

# Abolishing the Leviathan: A Theoretical Argument for Activists

Hannah Cornelia

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## Introduction

Whilst Hobbes argues that we need the Leviathan of the state in order to prevent “the war of all against all”, activists propose the radical, yet comparatively more effective idea of abolishing the police as means to stop the cycle of violence in America. Thomas Hobbes, a 17th century philosopher, characterised humankind as constantly “warring” and animated by a self-interested desire for power; otherwise known as the state of nature (Partridge, 1961, pp. 222-223). Hobbes identifies that society needs a central authority to reign in this natural anarchy, granting it “coercive power to punish” those who break its laws, in other words, the Leviathan (Monash University, 2022). In contrast, the central claims of the abolition movement, argue that it is instead the Leviathan (modern day law enforcement) instigating “the war of all against all” and abolishing it would only then ensure prosperity. This is determined in two ways. The first recognises that practically, abolition creates safer, more effective “policing” and secondly, that principally, abolishing the police is ethically necessary to promote equality and democratic values. Thus, activists' calls for re-designing policing achieve a safe, equitable society far more effectively than Hobbes' Leviathan.

## The Contention of Effective Policing

Gaining traction from political protests during the summer of 2020, the slogan “Abolish the police” holds a great practical significance and promise as a solution to current police violence and ineffectiveness (Eaglin et al., 2023, p. 122). But what does abolishing the police actually entail? Well, some take it literally; Christian Davenport, a political scientist at the University of Michigan advocates for “completely eliminating the institution” and then re-creating something that is deemed “more just and humane” (Jackson et al., 2020). Others believe that “defunding the police” is instead the first real step of abolition, as Christy Lopez, a law professor at Georgetown University offers that we need to “reset public safety” by defunding policing to prioritise housing, employment, community health and other vital programs in order to “eliminate our overreliance on law enforcement” (Eaglin et al., 2023, p. 127)

(Jackson et al., 2020). For the purpose of this essay, we focus on the first two definitions of abolition: complete dismantling of the Leviathan, or incremental defunding.

For Hobbes, the abolition of the police would allow for the return to the dreaded state of nature, where “every man is enemy to every man” (Hobbes, 1651, p. 78). In absence of strict law enforcement, without “public officers, armed, to revenge all injuries” committed against law-abiding civilians, the good will of the public would be put to the harshest test (Hobbes, 1651, p. 78). After all, under Hobbesian assertions, the logical conclusion of such police abolition would result in anarchy and a “poor, nasty, brutish and short” life (Rosen, 2000, p. 86). Thus, Hobbes proclaims our only “reasonable option” therefore, is to preserve the all-powerful law enforcement that is utterly “unaccountable to its subjects” (Lloyd & Sreedhar, 2002). Young scholars have argued that the state of nature would be a lovelier place, if only Hobbes conceded that human beings have basic morals; yet this is “naive”, because unless people shared the same “general principles” and “individual judgement” than the challenge he poses remains unsolved (Williams, 2003). Given the “perpetual and restless desire of power after power” and in a space lacking total authority, people are almost certain to fall into deadly conflict (Hobbes, 1651, p. 61).

In response to Hobbes, activists believe that the simple characterisation of the police as “practitioners of violence, and bureaucrats with weapons” lends to an unjust, and costly repression over society (Augusto, 2023, p. 3). A safe world is not one in which the police “keep black and other marginalised people in check” through threats of arrest, incarceration, violence, and death (Kaba, 2020). It’s irrefutable that police officers disproportionately murder people of colour, often when there is no threat to their safety (Vaughn et al., 2022, p. 125). The pure ineffectiveness of the police force to actually protect people, compounded by the violence atrocities they commit, presents a very different picture to the utopia of Hobbes’ Leviathan. Ayobami Laniyonu, a sociologist for the University of Toronto, explicitly states that the current model of policing forcibly places officers in situations which they often “mishandle”, are completely “ill-equipped for and don’t do particularly well” (Jackson et al., 2020). Officers are burdened with responsibilities that could be more effectively achieved with “community management” (Varone & Wyant, 2021, p. 9). Out of the 10.3 million arrests made per year, 95 percent are for offences that don’t explicitly threaten public safety; such as traffic violations, unlawful assembly and marijuana possession (Fernandez, 2020). These arrests cost the United States government \$115 billion dollars to incarcerate a greater number of people than any other country in the world, despite the exponential decline in crime rates (Levin, 2020).

