Deconstructing the State

or, Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

by David Solway (August 2023)

Barcode Leopard, Banksy, 2004

> *The vision of an anointed elite urgently needed to control the otherwise fatal defects of lesser human beings.*—Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed*

> *Then Daniel went in, and desired of the king that he would give him time, and that he would shew the king the interpretation.* —Book of Daniel 2:16

In his fascinating volume *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott defines—or redefines—the nature of the state as a form of "internal colonialism," of bringing "nonstate spaces and people to heel" in order to turn them into what the French call *rentables*—property that can be exploited for profit. The need to organize large groups of people into a reasonably congruous societal unit is admittedly uppermost, but it does not come without cost, in particular the subordination of individuals under a supervening and variously repressive structure. The political success of the managerial state, while providing for material comforts and a degree of security, goes hand in hand with much personal duress.

Inevitably, the state demands respect or even exalted status as an *autonomous entity* occupied with the welfare and disposition of the nation, acting as a kind of supernumerary Self. It styles itself as a benefactor, as if, like the mythic hero Prometheus, bringing the gift of fire to the people. But the gift of fire cuts two ways: survival or destruction. Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Kim Holmes in *The Closing of the Liberal Mind* refers to the "Promethean State … ubiquitous and compulsory as government and law," whose plenary assumption of power and moral altitude is "the most perfect corrupter of whatever is good in man." (I would prefer to say "in many men," not all.) But Holmes is not as cynical or dramatic as he may sound. The state is always prone to prioritize its existence before its purpose, to coarsen public morality, and to manifest as an invincible behemoth, a

Leviathan, as Thomas Hobbes branded it.

For Hobbes, the Leviathan was a trope for "Sovereign" or "State," whose aim was to rein in man's natural instincts, selfishness and innate propensity for violence, a conception which allowed Hobbes to justify a virtual dictatorship by the sovereign power. Centralized control, the application of enforceable law, and prescriptive planning were necessary to avoid civil discord—rife in Hobbes' time. But necessity does not come cheap. A virtuous state would require a ruler who possessed a faculty which Hobbes denominated in Latin *Nosce Teipsum*, the ability to "read or understand himself," in order to counter the endemic flaws and vices of human nature.

Sadly, there are very few such men, those who are aware of their human-all-too-human frailties and compulsions, who can act sagely in times of national distress, and who truly wish to legislate in the interests of the people and the nation. One recalls Nicoló Machiavelli's dictum in *The Prince*: "When a prince is forced to maintain the state, he is often forced not to be good." It goes without saying that he is all too often "not good" to begin with.

This misfortune does not appear to change the equation. Hobbes chose what he considered the lesser of two evils. In his estimation, autocracy trumped anarchy; any other possibility was an excluded middle. In Chapter XXI, he inveighs against the "habit in men … under a false show of liberty, of favouring tumults and of licentious controlling the actions of their sovereign." Quite the contrary, the iron hand of the sovereign—that is, the supremacy of commonwealth or state over its citizens—was the only antidote, as he saw it, to political disarray and civil conflict. Although Hobbes spoke of the sovereign as *Persona Civitatis*, a Person of the Commonwealth, he gradually modified his view. "It is a striking fact," remarks Quentin Skinner in *From Humanism to Hobbes*, "about the composition of *Leviathan* that, as the argument unfolds, he increasingly speaks of the possessor of sovereignty as the

state." In the last analysis, it is the state itself that is the sovereign, invested with unquestionable authority.

To compound the issue, we tend to forget that the state—or Leviathan—is not a tangible *thing* or a living person, even if it is subsumed in the figure of the sovereign or ruler. It is an abstraction, something like a corporation, though it does not have a *corpus*, or a body, except by proxy, that is, in terms of its practical effects. It is an artificial entity resembling a *legal person* defined by such attributes as perpetual existence and top-down decision-making. It is not real in a physical or sentient sense.

