

Leviathan

THOMAS HOBBS GAVE US THIS JUDGMENT ABOUT PRE-CIVILIZED HUMANS, writing that their lives were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."⁷ You've probably heard this line before; it's become one of those things we all just "kind of know." But is it true? What did he base this on?

Hobbes penned these words in the 1600s in a book that deeply affected modern concepts of government. His ideas—universal equality and a state constituted by mutual consent—found their way into the foundations of the United States of America. America in turn was the trailblazer providing the model for the rest of the world, which, like it or not, emulates America under the loose banners of democracy and human rights. All this is to say thank you, Mr. Hobbes, even as I raise some criticisms of his most famous remarks.

The Hobbesian world needs to be governed and governed firmly. Hobbes believed that humans were incapable of pursuing their own best interests without the guiding hand of power. If I may quote the ever-concise *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "He is infamous for having used the social contract method to arrive at the astonishing conclusion that we ought to submit to the authority of an absolute—undivided and unlimited—sovereign power."⁸

The "social contract" is Hobbes' coinage, too. It means consenting to the resolute rule of sovereign power in exchange for its protection and equal opportunity to welfare. This is not quite the American dream, of course. As influential as it was on shaping modern democratic ideals, the Hobbesian state is more like the book (and film) *Starship Troopers*, in which the population gives itself to the order, safety, and care of an absolutely dominating paternal state.⁹

Hobbes had sharp insight into the nature of the corporate political entity—he envisioned it as a personality, a sentient being. His book is called *Leviathan*, a biblical reference to a giant sea monster that the Hebrew prophets employed as a metaphor for the dominating empires of Mesopotamia. It seems he had no illusions about the nature of supreme power even as he endorsed it as a necessity.

This is made abundantly clear by Hobbes' book design. The titular monster, Leviathan, appears on the 1651 edition's frontispiece, designed by the artist with detailed input from the author: Leviathan rises from the land as the torso and head of a king wearing a crown; he has a sword in his right hand and a scepter in his left. His body at first appears to be faceted armor,

but a closer look reveals the bodies of hundreds of people. The beast and its subjects live symbiotically for the common good.

This communal beast accurately reflects the nature of corporate power, which resembles universal consciousness, but is a simulacrum, a predatory constituent hierarchy. Such bodies have names, own property, inflict pain, and bestow blessing. They make friends and enemies. You can sue one by name in any court of law. If one ever comes after you, it will have its name across from yours in the lawsuit.

It can be a government, a state, a corporation, or any such named institution. If there was any doubt, the US Supreme Court has famously decided that since corporate beings are non-human people, they should have all the rights as other individuals.

Corporations of state and enterprise are not quite the same as us, however. In Hobbes' cover art, we see the gigantic Leviathan comprising his constituents, the body politic, all torsos and heads. They are like individual cells in the body, and like cells, they will live and die in its service. Not so, Leviathan. The corporate entity does not die easily, and typically lives for centuries, with some institutions enduring for millennia. They can grow to enormous size and power—options that are not available to mortal people.

With that in mind, Hobbes did us a service by starting to think about how to make the best of the human/state relationship. The corporate state should serve the interests of the people, he said, and that's certainly an improvement over unchecked despotism. On this he stimulated many great minds who would inspire the best aspects of the world order that we live under now. Assuming that corporate power is unavoidable, his objective was to tame the beast, to make sure it held up its end of the bargain.

For Hobbes, this was as good as it gets. His assumption was that before the rise of the sovereign state, all humans lived in a state of war—a state, as he put it, of "all against all." It was, he was certain, utter chaos. Sovereign power was inevitable because humans would be in a mess without it. This is the premise we need to examine. Is this "all against all" war and its solitary, impoverished, short, and nasty life truly inevitable in the absence of absolute authority?

My first doubt arises from the strong whiff of anxiety coming from Hobbes himself. He lived during the English Civil War, and by his own confession, he was terrified: "My mother gave birth to twins, myself and fear."¹⁰ Hobbes was a frightened man living in chaotic times.

Anxiety was Hobbes' sole justification. The reason for submission to

sovereign power was the same for everyone: "their underlying motivation is the same—namely fear—whether of one's fellows or of a conqueror."¹¹

The social contract was a renunciation of individual rights in exchange for the state's protection and peace of mind. "Political legitimacy depends not on how a government came to power, but only on whether it can effectively protect those who have consented to obey it." This means that sovereign power is justified no matter what, so long as it protects its obedient charges from what they fear. But the protected do have to obey.

