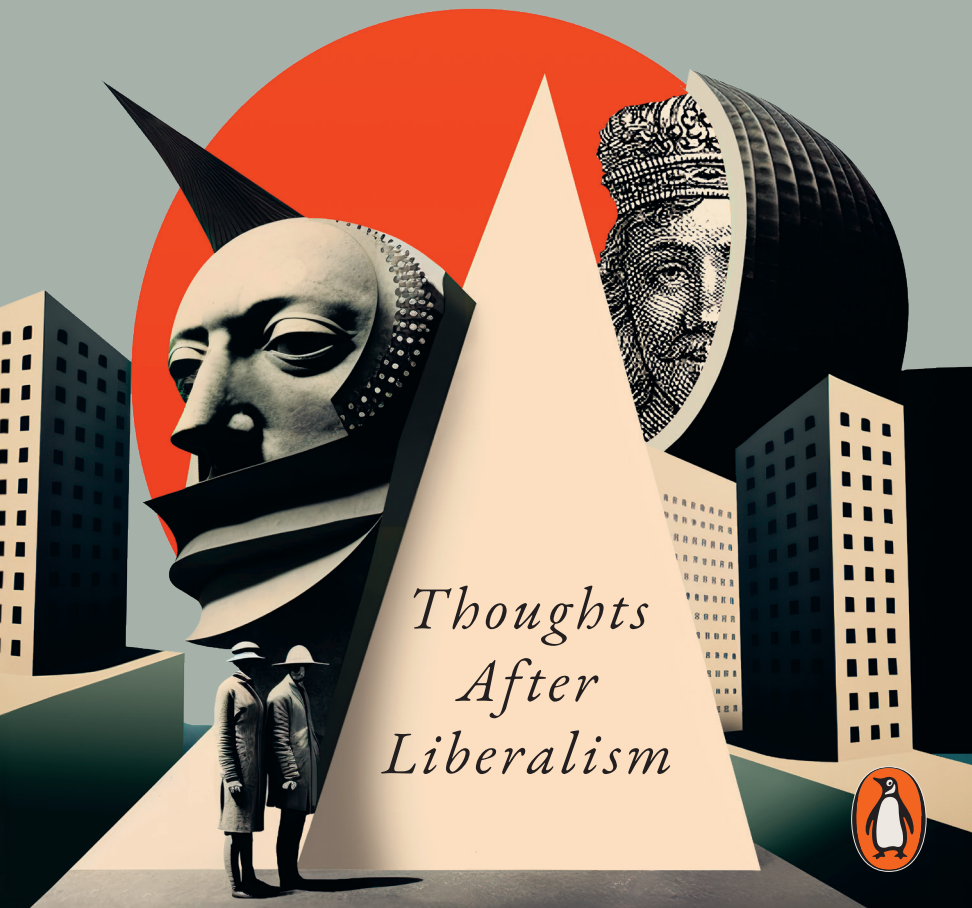
'A provocative delight' *NEW STATESMAN*

JOHN GRAY

THE NEW LEVIATHANS



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The New Leviathans

'His is a calm, exacting voice, which does not rise above its measured tone even when he is relating the most egregious excesses of the past or delivering the direst predictions for the future . . . Gray displays his accustomed mastery . . . a sobering reminder of what we lose when we abandon traditional liberalism in favour of new and exclusive certainties that are based on nothing certain' John Banville, *New York Review of Books*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Gray is a political philosopher, whose books include *Seven Types of Atheism*, *Straw Dogs*, *Black Mass*, *The Soul of the Marionette*, *The Silence of Animals* and *Feline Philosophy*. He now principally writes for the *New Statesman*.

The New Leviathans

Thoughts After Liberalism

JOHN GRAY

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. . . the privilege of absurdity; to which no living creature is subject, but man only. And of men, those are of all most subject to it, that profess philosophy.

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*[1]

Contents

1.

