



<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Thomas Hobbes in the Time of Coronavirus

M. John Lamola, University of Pretoria, jlamola@mweb.co.za

Lamola, M. John. 2020. "Thomas Hobbes in the Time of Coronavirus." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (4): 72-75. <https://wp.me/P1Bfg0-4Wa>.

The pattern of the response of governments all over the world to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has unleashed the institution of the State as the citizens' accepted and trusted protector and saviour of their lives. The imputation of this role is accompanied by an implicit arrogation to the State of a right to deploy all of the political-administrative-legislative, technological and even police-military powers at its disposal in the name of the welfare of society.

In a deviance from the prevailing neo-liberal ideology of the minimalist State that modern societies have been schooled to tolerate, we have unwittingly acquiesced into an experience of the State as conceptualised by the political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). The Leviathan is arraigned against this most credible threat in living memory to life as known by the human species.¹

It is remarkable how since the outbreak and global spread of COVID-19, the medical scientific community, journalists and civil society in general, have happily bestowed the duty to lead, design, control, micromanage and communicate all responses to this pandemic to the institutions of the State, and symbols of State power.

The prerogative to even define the treatment for this coronavirus now appear to rest, in the first and ultimate instance, with the State. This new normalcy was ominously exhibited by President Trump's pontifical prescription of Hydroxychloroquine as a possible therapy against the effects of COVID-19, right in the face of his head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the eminent immunologist, Professor Anthony Fauci, who at the time voiced a contradictory scholarly scepticism at the efficacy of this remedy. The State and its mechanisations have usurped the paramouncy of Science.

Statistics on the rates of the spread and devastation wrought by this virus can only be pronounced as official government statements. Daily, we await official tallies on infections as well as latest health instructions and commands with fear-filled glee from politicians who in the ordinary course of our civil lives we never really trust.

We are in the age of Hobbes—under the spell of a messianic, monarchic and omniscient State.

Hobbesian Times

Ominously poignant of this *zeitgeist* of Hobbes, a seventeenth century iconic English anti-revolutionary royalist, was the rare emergence of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom on international television on 5th April 2020 to assuage not only her British

¹ Leviathan—an allegorised sea monster variously referred to in the Old Testament of the Bible as a sublime creature with foreboding powers, used by Hobbes in his problematique of his description of the archeology of sovereign power. Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan* in Vincent P. Pecora, editor, *Nations and Identities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 42-49. [Original, Hobbes, Thomas. 1651, *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, Andrew Crooke, London.]

subjects but, as Her Majesty mentioned in her Sovereign address, also ‘the Commonwealth’, on the dangers and implications of this coronavirus crisis.²

Indicative of the times, is also the currency of Hobbesian parlance in public discourse. Arising from the undisputed Wuhan genealogical roots of this virus, we have come to not only contend with the sobering plausibility of an animal-to-human transmission of a biological agent even in the twenty-first century, but have been reminded of the vulnerability of the much-vaunted species (speciesism) human life, that it is ‘nasty, brutish and short’ in Hobbes words.³ ‘Nasty’ is the expression we very often hear used to characterise the experience of this SARS-COV-2 by those infected by it, and by the media.⁴ This virus has a character similar to the socio-existential nature of human life as monumentally defined by Hobbes.

Hobbes’ observations of his sea-fearing English countrymen had led him to a well-defended theory of how humans, ‘in their state of nature’, are primordially fear-filled power-seekers, selfish and self-centred, and therefore are predisposed to enter into some mutual consent of the need of the Sovereign to regulate their behaviour for the sake of their happiness and self-restraint against injuring one another. Seminally, he didactically declared: ‘This is more than consent . . . the multitude so united in one person, is called the commonwealth’. And the central authority to which all submit their wills and judgments ‘to the end that he may use their strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defence. . . is called SOVEREIGN, and said to have *sovereign power*, and everyone besides his, SUBJECT.’⁵

Accordingly, the Hobbesian post-coronavirus State we are witnessing has emerged as the vicarious and omnipotent protector of citizens against their own self-destructive proclivity of not caring for their individual health, and against a propensity to wantonly endanger that of their fellow citizens.

Through lockdowns and similar measures, we are policed to think not only of our individual survival, but also of the consequences of our behaviour on the health of others. In South Africa, the emergency regulations went as far as to prohibit the sale of tobacco products for five weeks.⁶ Individual freedoms and agency, including rights to privacy, are surrendered as the State is being re-embraced as the legitimate saviour of both lives and livelihoods; the supreme guarantor of the health of nations and the persistence of the financial and economic system that will ensure the preservation of our jobs and pensions. True to Hobbes’ thesis, this surrendered personal agency in a covenant with others to defer power to the dictates of the Sovereign cannot be sustained by a culture of individual voluntarism, the

² <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-52177000>.