The Leviathan is both detrimentally ineffective, fiscally expensive and prone to violent overreach. Considering that, what does a world without the Leviathan look like? Well, activists firmly believe it will not be akin to a Hobbsian state of nature. The slashing of millions of dollars from department budgets, \$150 million from the LAPD as an example, are practical policy frameworks paving the way toward abolition (Varone & Wyant, 2021, p. 6). It's projected that these areas will suffer less crime with an expected reduction of "proactive policing" (Eaglin et al., 2023, p. 128). Proactive policing is the "systematic and aggressive enforcement of low-level violations" and heightened police presence in areas where "crime is anticipated" (Andrew, 2020). When the New York Police Department purposely pulled back on "proactive policing," for several weeks in 2015, there were 2,100 fewer crime complaints during that time (Levin, 2020). Furthermore, the adoption of community based emergency response without relying on the criminal justice apparatus, has been experimented all over the nation. For instance in New York City the Harm Free Zone Project, working primarily to re-establish processes that prevent, intervene, repair and transform responses to harm (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018, pp. 386-387). By doing so, activists are successfully instituting and mechanising directives that stray away from modern day policing disproving the Hobbesian hypothesis that everything would fall into a devastating anarchy. We can also conclude that the abolition vision is far more suited to effective policing that maintains the safety of the population.

## The Contention of Equality

Practically, abolishing the police has far greater success than an authoritarian leviathan to maintain the security of the individual, but on what basis does the abolition movement present an ethically superior and more equitable world? Initially, we look towards the Hobbsian argument. Drawing on his mechanistic picture of the world, Hobbes suggests that the Leviathan creates justice. Without the Leviathan "there is no law; where no law, no justice" states Hobbes, whereby "the notions of right and wrong...have there no place" (Rosen, 2000, p. 87). Consequently, the police is then solely responsible for the establishment and arbiters of justice.

Yet, this entirely sugarcoats and distracts from the deep rooted inequitable, discriminatory and structurally antagonistic system that makes our modern day Leviathan; the police force. Activists contend that the police do not bring about justice, they instead proliferate unjust acts and principally do not align with democratic systems; and they do this in three ways. Firstly, police undermine democracy. Not only Hobbesian regimes but also liberal democracies have proved incapable of limiting the role of the police to merely executing the rule of law, instead allowing them to "pursue their own ends under the guise of

legality” (Loick, 2021, pp. 119-120). Police departments continually make far-reaching decisions on how to use the violent means the state has entrusted to them, thus “structurally placing them at the margin between lawful and unlawful actions” (Fassin, 2014, p. 74). The “procedural authorisation to use coercion”, that exact “government by coercion” that Hobbes advocates for, has allowed for permanent state agents who have their own institutional self-interest, to use their power for oppressive purposes (Aitchison, 2021, pp. 136-137) (Hobbes, 1651, p. 330). Secondly, the police continually undermine equal citizenship. Through practices such as raids and stop and search, police habitually attack parts of the population (standardly people of colour, poor people, homeless people, drug users, sex workers, trans and gender non-conforming people) as potential criminals (Vaughn et al., 2022, p. 125). To another part of the population (usually white and affluent), police offer themselves as an “instrument for the protection of material or symbolic property” (Loick, 2021, p. 121). This differentiation impedes the democratic ideals of equality. Finally, police create insecurity. The creation of “security for life and limb” is one of most widely invoked justifications for the state’s monopoly on violence (Loick, 2021, p. 120). Police continue to threaten precisely the good they are supposed to provide; security. Thus it is no surprise that modern activists detest the idea that principally, the police are “good” for society. Hobbes, therefore, has blindly misunderstood the violent and discriminatory outcomes of his all-powerful Leviathan.

