamp and standardize, the value of the means-of-exchange itself is taken by Hobbes to be mostly untouchable by the state, except by inflicting upon the national coins a "prejudice."

This attitude towards gold, of course, would go on to play a significant role in the colonial period, but it is also a rare moment in Hobbes where a value exists somewhat independently of arbitrary sovereign power, and the "sovereignty of currency," so to speak, lends itself more to the division between state and civil society in liberalism than Hobbes's absolutism. More importantly, this element of robust commerce as crucial to the state, more emphatic than Locke's more thorough discourse on property, builds upon Hobbes's earlier notions of exchange of right and its emphasis on the surrendering of a right as the basis of exchange; thus the seller becomes the more significant party of the contract.³⁶ Also note that Hobbes declares the worth of an individual as his or her price, which raises the unresolved debate over whether Hobbes takes labor to be a commodity, as Locke does.³⁷ Regardless, insofar as a right to property exists- or is allowed- Hobbes's concepts of money, right and legal exchange form a proto-capitalist concept of commerce: a regulated exchange between private individuals on their terms, rather than feudalism's traditional economic obligations in which one social caste owed another.

Hobbes and the Future of Capitalism

Hobbesian legal philosophy also sets incredibly important precedents for the way businesses form, and are allowed to form. Though both Hobbes and Locke start with dissociated individuals who alienate a portion of their natural rights through contract to form the commonwealth, only Locke's government is of its subjects and itself subject to the law. Hobbes's Sovereign is, by its contractual nature, above and outside the civil law.³⁸ Though Hobbes's severed Sovereign is, as far as business and commerce are concerned, innocuous enough in Hobbes's time, the later expansion of capital during industrialization would tap Hobbes's political foundations to form the basis of corporate law. The process that creates the Sovereign sets a precedent which allows natural persons to represent and act in the name of abstract powers.³⁹ Most importantly, these representatives are absolved of the usual responsibilities of natural persons, as the abstract power they represent is responsible for the actions they undertake.⁴⁰ As capitalism progressed in England, private property rights enumerated and secured by Locke's philosophy would be alienated in a Hobbesian manner to form companies and corporations. Hobbesian legal precedents about impersonation and representation provided a framework for a battery of legislation throughout the 1800s⁴¹ which created the legal fiction of the private company, or "enterprise," and enshrined it as the standard holder of capital in the marketplace. The 1862 Companies Act in particular echoes Hobbes's Sovereign, as it first established the idea of a corporation as a unique legal entity. By changing the terms of reference from "they" to "it", the Act wholly severs private business from the actual persons who invest in and staff them.⁴² It is also of note that if Hobbes's work did originally commodify labor, the later corporate application of his legalism it demands it.⁴³

Alienation and representation in corporate law imbues corporate business, which like Hobbes's Sovereign power, is a collection of rights with similar immunity in violating the civil rights of others. Collections of rights, "can have no mind, and therefore can have no malice" and can not be held liable for "malicious prosecution, which involves a mental state."44 This immunity carries on the Hobbesian tradition of working in ways "far more accommodating to corporate persons than humans ones,"⁴⁵ with the express intent of accumulating power, though with a distinctly Lockean and capitalist alteration. Hobbes's Sovereign accumulates political freedoms and is privileged in dominating politics, whereas the corporate form, built in the wake of Locke's emphasis on property and ownership, accumulates capital and is privileged towards dominating the marketplace. Once feudal economics were decisively over, English lawmakers repurposed the legalism of Leviathan towards making a new mortal god, the corporate entity, which, at present, rivals nationstates in exercise of power. There is a warning here against the idea that private business is democracy's great bulwark against authoritarian power, ideas expressed by Friedman and Hayek, for example. The private businesses of capitalism appropriate Lockean notions of labor, exchange and private property rights, but are ultimately built upon the dictatorial, unchallengeable, all-consuming Sovereign power of Hobbes'. It should also be noted that Hobbes saw the marketplace as neither "an equilibrium generating mechanism" nor as "an institution where people exercise their freedom."46

Settling Down

The tumultuous centuries before the lives of Hobbes and Locke uprooted the embedded feudal political and economic traditions, leaving these two philosophers and their contemporaries to stabilize the country. Without a consolidated elite like those present in continental Europe, Hobbes and Locke were forced to imbue mobile individuals with motivations and freedoms independent of authority. With this, they were then able to blueprint new political systems built upon the exchange and alienation of natural rights that existed independent of hereditary status. Political society was thus rebuilt, Lockean and particularly Hobbesian legalism would go on to provide the foundations for a new center of power: corporate business.

