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Soldiers on the Street: How Insecurity Can Justify Authoritarianism

We often hope our government provides us with security, but what happens when this security is in question? How much do we justify our government's power to make us feel safe? In *Star Trek: Deep Space 9,* the episodes "Homefront" and "Paradise Lost" illustrate a situation in which their government is faced with these same questions about how far it should go to guarantee security, and in doing so, the episodes reveal the ease with which a dictatorship can not only arise but be justified. Hobbes's principle founding text of political philosophy, *Leviathan,* may provide us some clues to understand how and why this is the case. Indeed, Hobbes provides us the basis for examining these Star Trek episodes, in which we can discover not only that fear justifies authoritarianism, but how insidiously fear is related to questions of security and insecurity.

Before any other analysis, it is illustrative to compare the historical context of Hobbes' writings to that of the *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* episodes "Homefront" and "Paradise Lost." In many ways, Hobbes's writing of the *Leviathan* comes as a response to the political insecurity of England in the mid-1600s. During this time, civil war broke out in England, pitting those in support of the Monarchy against those in support of the Parliament. Throughout his writings, Hobbes is in complete support of Monarchy, and he believes assemblies like Parliament correspond with the risk of civil war (101). In many ways, his writing in *Leviathan* can be interpreted as a philosophical justification for governments with unlimited power, especially Monarchy. Within the context of the *Star Trek* episodes, Earth has been at peace for nearly hundreds of years. The ruling body, the Federation, has kept the peace, but in this context believes Earth to be under threat of invasion by the Dominion: a species of shape-shifters named "Changelings" ("Homefront" 22:29). The major

difference between these two contexts is that in one, Hobbes had witnessed a descent into insecurity as a result of civil war and wrote his *Leviathan* in large part as a response, while the Federation is starting from a place of security but gaining anticipation that this may be lost. So, Hobbes' writings can be interpreted as a description of how political institutions are justified and should be shaped towards the goal of maintaining security. Perhaps it is precisely because of the Federation's longstanding peace that they attempt to control and minimize risks to their security. In this way, Hobbes's rationalizations for how political institutions can maintain security provide a framework to understand the episodes' development of the Federation's response to the growing Changeling threat.

Hobbes builds his political philosophy on a foundation of addressing insecurity, which can be seen in fear's central role to the thought experiment of the State of Nature. Hobbes believes in a form of equality in the sense that any person is capable of being killed by any other (99). In his thought experiment, he imagines a time when all people are just among each other in nature without any kind of government or society. He imagines that primarily people will be interested in protecting themselves, even if it is at the expense of others. But in knowing everyone else is equally capable, everybody also lives in a state of fear that others might subject them to their whims. As a result, Hobbes believes "there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain," no place for "culture," commodities, art, society and only "continual fear, and danger of violent death" (102). It can be seen that in the presence of others in the state of nature, one cannot feel secure that the future will leave their livelihood, of any form, intact; they fear the change and danger others may bring upon them. Indeed, wherever fear is concerned in a political context, Hobbes believes a form of insecurity of this kind is the source. And so, to address fear, security must be established.

To Hobbes, the best guarantee of security comes from the formation of a commonwealth, with a Sovereign at its head. Hobbes believes that people will first seek peace, then if necessary defend themselves, and in pursuit of both of these things people form a "social contract." This

creates some common authority and an agreement to lay down one's right to everything and instead follow the laws of this common authority which is designated the Sovereign, whose goals it is to prevent conflict. Hobbes believes "if there be no "power erected, or not great enough for our security, every man will and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art for caution against all other men" (133). Explicit in this social contract is an agreement to obey the Sovereign as long as security is established, and that the Sovereign must be able to have unlimited power to be able to command complete obedience. Implicit is that while Hobbes is loath to say people have any right to change government, if security is lacking, people looking to re-establish security may try to change or overthrow the Sovereign. Interestingly, Hobbes believes that while the existence of a Sovereign prevents the state of nature within their realm, this state of nature still exists between Sovereigns (103). Essentially, the presence of other countries is an issue of insecurity. To Hobbes, only a Sovereign with unlimited power has the capabilities of protecting their subjects from internal and external insecurity, which is only possible through the complete obedience of its subjects.

