

Book Review

The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism by John Gray

Satyam Tripathi¹ & Aasthaba Jadeja²

In *The New Leviathans*, John Gray offers a sobering critique of modern liberalism by reinterpreting Hobbesian theory to explain the re-emergence of strong, centralized states in the twenty-first century. The work challenges prevailing liberal assumptions about human progress and global governance, advancing a dystopian vision of contemporary geopolitics. The *Leviathan* was initially published in 1651, at the end of the English Civil War, and stands as the cornerstone of the Hobbesian world, which in modern context metaphorically explains the state of global political anarchy and realpolitik where states act aggressively to ensure their survival in the absence of international authority, considered as a state of nature in *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes.

The book begins with the proposition that the twenty-first-century states are becoming Leviathans. This proposition forms the first of the three chapters titled - *The Return of Leviathan*. Gray posits the paradox of Hobbes's conception in *Leviathan*; the subsequent centuries saw the emergence of democracies governed by the rule of law (p. 2). The effectiveness of the liberal government against dictatorship was characterized by the defeat of Nazism, which, Gray argues, led to a belief in the universality of liberal democracy post-Cold war (p. 2). However, while comparing the scope of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which was limited to securing individuals against other individuals and states. At the same time, the new Leviathans, in his conception, is the state that "instead of safeguard against tyranny, it offers shelter against chaos". He identifies Russia and China as the new leviathans, the resurgence of authoritarian regimes, those who have rejected both communism and free markets. He presents an obscurity where "democracy continues to function, the state intervenes in the society to an extent unknown since the Second World War" (p. 2).

This collection revisits Hobbesian insights advocating strong and centralized authority, while critiquing the modern liberal Western project as lacking pragmatism and disconnected from the present geopolitical realities. 1 He suggests that regimes that adapt to random walks of history will only prevail. In the two variants of state capitalism, China is "where the market forces serve the objectives of government", and in the West, "states have ceded power to corporations that obey the imperative

¹ PhD candidate, Centre for European Studies, JNU

² MA in Liberal Studies, HSNC University, Mumbai

of profit". By invoking the evolutionary process of natural selection, he posits that "in its competition with China, western capitalism is programmed to fail" (p. 22). To strengthen this analogy, Gray invokes Darwinian logic, arguing that ideological rigidity in Western liberalism undermines its adaptive potential in the face of rising authoritarian models. The author compares the Chinese state of surveillance with Bentham's Panopticon, an ideal prison designed to keep inmates under observation undergoing behaviour modification, which under Xi's regime takes place through a social credit system, where individuals receive credit scores based on the monitoring and data assessment of their behaviours, that decides if they would be banned from healthcare or given priority in healthcare. He calls the new leviathans the engineer of souls. The orthodox Russian Leviathan, as per the author, is characterized by the eschatological thought process where religion serves the purpose of the state, which played an instrumental role in engineering the production of ethnic homo sovieticus, which in Grays words "is not a new type of human being whose individual nature merged into collective life, but a Hobbesian loner that survived by preying on others" (p. 36).

Gray contextualizes the West of the twenty-first century in the Hobbesian world as a "war of all against all between self-defined collective identities". He contends in the second chapter, titled Artificial States of Nature, that the Western "hyper-liberal project is to emancipate human beings from identities that have been inherited from the past", which results "in the artificial states of nature among self-defined identities" (p. 55). While Gray does not foreground gender in his analysis, he addresses it as part of a wider critique of liberalism's emphasis on self-constructed identities. In his view, the rise of gender identity politics reflects a deeper liberal tendency to erode traditional social frameworks, resulting in a fragmented society marked by ongoing identity-based conflicts. Gray claims Russia under Putin is a "mix of theocracy and kleptocracy" (p. 62), which could not be foreseen by Konstantin Leontiev when he was mistaken about his assumption that "Socialism is the feudalism of the future".

By critiquing triumphalism after the fall of the Soviet Union, Gray went on to posit that the belief in rational progress and universal values had fostered not peace but delusion and chaos. He challenges and describes the concept of humanity as a dangerous illusion that is accompanied by violence and exclusion. Throughout his book, Gray includes historical anecdotes to support his arguments and illustrate the limitations of liberal ideology. Ultimately, he presents a cautionary vision—calling for a preparedness rooted not in hope but in realism, amid a global return to disorder, fragmentation, and the inevitability of anarchy marked by tyrannies and stateless zones. This compact work presents a challenging read of his compelling dystopian vision with strong propositions soaked in pessimism that warn of an uncertain future and the churning of the liberal order by the new Leviathans.