

# New Leviathan: The Limits of Reason

Brij Mohan

*Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan propounded a thesis which reverberates in the hideous houses of power, pillage, and politics. The New Leviathan is an evolutionary outcome of post-modern technological control, manipulation, capitalist populism, and consumerist globalization. This article is a search for a few answers which explain how civility, humanity, and survival are bedeviled by the forces of counter-development.*

**Keywords:** *new leviathan, human commodification, systemic inequality, transcendental, capitalism*

The ideal organization of Indian society was put forward in the *Purusa Sukta* ("Hymn to the Cosmic Person"), a hymn in the *RigVeda*. ... Thus, the gods ordered the world. The concept of order as natural: the social classes are as much a part of the structure of the cosmos as natural phenomena and celestial bodies. The division of society was therefore a powerful concept from very early times. (Ram-Prasad, 2006, p. 120)

Another Ram Pershad Sharma—my father, a legendary physician, a quintessential Hindu philosopher, and an honest philanthrope—taught me about this mythical, heavenly designed hierarchized order which I began to question as I grew up as a nonbeliever. This was the rise of a critical mind that unwittingly came close to the Kantian *Critique of Reason*. Earlier I had accepted Marxian thought as the Holy Grail of knowledge and historical society. Perhaps Kantian moral law prevailed over Marxist rationality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Logica of Social Welfare* (Mohan, 1988) was conceived in an aesthetico-axiological vein without any consciousness of Kant's emphasis on morality.

I turn back to grasp the teleological import of societal structure which, despite many revolutions, continues to perpetuate the myths of power, freedom, democracy, and meritocracy. The evolutionary trajectory of this inquiry is underscored by the rise and fall of communism, socialism, and capitalism. Hubris and human fallibility are confounded by pernicious authoritarian impulses that delude people in power.

The character of the *New Leviathan* is embedded in the nature of a post-ideological nation-state. “[T]he leading cause of the death of American kids: gun violence.”<sup>2</sup> China is an unabashed communist nation with one-party authoritarian rule. It also is the manufacturing bazaar for any nation that wants cheaper products at the expense of workers’ well-being. Qatar recently caught the world’s attention when its sports stadium, built by exploited immigrant workers from South Asia, came to symbolize the state’s predatory character. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is an ugly display of the Old Leviathan’s murderous lust for occupation and control. Palestine is plagued by a new apartheid inflicted by a country founded on the Judo-Christian ethos, values, and necessity. India’s lower castes and other minorities are bedeviled by a bourgeois democracy sustained by obnoxious religious righteousness. Pakistan, a byproduct of the colonial “two nations” theory is governed by a theocratic army motivated by anti-Indian madness exploited by the Chinese rulers. The Taliban of Afghanistan and Mullahs of Iran torture women with impunity unmindful of any respect for human rights. Putin’s popularity in Africa is a manifestation of American hypocrisies and shortsightedness. Ukraine has been given a near blank check against the Russians to consolidate NATO at the expense of world peace. This “war” has emboldened many countries to raise defense spending to innovate faster and deadlier weapons (See Hashim, 2022, p. 136).<sup>3</sup> The New Leviathan is a beast clothed in patterns of different colors.

Anti-Semitic, Anti-Asian, Anti-Black, and Anti-Muslim phobias dominate Fox News’ daily diatribes and charades. The “libidinal” culture is more than a mirror: It’s a defining cultural chimera. Look at this:

“The White Lotus” Eli Zaretsky

By foregrounding the sexual relations and fantasies among and between the hotel staff and the guests, *The White Lotus* analyzes capitalism not only as a system of race and class hierarchies but also as a libidinal economy. There is a further twist to this. Hotels, like the entire luxury sector, work by anticipating and calibrating what customers desire. TV viewers are also

<sup>2</sup>“Since 2020, gun violence has surpassed car accidents as the leading cause of death of American children.” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 18, 2022: 14–15.

<sup>3</sup>See *The Economist*, *The World Ahead 2023*, November 11, 2022: 136.

“guests”—consumers of Brij Mohan 61 a quasi-luxury product (HBO). A show like *The White Lotus* is not only a lens; it is also a mirror.<sup>4</sup>

I have seldom found a cultural icon devoid of its own trappings. One of my grand-teachers, Radha Kamal Mukerjee—aka, “the Father of Indian Sociology,” used *transcendental* 100 times in a 45-minute talk. I didn’t understand then what it meant. Kant’s philosophy is “transcendental” which “seeks to cast light on the subconscious structure that precedes and shapes experience” (Karatani, 2005, p. 1). In other words, social reality and human unconsciousness are related phenomena. *The White Lotus* metaphor in this context refers to an unexamined life corrupted by wealth, lust, and greed, the hallmarks of consumerist capitalism.

What is most important in Kantian thought is the emphasis on means-end duality. Kant believed in humanity when people are not made means to an end. Marx and Engels recognized the nature of “global capitalism.” The following words demonstrate how Marx foresaw global capitalism and its impact on humanity:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind ... The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. (Quoted by Renton, 2001, p. 10)

The highest virtue of any study is the study of “man.” Kantian Marx’s “categorical imperative” signifies this vital postulate:

Criticism of religion ends with the teaching that *man is the highest being for man*, hence with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being. (1844, 1976, p. 175; emphasis original; Karatani, 2005: xi–xii)

In *Murder State* (2012), Brendan C. Lindsay rivetingly unravels how the United States weaponized democracy to commit genocide, a 19th-century holocaust, to expropriate land mass murdering their owners, the Native Indians, to advance California’s occupation and interests of the Euro-American settlers. Descendants of the holocaust in dubious clothes too often raise their ugly heads.