The return of Leviathan

> . . . 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 . . .
> . . . In such a condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the Earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; 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; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.
>
> *Leviathan*, Chapter 13

Twenty-first-century states are becoming Leviathans, spawn of the biblical sea-monster mentioned in the Book of Job, which the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes used to picture the sovereign power that alone could bring peace to unruly humankind. Only by submitting to unlimited government could they escape the state of nature, a war of all against all in which no one is safe from their fellows.

As he portrayed it in his masterpiece *Leviathan*, a state of nature was not in the distant past before the emergence of society but the breakdown of society into anarchy, which could happen at any time. It did not matter whether the sovereign was a king or a president, a parliament or a tyrant. Only a state whose power was unfettered could secure a condition of 'commodious living' in which industry, science and the arts could flourish in peace.

In the centuries that followed, it seemed Hobbes was mistaken. States emerged in which power was limited by law. Democracies developed in which governments could be held to account. In the twentieth century, the defeat of Nazism and communism seemed to show that liberal government was inherently more effective than dictatorship. After the end of the Cold War, many believed liberal democracy was becoming universal.

Today, states have cast off many of the restraints of the liberal era. From being an institution that claimed to extend freedom, the state is becoming one that protects human beings from danger. Instead of a safeguard against tyranny, it offers shelter from chaos.

New dictatorships have emerged in Russia and China, where communism and free markets have both been rejected. Where democracy continues to function, the state intervenes in society to an extent unknown since the Second World War.

These are not Leviathans Hobbes would recognize. The goals of Hobbes's Leviathan were strictly limited. Beyond securing its subjects against one another and external enemies, it had no remit. The purposes of the new Leviathans are more far-reaching. In a time when the future seems profoundly uncertain, they aim to secure meaning in life for their subjects.

Like the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the new Leviathans are engineers of souls.

The upshot has been the return of the state of nature in artificial forms. Even as they promise safety, the new Leviathans foster insecurity. By deploying food and energy supplies as weapons of war, Russia has projected famine and poverty across the globe. China has established a surveillance regime which through exports of technology threatens freedom in the West. Within Western societies, rival groups seek to capture the power of the state in a new war of all against all between self-defined collective identities. There is an unrelenting struggle for the control of thought and language. Enclaves of freedom persist, but a liberal civilization based on the practice of tolerance has passed into history.

In schools and universities, education inculcates conformity with the ruling progressive ideology. The arts are judged by whether they serve approved political goals. Dissidents from orthodoxies on race, gender and empire find their careers terminated and their public lives erased. This repression is not the work of governments. The ruling catechisms are formulated and enforced by civil society. Libraries, galleries and museums exclude viewpoints that are condemned as reactionary. Powers of censorship are exercised by big hi-tech corporations. Illiberal institutions are policing society and themselves.

A global pandemic, accelerating climate change and war in Europe have hastened these transformations. But they began as many historical reversals do, with the apparent triumph of an opposite trend. Greeted in the West as an augury that liberal values were spreading worldwide, the Soviet collapse was the beginning of the end for liberalism as it had previously been understood.

An epitaph for liberalism

> Good, and Evil, are names that signify our appetites, and aversions, which in different tempers, customs, and doctrines of men, are different; and divers men, differ not only in their judgment, on the senses of what is pleasant, and unpleasant to the taste, smell, hearing, touch and sight; but also what is conformable, or disagreeable to reason, in the actions of common life. Nay, the same man, in diverse times, differs from himself; and one time praiseth, that is, calleth good, what another time he dispraiseth, and calleth evil: from whence arise disputes, controversies, and at last war.
>
> *Leviathan*, Chapter 15

Hobbes was a liberal – the only one, perhaps, still worth reading. His best interpreters – the conservative Michael Oakeshott, the Marxist C. B. Macpherson and the classical scholar Leo Strauss[1] – all recognized him as a liberal thinker. Alone among liberals, he can help explain why the liberal experiment came to an end.