If this study may be allowed some poetry to close it, then it will come from the Machiavellian uncertainty in the previous point, which runs counter to the finality which Locke and Hobbes both see in their philosophies. Despite themselves, Locke and Hobbes were writing in the context of a tumultuous world and, as the continued evolution of economics should demonstrate, the material conditions human beings respond to are still tumultuous and changing. As the fall of Soviet communism is still somewhat fresh in our memory as we suffer alongside dying neoliberal policy, the notion of economic and political contingency ought to be kept in mind when reflecting on the origins of the ideas taken for granted.

Notes

¹ I use "self-centered" in a very literal sense. That is, I mean "egocentric" rather than "egoistic," which is an important distinction when Locke's ontology is to be discussed in relation to Hobbes. The Lockean individual has a personal interest in the well-being of others which is independent of his or her own personal needs but nonetheless an internal command of reason, rather than an external command of necessity or God. Contrast the Hobbesian individual whose internal command to care for others is epiphenomenal of self-preservation and, moreover, a contract which ensures self-preservation.

² Richard Lachmann, "Feudal Elite Conflict and the Origins of English Capitalism. Politics and Society," *Politics and Society* vol.14 no.3 (1985): 352-354. ³ Ibid., 361.

⁴ Ibid., 355-357.

⁵ Ibid., 358.

⁶ Ibid., 359-360

7 Ibid., 366-368.

⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. A.P. Martinich (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), 75.

⁹ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁰ Ibid., 495.

¹¹ C. B. Macpherson's work is cited as an example of this in Harman, John and Vanderbilt, Deborah. "Agendas, Arguments and Political Theory," *PS: Political Science & Politics* vol.39 no.4 (2006): 907-910.

12 Hobbes, 76.

¹³ Mark Neocleous, "Staging Power: Marx, Hobbes and the Personification of Capital," *Law and Critique* vol.14 no.2 (2003): 152.

14 Hobbes, 93-95.

¹⁵ Ken Binmore, "Why Do People Cooperate?" *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* vol.5 no.1 (2006): p.87.

¹⁶ Hobbes, 76-80, 82-83.

¹⁷ Ibid., 133-135, 170-171.

¹⁸ John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 270-271.

¹⁹ The purpose of political society itself is to preserve life, liberty and property – as elaborated in Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, as a teleological endpoint, as opposed to the subversion of desire in Hobbes or the further development of power (property potentially included) in other philosophers such as Spinoza.
²⁰ Peter Kurrild-Kiltgaard, "Opting-Out: The Constitutional Economics of Exit," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* vol.61 no.1 (2002): 138-140.
²¹ Locke, 288-289.

²² This is to say that, in Hobbes, the use of reason in the state of nature necessarily produces the state of war, as each individual is aware of and understands the natural freedom and arbitrary powers of others, as well as the first law of nature (self-preservation). From these, agents understand the constant threat of the arbitrary power of others. However, this same understanding also defuses the state of nature progressively via all laws of nature subsequent to the first. ²³ Locke, 279.

²⁴ William O. Coleman, "The Significance of John Locke's Medical Studies for His Economic Thought," *History of Political Economy* vol.32 no.4 (2000): 719, 722.
 ²⁵ Locke, 291. It should also be noted that, by the argument of this passage, that whichever peasants are unwilling to work additional plots *do not* deserve to benefit from them.

²⁶ Lachmann, 367.

²⁷ Coleman, 712.

²⁸ Locke, 294, 300

²⁹ C. George Caffentzis, "Medical Metaphors and Monetary Strategies in the Political Economy of Locke and Berkeley," *History of Political Economy* vol.35 supplement (2003): 209-210.

³⁰ Ibid., 216-218. ³¹ Hobbes, 247. ³² Ibid., 187-188. ³³ Caffentzis, 206. 34 Hobbes, 188 35 Ibid. ³⁶ Neocleous, 153. ³⁷ Amit Ron, "The 'Market' and the 'Forum' in Hobbes's Political Philosophy," Polity vol.38 no.2 (2006): 237. ³⁸ Hobbes, 352-353 ³⁹ Neocleous, 121. ⁴⁰ Hobbes, 121, 133 ⁴¹ Neocleous, 155 42 Ibid., 156-157. 43 Ibid., 159. 44 Ibid., 160. 45 Ibid., 163 46 Ron, 246.