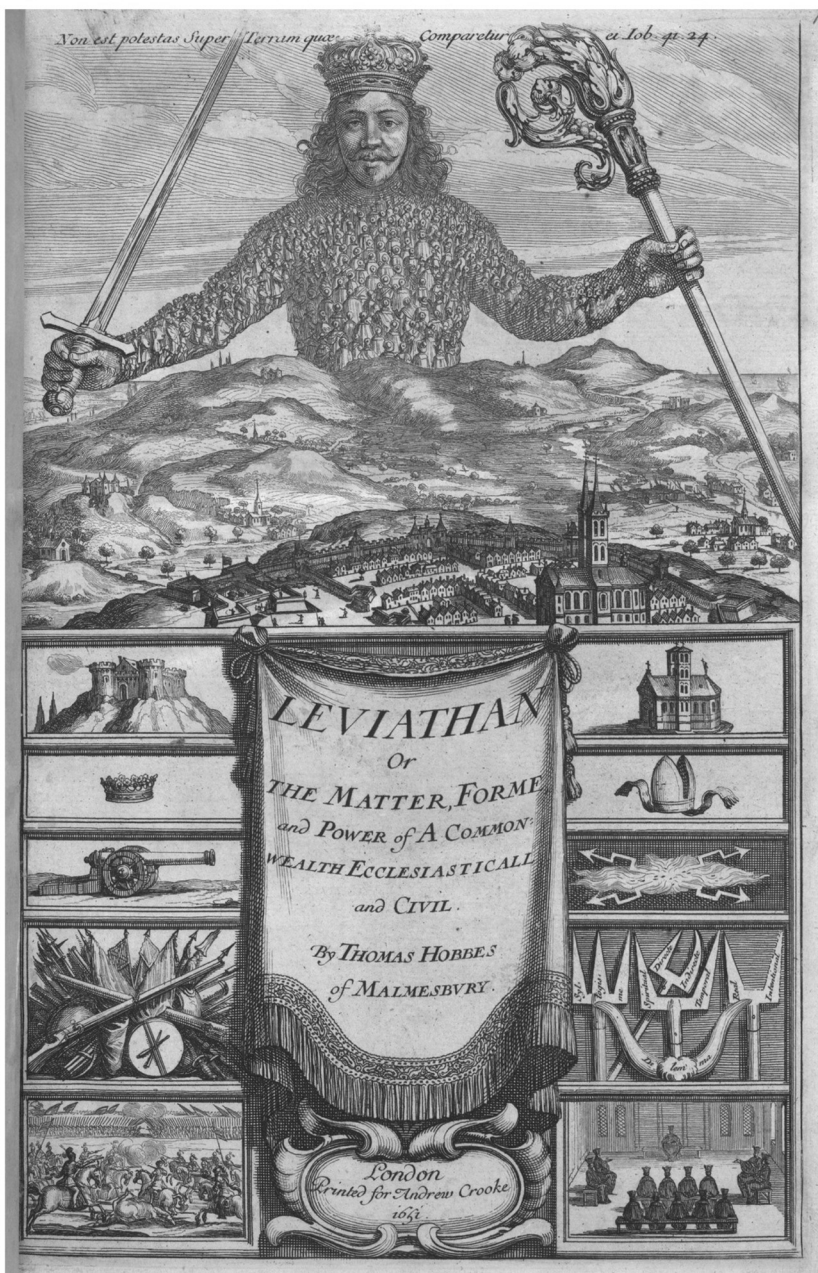
In the film *Starship Troopers*, it was the threat of an alien bug race that propped up the all-powerful state. The original 1959 novel is an interesting read; published against the backdrop of the Red Scare, it is as much a philosophical discussion as it is science fiction, conveying very well the fear of humanity under threat and the appealing consolation offered by a firm hierarchical order. If the absolute sovereign takes care of you and protects you in exchange for your submission, what's so bad about that? Simply doing as one is told effects a child-like freedom from anxiety.

Hobbes universalizes and normalizes this. For him, there is always something to fear. He argues that without submission to the civilizing effects of total sovereign power, humanity would live with "no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death."¹²

But what if his presupposition is wrong? What if pre-civilized people lived prosperous, healthy lives? What if they lived better than did most people in Hobbes' time and with demonstrably less "brutish" behavior? After all, it was he who lived in continual fear and danger of a violent death; a trivial crime in those days could mean having a limb chopped off, not to mention being boiled alive, pilloried, or burned with irons. His generation witnessed the peak of witch-hunting when a petty grudge could be converted by anyone into the worst of personal horrors. Was pre-civilized life really more brutish than that?

Poor

There is no ready resource to tell us whether pre-civilized life was more or less brutish than our own. The bulk of human existence is not historical, which simply means no one wrote it down and there is no verbal testimonial. The best we have are mythological accounts like Genesis or the Mesopotamian creation epics, which were transcribed from oral traditions thousands of years after the beginnings of agriculture. To understand



Original cover of *Leviathan*. The illustration captures Hobbes' view of humanity subsumed by the benign and necessary protectorate of the authoritative corporate being. I believe his premises are mistaken.