In 1986 liberalism could be defined in terms of four ideas:

> Common to all variants of the liberal tradition is a definite conception, distinctively modern in character, of man and society . . . It is *individualist*, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the individual against the claims of any social collectivity; *egalitarian*, inasmuch as it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; *universalist*, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according a secondary importance to specific historic associations and

> cultural forms; and *meliorist* in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements. It is this conception of man and society which gives liberalism a definite identity which transcends its vast internal variety and complexity.[2]

As presented in *Leviathan* (1651) and other works, such as *De Cive* (1642) and *Behemoth* (1681), Hobbes's political theory features all of these ideas. Society is made up of individuals, who can assert their claim to self-preservation against any demand by the state; if a ruler fails to protect them, they can be disobeyed or overthrown. Human beings are equal in being exposed to death at each other's hands: the strong can be killed by the weak, and no one has a divine right to rule. Human nature is universal in its needs; divergent cultural identities are superficial and insignificant. With the application of reason, government can be improved. Human beings can overcome their conflicts, and learn to live in peace.

Each of these ideas is a half-truth. Individuals may be the basis of society; but self-preservation is only one of their needs: bare life is not enough. Human beings may be equal in needing protection from each other, but they regularly give up peace and security in order to defend a form of life they believe to be superior to others. The most basic human goods may be universal, but they are often sacrificed in order to fight for values that are specific to particular ways of living. Society and government can be improved, but what is gained can always be lost.

Hobbes's political theory expressed the faith in reason of the early Enlightenment of which it was a part. His writings contain another strand in which he is not a rationalist philosopher but a theorist of absurdity. In his account of language, he

shows how human beings allow themselves to be possessed by words. This other Hobbes can help us understand why liberal civilization has passed away.

A poor worm

> He that is to govern a whole Nation, must read in himself, not this, or that particular man; but mankind . . .
>
> *Leviathan*, Introduction

Hobbes has been condemned and execrated for his unsparing view of human beings. *Leviathan* was attacked as a defence of atheism and egoism, with over a hundred books being published against it in England by the end of the century in which it was published. Copies were publicly burnt by Oxford University, and Hobbes destroyed his papers to protect himself against accusations of heresy. Many of these attacks came from churchmen, for whom he was (as he said) 'a perpetual object of hatred'.

He was avoided, and at times betrayed, by fellow men of letters. The head of Oxford's Bodleian Library, who had written thanking him for the gift of a book, penned an essay arguing that Hobbes could lawfully be executed for blasphemy. A translator who had worked on rendering *Leviathan* into Latin denied he had read any of Hobbes's books and removed them from his shelves.

According to his friend John Aubrey, Hobbes

> . . . had very few books. I never saw above half a dozen about him in his chamber . . . He had read much, if one considers his long life; but his contemplation was much more than his

> reading. He was wont to say that if he had read as much as other men, he should have known no more than other men.[3]

Intrepid in his thinking, Hobbes was timid in life. He loved routine. Aubrey described his daily habits:

> He rose about seven, had his breakfast of bread and butter; and took his walk, meditating till ten; then he did put down the minutes of his thoughts. He was never idle; his thoughts were always working . . . His dinner was provided for him exactly by eleven . . . After dinner he took a pipe of tobacco, and then threw himself immediately on his bed . . . and took a nap of about half an hour. In the afternoon he penned his morning thoughts.[4]

Aubrey comments:

> . . . it is very prodigious that neither the timorousness of his nature from his infancy, nor the decay of his vital heat in the extremity of old age, accompanied with the palsy to that violence, should not have chilled the brisk fervour and vigour of his mind which did wonderfully continue to him to his last.[5]

Hobbes was born in Westport near Malmesbury in the English county of Wiltshire on 5 April 1588, during the panic that gripped the country with news of the approaching Spanish Armada. In an autobiographical poem he described himself a as a 'poor worm', and wrote: 'My mother dear did bring forth twins at once, both me and fear.' Hobbes's father was a penurious alcoholic clergyman, who abandoned his family when Hobbes was sixteen, and died (as Aubrey writes) 'somewhere beyond London'.