It is, rather, a figment or totem, a subtle and insinuating illusion which derives its power from a combination of spurious prestige, coercive function and the phenomenon of psychological projection—what Mattias Desmet in *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* calls mass formation psychosis—fermented in those whom it seeks to control by manufacturing belief in its overarching and proprietary identity. It relies on what in spectator sports is known as a "kayfabe" or "shoot," defined in the psychological literature as a "dyad of deception" which provides "information that 'misleads' or 'fools' an observer into making an incorrect judgment."

In other words, a kayfabe is a web of illusion disguising a contrivance, performers engaging in a believable storyline or staged event. It is often part of whatever game is being played, including, we might say, the game of politics, an elaborate display of craft maneuvers designed to provoke conviction in its *bona fides* and putative embodiment. Though exerting force in the world, the state endures as a conjuring trick or an imagined reality whose existence *as such* depends on communal acceptance and trust.

It is only fair to note that what has come to be known as the "civilization state," comprehensively expounded in Christopher Coker's *The Rise of the Civilizational State*, presents a

somewhat different situation where the revival of a traditional ethos, remembered customs and a sense of cultural ancestry is intended to bind state and people in a common enterprise. As Coker writes, "Just at the time Western exceptionalism is losing traction, the civilizational state is encouraging its own citizens to think of their own civilization as exceptional, at times even 'immemorial' or 'eternal'… something that can be analyzed, catalogued and studied as a single entity." This is because, unlike the Western state, "it is deemed to have an essence, or a spirit …[A] vision of a new world order is beginning to emerge, based largely on civilizational values." Although it is not a Western phenomenon—the civilization state pertains mainly to China, Russia, India and perhaps Turkey—it is also subject to administrative delinquency, no less than the Westphalian state of the liberal West that makes a pretence of inner coherence. In either case, *civilizing the state* remains the crucial and elusive question. The ruling echelon still consists of a caste of individual practitioners and professionals who form a privileged class predisposed to acting in its own interests.

We consequently fail to realize that the state, both in the political literature and habitual assumption, is actually shorthand for a collection of commonplace and fallible individuals acting under an institutional umbrella and bristling with all the imperfections, desires, contradictions, and weaknesses of run-of-the-mill humanity. Pope, primate, president, savior, dictator, revolutionary hero, legislator, judge, minister, *they are just people*. They are nothing "special." They do not constitute a superior or entelechial breed apart.

Some are blessed—or cursed—with a force of personality or a strain of moral ruthlessness that enables them to exercise control over their peers and ultimately to monopolize an administration or even an entire nation. Others are corrupt or debauched and still others suffer from a deficiency of

intelligence that augurs poorly for the implementation of effective public policy. The geopolitical ecosphere today is clearly replete with such imbeciles and brigands. Some are raptors, some epicureans, some toadies, some careerists, some unabashed parasites. Some are grossly superannuated—"Old dudes eating Jell-O," as Congresswoman Kyrsten Sinema summed up her former Democrat colleagues in *Politico*. Most, as I argue, are average human beings with the pedestrian qualities of mind and spirit we all share.

True, we often refer to individual members of the state by their proper names, but these are not so much personal as a kind of aureate metonymy for the abstraction they are associated with. They are coated with the veneer of authority, a sort of nimbus, like the psychic mystique that surrounds celebrities. As Richard Fernandez writes, "the judge's robes, tall policeman's hat, guardsman's bearskin shako, flashing police car lights [are] all designed to make the wearer look bigger and clothed with the authority of the state." But they are only people in costume ginned up to reify a kind of Potemkin theater, a shared apparition known as "the state," a group of people who prosper in the belly of the whale—"bleached by gastric acids," as Patrick O'Neil says in *The Only Certain Freedom*—and who have no intention of ever emerging. This is equally the case for the democratic state, the nanny state or the police state. Even so, we proceed to concretize, animate, or deify it into something it fundamentally is not.

