

Economic questions: the Thomas Hobbes Question

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This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).

After the first two posts in this series, the topics have been chosen by me, and this is one of those. This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

Thomas Hobbes is inevitably one of the earliest thinkers to appear in this series, since he wrote in the seventeenth century. Why include him? Simply because even then, he realised that it was the role of government to ensure that life was not “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”. That is still, in my opinion, the role of government today, but despite that, too many lives still fall into one or more of those categories. We have not yet learned from Hobbes, indicating the scale of the challenge we still face.

[Thomas Hobbes](#) is remembered above all for *Leviathan*, the seventeenth-century masterpiece in which he sought to understand how stable social order could be created in a world prone to fear, scarcity and conflict.

Hobbes did not write as an armchair theorist but as an analyst of civil collapse. He saw firsthand how societies disintegrate when no authority is strong enough to keep fear in check or to restrain individuals from exploiting each other. *Leviathan* was therefore not a defence of tyranny but an attempt to solve a fundamental problem of political economy: what institutions are required to prevent life from becoming “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”?

Hobbes’s answer was that order does not arise spontaneously. It must be constructed. It requires a “common power” — a sovereign authority — capable of restraining

predation, securing property, enforcing rules, and providing the security without which trust cannot flourish. Modern economics likes to imagine that markets can regulate themselves, that private incentives produce stability, and that order emerges from competition. Hobbes argued the opposite: without strong institutions, insecurity corrodes social life, and fear displaces cooperation.

Hence, the Thomas Hobbes Question: ***If peace and stability depend on a common power strong enough to restrain domination, violence and fear, why do modern states tolerate economic forces that undermine the very conditions of civil society?***

The fragility of order

Hobbes understood that order rests on a knife-edge. It is not a natural condition. It must be continuously produced by institutions with the authority to prevent harm. In the absence of such authority, individuals, however decent their intentions, are forced into defensive behaviour. Scarcity creates conflict; fear breeds pre-emption; insecurity turns neighbours into potential threats.

This is not simply political theory. It is a description of what happens when social safety nets fail, when labour markets collapse into precarity, or when people feel abandoned by the state. Modern economies often ignore this Hobbesian truth: insecurity destroys trust, and trust is the substrate of markets.

Property, power and the conditions of peace

Leviathan is explicit that peace requires secure expectations. Contracts must hold. Property must be protected. Violence must be contained. Without these stabilisers, economic life cannot flourish.

Hobbes insisted that markets do not generate these conditions themselves. They depend on public authority to prevent coercion, exploitation and fraud. That authority is not an intrusion; it is the foundation of economic liberty. This flips the neoliberal worldview on its head: markets require the state far more than the state requires markets.

The dangers of unregulated private power

Although Hobbes argued for strong sovereign authority, he was clear that domination is dangerous in any form. The person coerced by economic fear is as unfree as the person coerced by force. Precarious wages, dependence on landlords, exploitative lenders, and unpayable debts produce conditions that Hobbes would recognise as a modern state of nature.

He teaches us that inequality can become a form of violence, not metaphorically, but structurally. Where domination exists, security disappears; and where security disappears, social order frays.

Market violence and social disintegration

For Hobbes, violence was not just physical harm but any condition that destroys security, dignity or belonging. Economic conditions can do this as effectively as war. When people cannot trust their incomes, their housing, their care, or their future, they revert to self-protection. Solidarity weakens. Common purpose dissolves.

Modern societies that tolerate extreme insecurity violate the Hobbesian premise of stability. They recreate the conditions of fear that ***Leviathan*** was written to overcome.

The modern Leviathan and its abdication

Hobbes believed the sovereign must be strong enough to protect people from each other, but also strong enough to restrain concentrations of power wherever they arise. A state that abandons this role is no Leviathan at all; it is a spectator.

Yet contemporary governments increasingly abdicate responsibility. They allow financial markets to destabilise economies, landlords to extract rent without restraint, corporations to offshore responsibilities, and austerity to erode the public institutions that secure civil life.

From a Hobbesian perspective, this is a profound dereliction of duty: the slow dismantling of the very conditions that prevent social collapse.

What answering the Thomas Hobbes Question would require

A genuinely Hobbesian political economy would insist on rebuilding the conditions of peace and avoiding the return of fear. That would require:

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Reasserting public authority over private power, requiring that corporations, rentiers and financiers be prevented from imposing insecurity on society.

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Protecting citizens from economic domination, permitting and requiring the regulation of labour, housing, credit and essential services so that no one lives at another's mercy.

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Rebuilding the institutions of security, requiring investment in health, education, welfare, justice and care as the structural supports of civil peace.

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Ending manufactured insecurity, requiring the abandonment of austerity and policies that deliberately expose citizens to fear.

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Strengthening the social contract by ensuring that obligations apply to all, including those who currently operate beyond accountability.

These measures are not idealistic. They are precisely what **Leviathan** argued was necessary to prevent the descent into chaos.

Inference

The Thomas Hobbes Question forces us to recognise that societies fall apart not when markets falter, but when insecurity becomes normal, and fear becomes pervasive. Hobbes teaches that civil order depends on institutions strong enough to restrain harm and guarantee stability. Modern states that dismantle these institutions in the name of market freedom do not create liberty; they undermine the foundations on which liberty rests.

To answer his question is to acknowledge that peace requires shared security, and that shared security must be guaranteed by public power, not outsourced to markets, and not left to chance.

The lesson of **Leviathan** is simple and enduring: a society that tolerates fear cannot remain free.

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