³ Hobbes, in Pecora, *Nations and Identities*, 45.

⁴ <https://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/fm-fox/trending/2020-02-27-coronavirus-a-nasty-virus-for-sure-but-most-survive-it/>; <https://qz.com/68715/hong-kong-scarred-by-sars-plays-it-safe-with-a-nasty-new-coronavirus/>.

⁵ Hobbes, in Pecora, *Nations and Identities*, 48, emphasis in original.

⁶ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-09-covid-19-smoking-ban-the-good-the-bad-and-the-very-ugly/>.

Sovereign, the State has to possess an element of terror as ‘covenants without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all.’⁷

As demands for the shutting down of businesses is enforced by decrees from traditionally neo-liberal States, even hallowed profits are suddenly rendered expendable holy cows at the altar of the Leviathan.

As can be expected, green shoots of a backlash against this new positionality of the State, here generically conceived, are emerging, especially, or rather naturally in the United States. In a recent wave of protest against the stay-at-home decrees of a number of States, emblematically, according to an CNN news report, one Republican candidate for the State of Utah’s 2nd congressional district declared in a protest news statement ‘the government, at all levels, has overstepped its authority in their request to “protect” Americans from the virus . . . The American citizen is perfectly capable of deciding how to best protect themselves’.⁸ A growing global consciousness along this vein is easily predictable.

State-Sponsored Solidarity

Thanks to COVID-19, even individualistic consciences of Westerners in so-named advanced societies, who have been politicised (think “austerity”) and cultured to not give much thought about the elderly in their midst, are now being mobilised by the State to protect themselves against infection in the name of protecting the vulnerable elderly among them. In its self-assertive and newfound licence for authoritarian behaviour, the post-coronavirus State is paradoxically, or rather deceptively, successfully posing as the bulwark against human self-interest.

In South Africa, the government is urging the well-to-do to contribute to a Coronavirus Solidarity Response Fund which is targeted specifically at mitigating the consequences of decades of racism, corruption and neglect at providing requisite basic infrastructure such as clean running water, that is now needed for the anti-coronavirus prescribed protocol of washing of hands.⁹ At last, the rich and related corporate interests are successfully sensitised by the State to the fact that the living conditions of the poor are a threat to their own survival.

The global one-percent and the upper middle classes who had hitherto opted for private healthcare and medical insurance have at some point of the evolution of democratic capitalistic society withdrawn the responsibility for their health away from the State to their own personal agency and means.¹⁰ In the pandemic being declared, variously, a national disaster and national emergency in some countries, COVID-19 has thrust the health self-managements of these middle classes of the world back under the command and control of

⁷ Hobbes, in Pecora, *Nations and Identities*, 46.

⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/16/us/protests-coronavirus-stay-home-orders/index.html>.

⁹ <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/how-to-donate-to-south-africas-covid-19-solidarity-fund-banking-details-2020-3>.

¹⁰ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-04/a-global-guide-to-what-it-means-to-be-part-of-the-1>.

the public health Czars. As if this was not enough, in almost the majority of countries, as the pandemic worsens, their exclusive private hospitals and other health facilities are being ‘nationalised’ by stealth in the course of the collective salvation of the commonwealth. At the beckon of the State, in the wake of COVID-19, exclusive privileges are suddenly contingent.

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 has shown how the fate of the privileged and powerful is symbiotically tied to those of the masses of the damned of the earth—not only the abjectly poor, but also the hardened convicts in the crowded prisons of the world. We all, are ‘the commonwealth’. The indiscriminate and dramatic spread of COVID-19 has proven that we are all of one kind, humankind. We are all equally vulnerable, kings and commoners, and seemingly, only the omnipotent and ostensibly caring State, or some global authority, can protect us from ourselves and from each other.

Assuming, the Leviathan will conqueror against the possible revolts against its reach, will a post-coronavirus world be characterised by a new moral consciousness of interdependence and human solidarity that is fostered by the State? What will be the exact quality of this state-sponsored humanism? Can the State, a creature subject to the naturalistic devices and proclivities of the politicians fashioning it, sustain this role of a ‘caring and protecting State’ without corrupting it for its own ends?

What more will we be duped to inculcate into our psyche by the ongoing stream of anti-coronavirus socio-legal injunctions and bondages to technology to save our lives and those of our fellow human beings? Which individual rights and liberties are we being hypnotised into sacrificing without even whingeing at the altar of the Leviathan?