Most holocaust historians tend to obscure this tragedy for various unethical reasons. Kant pointed out the limits of reason in his *Critique of Reason*. Rationality

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2022/december/the-white-lotus> (December 22, 2022).

did not always enhance the cause of the poor and the powerless. It produced dictators and tyrants to legitimize their mendacious rule amidst the twilight of false utopias. This pretentious stride of success continues to paralyze progress at the expense of the oppressed.

*Financialized Capitalism*, Nancy Fraser contends in her new book, is an outcome of institutionalized oppression, exploitation, and domination embedded in the nature of *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022). The subtitle raises a poignant question: *How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do About It?* Social Development, it may be argued, ought to address issues that arise from this complex but general structural cannibalism.

A counter-oppression movement, though in order, calls for a reflective action plan. It seems to me that *the nation-state-me* trinity of the 21st Century is on the march. In *Prism of the People*, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa (2021) discuss “power and organizing in twenty-first-century-America.”

*Prism* is a great metaphor. Reality and metaphors don’t usually go a long way. If they do—sometimes they do—Donald Trump must be declared the vilest traitor in the history of American democracy. But 72 million Americans, Trumpian followers, will have me sent to jail for this blasphemous statement. My point is: Democracy, worldwide, is in the throes of turmoil. We need people and promises of a better future. *Prisms* that project contours of perception don’t adequately represent reality. The facets of January 6, 2022, insurrection demonstrate villainous insurrection, chaos, and violence rather than a call for democratic revolt or revolution. The perpetrators still hold sway. The state-nation-culture- and-community- in-crisis persists at the expense of public welfare, civility, and developmental progress.<sup>5</sup>

When Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 566–486 BCE) first encountered the faces of human misery beyond his palace, “he was shocked by *Four Sights* that opened his eyes to the suffering of the world: an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a begging monk” (Ram-Prasad, 2006, p. 64). The indignities of aging, sickness, death, and poverty still bedevil humanity. Science, technology, capitalism, and socialism have made strides, but the magnitude and depth of unmitigated misfortunes have not dwindled. It’s doubtful if it will ever diminish.

The limits of reason have emboldened the *New Leviathan*. Karatani has a point: “The trinity of Capital-Nation-State consists of three mutually complementary forms of exchange. Corporativism, the welfare state, and social democracy, for example, are all end forms of the trinity and do nothing to abolish it. The

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<sup>5</sup>As I conclude this essay on January 6, 2023, 365 days after the seditious insurrection commanded by the 45th President of the United States, two takeaways are clear: First, the reactionary rioters’ numbers and intensity have increased despite the Department of Justice’s best efforts. Second, Republicans’ mendacity and malice against the democratic processes have virtually paralyzed governance as an over-zealous candidate for the Speaker’s position failed to succeed after 13th round of votes. P.S: January 7, 2023: The 118th Congress did elect their 53rd Speaker after he had lost 15th round of votes.

globalization of capitalism won't decompose either" (2005, p. 344). This trinity, as expounded, is in a state of crisis itself. This fact is we as a civilization have entered a new phase in historico-critical development. What I call the breakdown of *social Contract*, is in fact the meltdown of this dubious "trinity," the mother of *New Leviathan*. Both freedom and unfreedom seem products of capitalist consumerism.

Kant changed the classic *theoria* which initiated the process of scientific method leading to modern science. His evolution had a moral dimension which is at the roots of humanism since it replaced *cosmos* by "man" as the center of the universe. Rousseau's sense of "perfectibility" distinguished humans from animals implying what Jean Paul Sartre's existential dictum—"existence precedes essence"—epitomized in the 20th century.

What G.W.F. Hegel called *Geist* (meaning, mind, soul, spirit—or "national spirit"—and mentality) in his Philosophy of History, the "rational" and "social animal," that is, *man*, becomes the substance of history: "Spirit is to be observed in the theatre of world history, where it has its most concrete reality" (Hegel, in Rauch, 1988, p. 19). *New Leviathan* embodies the negation of this Spirit.

In sum, the new conception of the "human"—the free and transformative "animal"—no longer exists in the prevailing cultural climate which devalues Rousseauian "perfectibility" and breeds "cannibal capitalism." *New Leviathan* is a product of this nihilism which negates Kantian "categorical imperatives." *Genealogist* Nietzsche turned Western philosophy upside down.

Kant's success is merely a theologian's success. ... One word more against Kant as a *moralist*. A virtue *must* be our own invention, our most personal defence and need: in every other sense it is merely a danger. That which does not constitute a condition of our life, is merely harmful to it: to possess virtue merely because one happens to respect "virtue," as Kant would have us do, is pernicious. (Nietzsche, 1895 [2006], pp. 9–10)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The author is deeply indebted to Aneel Sharma for the inspiration to write this "critique."

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