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Would Life in the State of Nature Be a State of War?

Introduction

Whether existence in the condition of nature would be a warlike condition is not only an empirical or historical question. It is rather a metaphysical consideration of the human condition stripped of political order, common meaning, and binding norms. Hobbes's celebrated aphorism that existence *in extremis* would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651, p. 89), is not only an anthropological guess, but rather an explanation of what occurs once recognition, trust, and mutual understanding break down.

This essay argues that war for Hobbes is not a metaphor for violence, nor is it some literal descent into anarchy, but instead it is a structural condition of opacity, fragility, and epistemic insecurity. It is not simply security that collapses with the fall of government but legibility: the ability to be looked at, understood, and believed. When meaning dissolves, fear is rational, and peaceful intentions become illegible.
War is thus not the presence of violence but the absence of common recognition.

Rather than defending or attacking Hobbes, the essay re-interprets his insight: by juxtaposing Rousseau and Locke with post-Hobbesian thinkers such as Foucault and Butler, it asks whether trust can be structurally upheld without sovereignty, and whether peace is possible without the grammar of political legitimacy. Ultimately, it contends that Hobbes is nevertheless ultimately correct, but not as usually understood: the bloody stage is not the state of nature, but rather the semiotic abyss, and the actual foundation of peace is not power, but visibility.

I. State of Nature Metaphysics: Beyond Historicism

A. Hobbes and the Architecture of Existential Insecurity

Hobbes's condition of nature is not a historical argument, but rather a metaphysical construct: a theoretical sealed vacuum in which the human condition is subjected to the stress of sheer normlessness. It is not aggression that characterizes the space, but rather the constant possibility of it, not activity,

but waiting. As Hobbes explains, war exists not in active battle but in the disposition thereto (Hobbes, 1651, pp. 88–89). Under such a pre-political condition, goodwill is unreadable, promises vain, and silence deadly.

Here, the Hobbesian subject is not brutish by nature, but structurally insecure, vulnerable to unpredictability, and thus rationally defensive. This anticipatory stance echoes Sartre's gaze as objectification (Sartre, 1943) and Levinas's account of the ethical demand of the Other (Levinas, 1961). Hobbes is not describing a history, but a metaphysical condition: a collapse of mutual intelligibility, where fear becomes the last common language.

B. The Anthropological Turn: Rousseau and the Fragility of Peace

Rousseau counters with the alternative image: the unselfish and peaceful human being until he or she is corrupted by society (Rousseau, 1755). Anthropological research like Boehm (1999) and Graeber & Wengrow (2021) often shares the same view, depicting pre-state societies as egalitarian and peaceful.

But Hobbes's fear was not violence itself, but structural vulnerability. In a world of non-enforceable norms, peaceful actors have no protection against catastrophic breakdown. Temporary silence is not peace unless trust is established. The "noble savage" is benevolent, but radically unprotected.

Rousseau, therefore, points towards anarchist possibilities, but it is Kropotkin (1902) and Graeber (2011) who more overtly describe decentralised, non-state peace. Although not explored here in detail, they reappear subsequently in order to subject the possibility of non-sovereign cooperation to the test.

II. Political Theology of War: What is Being Described?

A. Hobbesian War as the Collapse of Shared Meaning

War is not, for Hobbes, just an exercise in violence. It is the destruction of common symbolic support structures: language, promise, expectations, the very syntax of cooperation. As he writes, "during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war" (Hobbes, 1651, p. 88). Here, war is not the flash of conflict but the destruction of communicability. Even the bare minimum of commitment withers away where there is no certain structure on which their sense can be sustained.

The Leviathan, then, is not only an oppressive organisation but a symbolic one. It threatens not only with force but with interpretation. It converts

the private obscurity of personal motive into publicly readable expectations. It is not only rule but semiotic redemption: a world where "I promise" can genuinely mean something because it can be made believable.

B. War Without Bloodshed: Epistemic and Symbolic Violence

This further conception of war, as the non-existence of recognisable meaning, is extended by recent theorists of power. Foucault (1991) points out that power is not merely repressive but constitutive: it determines the sphere of what is intelligible. Likewise, Butler (2004) contends that it is not necessary for violence to be evident; it can be the withholding of legibility itself, the making of certain bodies or voices unrecognisable and ungrievable.