One thinks of the powerful Bilderberg Group which, as Mark Dice writes in *The Bilderberg Group: Facts and Fiction*, comprises "a list of attendees [that] reads like a who's who of the ruling class" for whom "lying is pretty much the only policy [they] are consistent on." The Group imposes the rites of secrecy upon accountable political figures in attendance by claiming that the participants take part as individuals rather than in any official capacity. On the one hand, the claim is

disingenuous, a cover for representative politicians whose enactments are supposed to be transparent; on the other, it articulates an unsuspected truth, the fissiparous nature of a presumably unitary abstraction, a fungible collective enjoying oracular cachet.

Moreover, there is scarcely a politician to be found who represents anything but himself, his donors and the Party establishment. A political campaign is often a kind of business devoted to raising funds, which may disappear into private coffers. There are very few Coriolanus figures who will not prostitute themselves to secure votes and emoluments. "The ruling class," writes Alexis de Tocqueville in his absorbing memoir of the 1848 revolution in France *Recollections*, "entrenched in its power … treated government like a private business, each member thinking of public affairs only in so far as they could be turned to his private profit, and in his petty prosperity easily forgetting the people." The ruck of such politicians constitute the state, which a modicum of genuine public servants—*personae civitatis*—engage in unequal combat. These latter do not recognize the divine right of a consortium labeled "the state," which generally sets itself apart from "the nation." Unfortunately, these paladins are the hen's teeth.

Brownstone Institute founder and author of *Liberty or Lockdown* Jeffrey Tucker puts the matter starkly: "the great struggle of our time and all time [is] freedom versus the state … inclusive of the myriad permanent government agencies that imagine themselves to be immortal." For Tucker, the Covid and the possible coming Climate Change lockdown, both scams of the first magnitude, are an expression of the strategy "for acculturating people to tyranny." What we call the state is intrinsically a lockdown institution composed of wannabe demagogues, an instrument that can be used to advance a totalitarian order. It is a bleak vision, but not that far from the truth. Ultimately, the distinction between the state

and the deep state is moot.

This is not to posit a Rousseauian argument for the abolition or radical overhaul of the political state in its long-established form and for a return to something resembling a state of nature, which for Rousseau was benign, as opposed to Hobbes' "nasty, brutish and short." Rousseau's thesis was developed in part in his quasi-educational tract *Emile*, a manual of sorts for how to counteract the impact and pressures of a decadent society. So profound a reform is not realistically possible. For better or worse, the political state is the only conceivable organizing principle available to complex societies. Discounting the Globalist fantasy of one-world government, the state—regardless of its problematic nature as a chocolate box of political operators—is the final stage in the evolution of feasible political organization. Ideally, the purpose of the state, stresses Philip Pettit in his compendious volume *The State*, is to combat social anomie and revolutionary tumult and to promote economic prosperity, peace and justice, and the fruits of civilized life. It is the only organized political community, he argues, capable of meeting so august, if unlikely, a goal.

According to Plato in Chapter 6 of his Republic, the state is founded on "the noble lie" (γενναῖον ψεῦδος, *gennaion pseudos*), a "Phoenician tale," circulated by an elite to maintain political consensus and public conformity. As a result of the fractious nature of human beings, the philosopher tells us, the polis or state is indispensable to preserve public order. Doubtless, there is considerable truth to this, irrespective of the abuse to which the state is liable. However, the philosopher's eminence notwithstanding, the state should not be dignified as something over and above the prosaic average of its members, which explains why the public can be so easily manipulated.

One remarks in this connection the historic *doctrine of the lesser magistrates*. As Matthew Trewhella explains in an

important book of that title, apart from empowering a lower court to overturn a higher court's quixotic or unscrupulous judgments, the doctrine derives from the pre-Reformation "private citizen argument" asserting that an official who contravenes the law may be prosecuted *as an ordinary citizen*.

