

Leviathan in Lockdown

[Thomas Poole](#) The London Review of Books | MAY 2020

The famous frontispiece to the first edition of *Leviathan* (1651) was designed by the engraver Abraham Bosse in close collaboration with Hobbes. The figure of Sovereignty, the massive composite body that looms over town and country, outsize sword and crozier in hand, is disquieting, at least to a modern sensibility. The subjects, all orders of men crammed together in the artificial body as if it were an early modern Wicker Man, gaze up at the crowned head. Sovereignty's face, ringed with Stuart curls, is meant to radiate benignity, but the glass-eyed stare looks vacuous to me.

In the city below, things seem in good order. But what kind of order? The place is hardly bustling. It's the antithesis of a painting by Bruegel. Rather than a riotous superabundance of lived life spilling out over the canvas, there is sterile order. No teeming crowds, no variety, no interaction: in fact, no apparent vitality. Nobody is out in the city's attractive squares and avenues. (The countryside beyond the city walls is similarly depopulated.) Half a dozen figures animate one side of the city, but they are soldiers, pikemen, some patrolling the bastions, others on the parade ground.

And, right in the middle of the frontispiece, there are two figures wandering the empty city. Their clothes identify them as plague doctors, with their characteristic beaked masks, containing herbs or sponges soaked in vinegar to filter the air. I have studied the frontispiece many times, read about it and discussed it with students, but had never noticed these figures until I was alerted a few weeks ago to Francesca Falk's book *Eine gestische Geschichte der Grenze* ('A Gestural History of the Border'), which includes a [substantial discussion](#) of the plague doctors in Bosse's engraving.

The scene is bright and sunny – conditions on land are offset by the threatening storm clouds out to sea, beyond the state's territorial waters – and it is near the middle of the day, to judge by the shadows cast by the buildings and trees. A deserted city, barring a handful of military and medical officials, when it should be anything but. Is it far-fetched to imagine that [the city is in lockdown](#)?

Hobbes was no stranger to plague. Early modern England experienced waves of epidemics every ten years or so, some resulting in urban mortality rates as high as 20 per cent. Hobbes's extra year as a student – it took him longer to graduate than it should have – may have been due to the cancelling of 'Determinations' (oral exams) because of plague, which ravaged Oxford in both 1606 and 1607.

He produced the first English translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* in the late 1620s. ('There's none that pleas'd me like Thucydides,' he wrote in his verse autobiography.) Beginning in the second year of the war (430 BC), plague devastated Athens, taking the lives of perhaps 100,000 citizens, including Pericles. On Thucydides' account, people reacted to the awareness of impending death with utter dejection, and the city descended into chaos. As Hobbes's translation has it:

Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparatur ei Job. 41. 24.



LEVIATHAN

Or
THE MATTER, FORME
and POWER of A COMMON
WEALTH ECCLESIASTICALL
and CIVIL.

By THOMAS HOBBS
of MALMESBURY.

London
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1651.



Neither the fear of the gods, nor laws of men, awed any man: not the former, because they concluded it was alike to worship or not worship, from seeing that alike they all perished: nor the latter, because no man expected that lives would last till he received punishment of his crimes by judgment.

Thucydides' plague narrative suggests that if you replace fear of secular authority with blind panic about personal survival, the legal and conventional bases of social order dissolve. Without a realistic expectation that I have a future, how can I be expected to plan my actions on the basis of laws and conventions?

The propositions that emerge from Thucydides' account of the plague also animate *Leviathan*. But rather than a narrative of historical events moving from order to chaos, Hobbes offers a systematic thought experiment that takes the opposite trajectory, from natural barbarism to civilisation within the state. Fear plays a structuring role throughout, both in driving mankind out of the natural condition, and in maintaining the civil condition once established. If, from one angle, *Leviathan* is a machine geared to produce law, from another it is a creature fearsome enough to incline us to obey. Whatever else government does, the trick it absolutely has to pull off, according to Hobbes, is to make us afraid of breaking the rules while ensuring that we have no real cause to panic about our survival. [Bernard Williams](#) described this need to secure order, protection, safety and trust as the 'first political question': unless it can be solved, conditions of co-operation do not exist and government cannot deliver any of the other things we might want from it.

Hobbes is often thought to have been primarily concerned with political threats to the state, such as war and rebellion. But the plague doctors' presence in the frontispiece indicates that he was working from a broader conception of public safety. He knew from Thucydides that attacks on the city walls could take different forms, biological and psychological as well as martial. The inclusion of the plague doctors suggests that Hobbes saw protection against epidemics as one of the state's chief duties, using both medical and regulatory measures. The first nationwide rules for dealing with plague in England date from 1579 (a few years before Hobbes was born), when the Privy Council ordered the sick, and their families, to be placed under house arrest for six weeks. Medical and civil science evolved considerably during Hobbes's lifetime. In 1666, after the Great Plague, pest houses were introduced for the sick to be looked after in isolation from the wider community, with the cost met by nationwide taxation.

To assume that the frontispiece to *Leviathan* presents a normal or idealised scene is not especially comforting. The total absence of citizens combined with the presence of protective officials gives the city an air of being under a permanent state of siege. It could almost be a depiction of David Hume's remark, a century later, that military camps 'are the true mothers of cities.' Attentive to the disruptive power of such shocks as war, revolution and plague, Hobbes undervalues the more insidious but still threatening proposition of a locked-down population forced to adopt a siege mentality. Fear and disillusionment do their work here, too. We may underestimate, perhaps half on purpose, the camp-like quality of our cities even in 'normal' times, and accept that it is sometimes necessary for cities temporarily to become camps. But bare life is not enough. We don't just want to be preserved, we want also to live.