However, security is not an objectively measurable feature, but a subjectively charged interpretation of evidence to constitute a risk of danger, and in this way is related to fear. It is this particular role of the government to address fears that is featured in the *Star Trek* episodes. After gaining suspicions of a Dominion threat to Earth, Sisko is called back by Leyton, and together with Odo, a changeling allied with the Federation, they go to persuade the President to adopt security measures. In the scene where Sisko and Leyton confront the president, Odo is disguised as a briefcase while the other two make their case for blood testing and phaser sweeps (which purportedly reveal changelings). The President is apprehensive about such invasive measures, but only after Odo appears suddenly is it that he finally agrees ("Homefront" 20:59). Indeed the President only changes his mind when Odo's sudden appearance demonstrates the fear that infiltration is quite possible. As a preventative measure, it doesn't matter whether or not any changelings have actually infiltrated, but that there is nothing to stop them if they do. As Odo's

sudden appearance reveals, support for such preventative measures arises through demonstrations that utilize fear. And from a Hobbesian perspective, it is natural that the government must have unlimited power so that it can adopt any and all preventative measures to guarantee security. Indeed, Hobbes's justifications for the unlimited power of the government center on minimizing risks preemptively, only being justified to the extent that people fear a risk to exist.

Relatedly, Hobbes believes only Monarchy to be the best suited government towards being able to completely guarantee security. While Hobbes believes Monarchy aligns the public interest with the monarch's own private interests (which is arguable at best), he points to one of its greatest strengths: lack of dissention and the constancy of decisions. In any form of assemblies, Hobbes notes that the decision making process is split, so that opinions are divided. He argues this leaves open the possibility of a conflict in the Sovereign, whereas a Monarch's decision is final. Even if a decision is reached in an assembly, it may simply be overturned in the future, while a Monarch would be more consistent in decision making (149). This Hobbesian argument holds sway in democratic countries despite its anti-democratic roots simply because wherever security is concerned, an assembly is seen as inefficient and transitive, while something more resembling a Monarchy may be more receptive. Indeed, in many countries the executive branch in charge of matters of executing laws and war is often headed by a single person. The same form of government is present in Star Trek where even though Sovereignty is in the Federation, its executive powers are in one leader and in that way resemble a Monarchy.

The threat of the Dominion creates an opportunity for Leyton to manufacture a sense of insecurity, and concurrently use this fear to justify a greater centralized power in the Federation through the installment of a military dictatorship with himself as head. Leyton works to manufacture a crisis in which a world-wide blackout occurs, so that as before, he could demonstrate risk of insecurity to the world in much the same way as the earlier scene with Odo and the President ("Paradise Lost" 13:48). In this, he lays the groundwork for his own ascension to de facto

dictatorship, in which he plans to use this insecurity to justify forcible military control of the planet

and its leadership, overthrowing or disposing of the President in the process. Sisko learns of much

of this, and Leyton feels compelled to explain that "if that's what it takes to stop the Dominion" he

will place Earth under military rule ("Paradise Lost" 18:56). Leyton exploits what is, in essence, a

logical loophole in Hobbes's philosophy. If the relationship between the Federation and the

Dominion is like that between Sovereigns in the state of nature, there is inherently insecurity

between them. While the Federation has a balance of power between its assembly and executive

branch, this power appears inadequate to deal with the Dominion threat precisely because Leyton

managed to manufacture a scenario (the blackout) in which the Federation is powerless. Leyton

exploits a Hobbesian understanding of government that says it is the government's responsibility to

address these risks through unlimited power, which means bypassing the legal framework of the

Federation as a democratic assembly with a President to instead becoming a military dictatorship, a

de facto Monarchy.

Even though Leyton wishes to change the Sovereign, there is no recourse in a Hobbesian

framework to stop him (even despite Hobbes's own disagreement with changing the Sovereign).

Hobbes would find it questionable that Leyton manufactured a crisis, yet could not reject that such

a crisis still demonstrated that an insecurity needed to be addressed. Leyton continues to exploit a

Hobbesian understanding of the social contract as obedience when he argues for Sisko to obey his

orders and respect him as "without the chain of command, Starfleet would cease to function and we

wouldn't stand a chance against our enemies" ("Paradise Lost" 20:05). To obey Leyton would seem

to be right for guaranteeing security, yet also questionable for the ends of changing the government.