Citing a maxim attributed to the Emperor Trajan, "Use this sword against my enemies, if I give righteous commands; but if I give unrighteous commands, use it against me,"

Trewhella shows how this doctrine, also known as the *Magdeburg Confession*, can be applied to the unjust or immoral acts of higher civil authorities who, beneath their embroidered mantles, are only people like us, subordinate to the same laws and social usages. True justice is not a two-tier system, one level for ordinary citizens, another for state officials. The state, however, behaves as a unique system of prerogatives benefitting its individual members. Perhaps I am laboring the obvious, yet the extent to which the state is commonly regarded as a thing apart, an organism in its own right distinct from its human constituents, is truly remarkable.

Naturally, the contemporary media in particular has a critical role to play in consolidating the sway and credibility of the state. In *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*, Michael Parenti contends that "We do not have a free and independent press … but one that is tied by purchase and persuasion to wealthy owners and advertisers and subjected to *the influence of state power*." He is correct. The state is almost always master. When we begin to realize, however belatedly, that the state is only a fanciful structure that has no determining inwardness, that it is merely an aggregate of disparate individuals with their own biases and ambitions, most susceptible to the allure of power and wealth, and who may be readily corrupted, we can become intelligent skeptics of arbitrary state authority and its hypothetical benevolence. Regrettably, people continue to be submissive to state actors, minds clouded by superstitious reverence, oblivious to the

squalid game being played at

their expense. Tocqueville is again on the mark: “Faith in reason has been extinguished … but the idea of government as creator and safety net remains.” *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

The charade gives no sign of being exposed. Political theorist and economic historian the late Murray Rothbard was one of the most astute commentators on the imminence of political tyranny in the family of Western nations. In *Anatomy of the State*, he points out that the collective term “we” adopted by state functionaries is “a form of camouflage that covers over the reality of political life,” a false identification with the citizens they preside over in order to generate tributary consent. We are all in this together, goes the popular bromide.

In fact, the pronoun signifies a cadre of overlords, a different “we” of singular individuals wielding the mace and scepter of authority and masquerading as a discrete corporate institution. “And yet,” Rothbard laments, “the overwhelming bulk of the people hold this fallacy to a greater or lesser degree.” Civil historian Joel Kotkin, a recognized scholar on global, political, urban and social trends, is of the same mind, emphasizing in *The Rise of Corporate State Tyranny* that ordinary people tend to be clueless regarding their “cloistered superiors [who] redirect people’s minds from above.”

As Hobbes writes in Chapter XVIII of *Leviathan*, the state or commonwealth, once established by “mutual covenant” or “assembly of men,” shall authorize “all the actions and judgments of that man” [i.e., the sovereign] and confer upon him “all the rights and faculties” of unbridled power. The sovereign’s authority is non-negotiable, and citizens cannot “make a new covenant … without his permission.” In the evolution of contemporary Western democracies. Hobbes’

strictures are recycled and maintained via media disinformation, kayfabe pretence, electoral malfeasance and force majeure.

In the words of conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss from *Spinoza's Critique of Reason*, the liberal state, the very political structure that was touted as "the opposite of the kingdom of darkness" of pre-modern society, is on the cusp of devolving back into that darkness. The irony is almost exquisite: democracies finding a way to venerate and restore what they were intended to improve and replace.

The cardinal values of Western civilization—*free speech, individual rights, private property, responsible government that can be readily and without hindrance voted out of office, and the building of a milieu conducive to independent thought and critical inquiry—apparently no longer count for much.* The public has by and large endorsed Hobbes' conception of "the commonwealth," consecrating the state, bowing before an idol, surrendering to a species of political necromancy. They believe the state has an essence. "Nothing has an essence," wrote Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "unless it is without history" The state definitely has a history, persisting *in loco parentis* as an imperious transpersonal fable whose officials, while exercising gain-of-function power, have—in the famous phrase from the *Book of Daniel*—feet of clay.