Violence, on this view, does not begin with the fist, but with the exclusion of the other from the realm of intelligibility. Where institutionalised recognition systems do not exist, subjects harden: they cannot be certain that words, desires, lives will be registered at all. The state, as flawed as it is, at least gives the skeletal outline of such visibility. With all of its shortcomings, it occasions at least a grammar within which identities may be registered and demands be made.

C. The Myth of Peaceful Anarchy

Hobbes's commentators unfairly identify the avoidance of immediate violence with peace. But as game theory demonstrates (Hardin, 1968; Axelrod, 1984), mutual benefit is not sufficient for mutual gain. Under prisoner's dilemma conditions, rational parties can be made worse off even when cooperation would be rational for all. With no enforcement available, trust is a gamble and good intentions an insecure strategy.

The Hobbesian aspect here is not of morality but architecture. Anarchy has no systemic apparatuses of reliability that hold through time. Cooperation, unless it is grounded in enforceable agreements, is always contingent, it may exist, but it is of no foundation. Peace under stateless arrangements is possible but unguaranteed, a tensionless tightrope that cannot bear weight under pressure.

III. The Government, Trust, and Peace Possibilities

A. Leviathan as an Architecture of Trust

The Hobbesian Leviathan is widely misinterpreted as a repressive instrument. But it is fundamentally a piece of technology: an apparatus of fear. Through the

stabilising of expectations, it makes cooperative behaviour readable and low-risk. The state, rather than being an exercise of domination, is an intersubjective trust-infrastructure, a mechanism that makes recognition, as much as coercion, enforceable.

Rawls (1971) carries the argument further, claiming that only with institutions providing conditions of background fairness is justice possible. North (1990) argues correspondingly that institutions economise on the "transaction costs" of intricate cooperation. These authors all agree on understanding the state as not being an overlord at all, but rather as an enabling condition: a framework without which mutual reassurance breaks down into mutual mistrust.

B. Stateless Peace? Conditions and Limits

Yet the state is only one of many architectures of peace. We have in mind here the earlier work of Kropotkin (1902) and Graeber (2011), providing excellent counter-examples: mutual aid, norm- and trust-embedded communities, without centrally-located power. Anarchist or proto-anarchist societies like these reveal peace as possible once it is organically generated, bottom-up, within culture and not top-down.

Yet it is a very conditional peace. These kinds of systems do well in tiny, relatively homogeneous worlds with immediate social feedback loops and high density of trust. But as societies get bigger, across space, diversity, and abstraction, these implicit mechanisms decay. The problem is not with the ideal of stateless co-operation, but with scaling it. In the absence of hard norms able to withstand complexity, peace is local and ephemeral.

C. Beyond Sovereignty: Decentralised Trust Systems

The binary opposition of absolutist Hobbes vs anarchist ideal is a false dichotomy. Extending political creativity suggests an alternative option: decentralised arrangements that distribute power rather than abolishing authority. Political forms of confederacy, international legal conventions, or indeed computer codes such as blockchain (Scott, 2012; Lessig, 2006) outline systems that substitute top-down imposed trust with trust instilled within the very system.

They seek not to eliminate the political, but redefine it. Inscribing reciprocity, visibility, and symbolic inclusion into diverse institutions, they convert vulnerability into mutual legitimacy. Formal, governmental, or

communal, it is not the form but the end that matters: peace is durable with trust not only hoped for, but institutionally protected.

Conclusion: Recognition as the Condition of Peace

Hobbes's war of all against all is not born of blood, but of obscurity, a world in which intentions cannot be read, promises cannot be secured, and individuals misrecognised. Peace is not the negation of violence, but the affirmation of mutual readability. Where meaning is common, mistrust becomes prudent. Where recognition is valid, fear evaporates. Wherever states, communities, or decentralised systems mediate, the real basis of peace is not coercion, but communion, not sovereignty, but mutual visibility. And at last, war is not what occurs because men war. It is what occurs because they cease seeing each other.

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