Leyton's intentions need not be about guaranteeing security but instead about grabbing power for

himself. In essence, there is nothing to distinguish in a Hobbesian understanding between whether

Leyton was genuine in attempting to address a security threat, or simply wishing to obtain power

through a manufactured crisis. For Leyton, the result is the same: a subversion of the Federation, and himself installed as the leader, a Sovereign.

Understanding how Hobbes's thinking is central to Leyton's actions and justifications reveals a very real and plausible scenario in world governments today. Hobbes's perspective prioritizes addressing fear through means of security is not an inherently problematic line of thinking, but it creates a propensity for extreme solutions, especially if this fear can be shown (or manufactured) to be justified by some demonstrated insecurity. Notice that in the *Star Trek* episode after the blackout, the introduction of soldiers on the streets makes people feel safer ("Paradise Lost" 16:41). Even if the fear is manufactured, Hobbes's reasoning is that people will hand over their rights as long as the Sovereign promises to demonstrate security. Indeed, in the *Star Trek* episode, despite martial law, the people are in support of soldiers on the streets. Not only are military coups and a descent into authoritarian dictatorship viable as a result of fear, they are viable precisely because through fear people look for the government to demonstrate its power in attaining security. People support authoritarian leaders because it seems reasonable as a guarantee of security. Even if from the outside we find the fear of insecurity unjustified, overblown, or even based on outright falsehood, from within a society these actions appear reasonable. Indeed, the *Star Trek* episodes not only posit this dynamic, but utilize the function of the narrative to push the viewer through the very same motions, where Leyton's actions appear reasonable up until the point we learn they were based on a manufactured crisis. The danger of fear is that authoritarianism seems reasonable in all steps of its entrenchment if it is not exposed as such.

While a Hobbesian understanding alone is incapable of judging Leyton's actions, Sisko voices a firm critique based on some Hobbesian premises. At one point, Sisko is confronted by a changeling who gloats about the chaos that Leyton is introducing in his efforts to gain power ("Paradise Lost" 21:49). Odo had previously warned that the Dominion would attempt to subvert institutions however they could ("Homefront" 36:39), and it appears that while Leyton's efforts on

the surface appear to be about increasing security, the underlying result is that his actions would lead to destabilization. Hobbes argues that if people cannot trust their sovereign to remain the same — to exist, in the case of *Star Trek,* as the Federation, rather than a military dictatorship — then they will feel insecure as a result. Sisko voices this criticism of Leyton's ends most prominently in his final encounter with Leyton, saying, "Do you think other Federation worlds are going to sit back and let the President be replaced by a military dictatorship?" After Leyton acknowledges there will be dissenters, Sisko rebukes, "What then? Are you willing to risk a civil war?" ("Paradise Lost" 34:38). Sisko's argument that Leyton's plan to change the Sovereign risks destabilization draws upon the same idea as Hobbes: that military coups introduce insecurity and factionalism, leaving the people to choose sides or lose trust in their government completely. To Hobbes, this scenario collapses into a state of war. Sisko articulates the paradox in Leyton's goals, that while his actions seem to guarantee security, they essentially result in greater risk and insecurity. Hobbes's writing alone might consider the irrationality but see no recourse but to continue upon Leyton's path, while Sisko's critique is that the paradox alone is a good enough reason to reject Leyton's plan, even if no alternative is voiced.

Through the lens of Hobbes, it is evident how these *Star Trek* episodes illustrate the ease with which even a peaceful government can descend into authoritarianism. And though the justifications are irrational in the end in the sense of attempting to guarantee security by creating chaos, they seem perfectly reasonable throughout every step of the actual process up to that point. Though this example appears remote, the warning these episodes provide is that even in the most distant of futures, the most perfect of worlds, or the best of governments, there is an easy risk to descend into a kind of dystopian authoritarianism by way of fear. We should be mindful of this today, especially if we wish to understand the rising appeal of authoritarian leaders around the world, and what role fear, manufactured or otherwise, plays even in our own political landscape.

Moreover, we must find suitable alternatives to fear, so that we can even have the tools to reject

authoritarianism when it arises, even in our own backyard.

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