Hobbes took care not to be poor, but found himself hard up at several points in his life. By choice, he did not enter a profession. Serving the Church or any institution that claimed authority over his mind was intolerable to him.

After studying at Magdalen Hall in Oxford, where he 'did not care much for logic yet he learned it, and thought himself a good disputant', he entered into the service of William Lord Cavendish, the Earl of Devonshire. Throughout much of his life he was dependent on the patronage of the Cavendish family and other aristocratic households where he lived and worked. His tasks might include private tutoring, writing letters, joining in hunting, buying horses, entertaining guests and acting as a companion. He was, in effect, a servant, but his position left him much freedom. It enabled him to explore Europe as the travelling tutor of the sons of his patrons. During his travels, he met the astronomer Galileo and many leading figures in science, literature and politics.

Hobbes's timorous twin may explain his exceptional longevity. Alarmed by what he perceived as a threat to his life in the turbulent English politics of the time, he left for Paris in 1640 – 'the first of all that fled', as he wrote with some pride – and lived in exile until 1652, a year after his most famous (and infamous) book, *Leviathan*, was published in London. Between 1646 and 1648 he was tutor in mathematics to Charles, Prince of Wales, later Charles II, when he and the future king were living in exile. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, he was awarded a royal pension (which the king sometimes forgot to pay) and 'free access to His Majesty, who was always delighted in his wit and smart repartees'.

Hobbes left London in 1675 and spent his remaining years with the Cavendish family on their estates. When his final illness began in October 1679 he remarked, 'I shall be glad then to

find a hole to creep out of the world at.' His last words were, 'Now am I about to take my last voyage – a great leap in the dark.' He died on 4 December 1679 at the age of ninety-one.

Hobbes spent much of his life in danger. His vulnerability came partly from his supreme confidence in his own mental powers. Hobbes's prose has a lapidary finality that reflects his decisive turn of mind. An accomplished linguist, fluent in Latin, Greek, French and Italian, he was the first to write a major book of philosophy in English. His earliest published work was an English translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Towards the end of his life he published a translation of Homer's *Odyssey* into English verse.

Though he was soaked in the classics, Hobbes had little respect for classical philosophy. He scorned Plato, Aristotle and their medieval disciples. All of them, he believed, treated words as if they were things. Imagining that abstractions conjured up by language were independently existing realities, they led the human mind into millennia of feeble self-deception.

In classical philosophy it was assumed there was a supreme good, which it was the purpose of human life to attain. Hobbes dismissed any such notion. As he wrote in Chapter 11 of *Leviathan*:

> . . . the felicity of this life, consisteth not of the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no *finis ultimis* (utmost aim) nor *summum bonum* (greatest good,) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose desires are at an end, than he, whose senses and imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is, that the object of man's desire, is not to enjoy once only, and for

> one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire . . .
>
> So that, in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.

Not love of power but fear was the primordial human passion. Values originated not in God or some spiritual realm but in the human animal. Hobbes's materialism is one reason he was denounced as an atheist. God was also material, Hobbes replied – a kind of everlasting matter. In that case, though Hobbes never admitted it, the Creator of the world pictured in the Bible was no more than a legend.

If Hobbes was an atheist, his atheism had little in common with later varieties. Believing there is no God, modern atheists attribute to humans the power to make the world according to their will that had once been assigned to the Deity. Instead, Hobbes asserted that human beings no more possess freedom of will than any other animal:

> In *deliberation*, the last appetite, or aversion, immediately adhering to the action, or to the omission thereof, is that we call the will; the act, (not the faculty,) of *willing*. And beasts that have *deliberation*, must necessarily also have will . . . *Will* therefore *is the last appetite in deliberating*. (*Leviathan*, Chapter 6.)

For Hobbes, humans are like machines in that their behaviour is governed by laws of matter. But they are dreaming machines,