In attempting to prevent the “war of all against all” Hobbes has created a new war of his own, the conflict between civilians and the police. Policing, noting its widespread incorporation of military equipment and tactics, has “always engaged in war-like relations with marginalised subjects” (Rossdale, 2021, p. 31). The first state accepted chief of a police force, August Vollmer of Berkeley, California, stated in his 1909 opening address that “we’re conducting a war, a war against the enemies of society” (Lepore, 2020). In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson declared a “war on crime”, in which his “frontline soldiers” spent a disproportionate amount of time patrolling black neighbourhoods and arresting black people (Hinton, 2016, pp. 1-9). Ten years later, the Senate Judiciary Committee said, “For some time, it has been my feeling that the task of law enforcement agencies is really not much different from military forces; namely, to deter crime before it occurs, just as our military objective is deterrence of aggression” (Lepore, 2020). When the Obama Administration established a task force on policing, it reported that police had become “warriors” when what they really should be is “guardians” (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015, p. 8). People of colour in America endure the “continual fear and danger of violent death”, a suffering, Hobbes wrongfully claims, is only present without a police force (Rosen, 2000, p. 86). Tragically, in the vast majority of cases, the situations in which people of colour are killed by police are innocuous: Alton Sterling was selling CDs, Philando Castile was pulled over for a traffic stop and Freddie Gray “made eye contact” with an officer (Vaughn et al., 2022, p. 127). These

murders were the result of the “routine stops” of racial profiling, suspicion of drug possession or distribution, and so-called “public safety tool” gang injunctions where civil courts designate particular groups of people as “public nuisances”, restricting their mobility and freedom of association (Ellison & Lenz, 2016, p. 7). This is all while police reforms have consistently proven futile, as issuing more training for officers and mandating body cameras, has still perpetuated the uneven numbers of African American men and women dying at the hands of police, with a Harvard study indicating that people of colour were 3.23 times more likely to be killed than a white person (Varone & Wyant, 2021, p. 3). In abolishing or even defunding the police, fewer officers lead to fewer opportunities for them to brutalise and kill people (Kaba, 2020). That is the core reasoning of the abolition movement; by disabling the entrenched and destructive Leviathan authority of the police, society is a safer place, freer from discrimination.

## Evaluation

In weighing up the two contentions of practical and principal concerns, it is worthwhile to analyse further the Hobbsein defence. One argument surfaces to claim that because people of colour are “not currently protected by the sovereign” the Leviathan is therefore unjust to subject them to mass incarceration and racially motivated violence (Kovacs, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, the abolition of the police is surely a proposition that Hobbes would support. Yet the mere idea of the Leviathan being challenged by conscientious objection is clearly impossible. Hobbes declares that the Leviathan of the state is upheld by a Social Contract (morally binding) in which civilians experience an “overriding duty” to the state, and would never think to disable even a section of the government (Williams, 2003). Thus, the Hobbsein defence of abolition is structurally flawed.

The most substantive defence of Hobbes ties directly back to his characterisation of a world without the ultimate authority of the police force. This is a powerful, enduring idea as most Americans believe firmly that abolishing the police would entail a proliferation of criminal activity and the crippling disintegration of civilised society; Hobbes’ state of nature (Varone & Wyant, 2021, p. 16). But as Georgetown law professor Christy Lopez offers, “the status quo is untenable and becoming more unsustainable every year” (Jackson et al., 2020). Society has no choice but to act. Contrary to the beliefs of their critics, abolitionists are not impervious to the realities of crime and violence; they have a fundamental understanding that “crime is a manifestation of social deprivation and the reverberating effects of racial discrimination” (Taylor, 2021). These problems are not solved by armed agents of the state or by increased crackdown of authority orchestrated by the Leviathan, which exacerbate violence

and discrimination, while wasting billions of dollars that could be spent on public welfare. The call to abolish law enforcement “is not only intuitive, but also justifiable” (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018, p. 380). Hobbes' political theory fails on all fronts to best activists calls for police abolition.

## Conclusion

The urgency of police abolition in America is undeniable. Whilst the Hobbes Leviathan attempts to preserve a safe and prosperous society, discrimination, death and an ineffective policing agency are unavoidable symptoms of the state. The abuse and societal degradation associated with the Leviathan across many jurisdictions in the United States, demonstrate forcefully that there must be a better avenue for crime regulation. While few advocates recommend complete abolishment of the police - the majority understand a significant curtailment is right and better than the oppression of the Leviathan. It's clear that modern activists present a more sustainable political vision than Thomas Hobbes.

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