Here, *Daniel* (2:26-45) is pertinent, in both the scriptural and political contexts. Not only a confession of faith in a higher power, it treats of competing world views and political realities relevant to "the march of history." The Book tells the story of the exiled prophet Daniel summoned to interpret the troubling dream of the warrior-king Nebuchadnezzar, who envisioned a grand and dazzling statue made of gold, silver, brass, iron and clay which began to "break in pieces." Daniel explains that the dream represents a succession of kingdoms or states that are no more than a menagerie of hideous beasts (7:1-27), a composite Leviathan, as it were. The point of the

allegory is that the prophet refuses to worship the state and its transient and peremptory laws, regarding it as objective in one sense, illusory in another, answering only to the will of passing rulers. The state is as capricious as it is transitory, real and not real, a disembodied system of regulations, commands and practices favoring a parcel of potentates who treat it as an exclusive possession and a self-subsistent establishment.

The *Book of Daniel* is, in effect, a treatise for our time, like Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*. There are crucial differences between these works, of course. As Leo Straus observes in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, in which he selectively elucidates the seminal relations between Plato and Hobbes in their respective conceptions of the proper state, Plato's focus is on the ideal, Hobbes' on the material. Hobbes' Sovereign and Plato's Philosopher-King share the same profile and *raison d'être* as the highest category of "guardians" (Plato's word) of the hegemonic state, but their formative assumptions are radically different. Plato believes in justice and Hobbes in expedience. In either case, however, the authority of the ruler is total. We must render everything unto Caesar, even that which is not his.

Whereas for Daniel, the hegemon, though powerful, is a kind of impostor or charlatan. Nebuchadnezzar's dream itemizing the four metals (aside from clay) is analogous to Plato's distinction between the four elements of gold, silver, iron and bronze describing the inhabitants of the polis, declining from guardians and auxiliaries to productive craftsmen and farmers. The import of these comparisons varies, one depicting states, the other classes, yet they are oddly analogous. For our purposes, Daniel's insight into the nature and components of the political state as immaterial, as a kind of executive fiction, or not-so-noble lie, is central.

Politicians will come and go even though the "state" is the

permanent *construct* or invention of merely human fabricators, not a thing-in-itself with embodied heft and demarcated boundaries. It has always existed inside quotation marks. It is a concept that cannot be physically reproduced or located on a map. It has always been, so to speak, a tangible myth endorsed and fostered by the anointed and assented to by their unshriven wards.

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In summary, people are generally subject to the illusion of the state's corporate substance. Paradoxically, it is there and not there. It may be indispensable, but it is not what it claims to be. The nuts and bolts of governance, like the gold, silver, brass, iron and clay of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, or the gold, silver, bronze and iron of Plato's exposition, are merely the observable attributes of an imagined reality, the metaphorical elements of a notional commonwealth. Yet we continue to be ruled by specters and chimeras, of which the state is a paramount instance, despite the degree to which it may and no doubt will deteriorate, as we observe in our own progressivist framework, from assumed beneficence to oligarchic despotism—the reign of our contemporary "guardians," the plutocrats, technocrats and suborned politicians of our day. This is especially so as the state, whether secular or theocratic, is not an imperforate entity but, for the most part, a privileged club of self-promoting blue-chip members whose priorities skew toward the gratifications of absolute power and mounting revenues.

Historically speaking, the neo-liberal descent into authoritarianism, steered by a compromised leadership, is nothing new. What we are currently witnessing is an object lesson in the politically inevitable, which can only be deferred or, at best, moderated and made differentially livable. Civilizing the state has always been and will always be a heroic struggle, with no guarantee of success.

For people who cherish their freedom, the issue is clear. If the state is not held accountable by an educated and resolute citizenry aware of its true nature as a coven of self-interested individuals, and if these citizens are incapable of mounting serious resistance to its ascendancy as a reified dream, the mirage will continue to rise before us, tempting us to place our faith in a palpable fiction. Plainly put, so long as informed skepticism concerning the profane incarnation of the state and a determined insistence on citizen rights remain a scarce resource, and so long as the *personae civitatis* acting on behalf of the people are few and far between, the Leviathan will continue to devour its prey. For it has many mouths and its appetite is omnivorous.

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David Solway's latest book is *Notes from a Derelict Culture*, Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, *Partial to Cain*, appeared in 2019.

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