The New Leviathan

Part 1: The Rise of the Cogs  
By B.J. Edenfield

As I look back over my six year college hiatus from what most people term “the real world”, it becomes clear that the “real world” spoken of is one that terrifies me beyond description. What follows is my best estimation of humanity in such a vile place – the land of Cogs. By way of preface let me state that this place is inescapable. It is something we have done to ourselves, either as a result of blind evolution in a struggle for our survival, or worse, by our own free will. I will begin this journey with a look at the man, whom Karl Marx claimed was the father of us all, Thomas Hobbes.

In Hobbes’ greatest work, The Leviathan, he set forth to describe mankind’s experience without an all encompassing, centralized government. In this state of nature, man lives in “continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (186). In short, mankind is constantly in an ongoing war of man against man. To avoid such an existence, men establish a covenant with one another, agreeing to cast aside their natural right to obtain what they can for their own survival, in favor of an all powerful monarch. This will, in turn, create the concept of citizenship and remove the continual fear of violent death. Furthermore, it would allow humans to cultivate themselves in numerous ways that the state of nature prevented.

I tend to think that Hobbes needs revision. We have the advantage of living four hundred years after Hobbes and I think it is easy to pinpoint several mistakes Hobbes made. For example, the social contract never ended the continual fear of violent death and it never made man’s life any less solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short. That said, a description of a New Leviathan is in order.

The social contract Hobbes argued for eventually creates the “citizen” and brings mankind out of the state of nature - if there ever was such a state. Conversely, the New Leviathan has no room for a citizen; rather, it creates what I call the “cog.” Moreover, the too powerful centralized government, which creates and sustains order, is actually a technological society, wherein humans are vessels of efficiency and technique. What were once human citizens concerned with moral and political freedom are now cogs functioning for economic efficiency.

Cogs are commonly viewed as well crafted, detailed parts of a complex piece of machinery. Cogs come in different shapes, sizes, and they are interchangeable if their functions are similar enough. Some may be as minute as the inner workings of a wrist watch, while others are as tall and round as the Roman Coliseum. Some are politicians and deer hunters, while others are convenient store clerks and college professors. For my purposes though the dimensions of any cog are irrelevant - we are all geared with the cognitive schemata of technique and efficiency.

Cogs tend to think of themselves as individuals, mistakenly of course! Descartes argued cogito ergo sum, but I object! It is not the “I” doing the thinking, rather the “It” - the New Leviathan of Technological Society -- that does our thinking. Descartes’ insight must be turned on its head - “It thinks, therefore I am not.” The cogito is an illusion in the technological society. Your cog nature has been tempered and forged since your conception (even the nutrients you receive from your mother in the womb were determined by the workings of other cogs). This is because cogs do not operate on their own or in isolation from other cogs - they are collective.

There are signs that indicate we are all the moving and thinking parts of the New Leviathan. The most obvious place to look for evidence of having been cognized is in the realm of identity. All of us tend to think of ourselves as unique snow flakes fully equipped with...
our own tastes, idiosyncrasies, and opinions with little thought as to the origin of said qualities. We consist of numerous cogs which contribute to the overall whole of cog reality. We take for granted that we were thrown into existence at a certain point in time, to particular settings and surroundings, which have molded our consciousness into thinking we are, when in reality we are not.

Most of us have our existence because efficiency necessitated it. In former days families had “x” number of offspring to ensure the number of births decreased. There are numerous other examples of how the New Leviathan’s technological thinking alters the reproductive rate of human existence and even the human desire to reproduce (eg. birth control, sonograms, political techniques related to population control, marketing techniques, tax incentives, career identities, and sex education to name but a few).

Another example of identity efficiency is found in the realm of sports. During the 2010 NCAA Men’s Basketball tournament, I cheered for my beloved Duke Bluedevils from my living room. I deluded myself into feeling the emotions of every shot and botched call by officials. Yet, upon awakening from my dream, I realized that I did not attend Duke, nor did I know a single person on the team (or student on campus). Nevertheless, I thought of myself as a Duke Bluedevil and I know there are many others who share in these artificial identities manufactured for our consumption by the New Leviathan.

The “identity cog” works best when apathy has overtaken a culture. In fact apathy is a cog in and of itself, holding together numerous other cogs in the New Leviathan. For example, some of us spend our spare time “Keeping up with the Kardashians” and other reality television programs rather than actually discussing the nature of reality itself. Perhaps reality TV is reality itself if I am right, which is a fearful prospect. Nevertheless, such a mind numbing endeavor as keeping up with the Kardashian family is necessary for other cogs to function in this great new artificially living machine.

Cogs are also highly visible in the realm of economics. My own cog nature notwithstanding, I have honed my ability to detect economically functioning cogs in the New Leviathan. I know I am dealing with an economic cog when someone asks me what I study in college and I reply, “Philosophy!” Without fail the next question out of their mouth is, “Well what are you going to do with that? How much money do you expect to earn with that degree?” Is annual income in some way indicative of knowledge obtained at the university? Only economic cogs would think so!

The last example I will use is the cog of politics, which covers a vast area! Is it any surprise that the freest country in the world can be summed up by two political parties? Granted, there are some groups that break the mold and form splinter groups but they have little hope for success. The political cog can force fit any opinion of how things ought to be into one of two groups no matter how much dissonance may result - another sign of an apathetic society and New Leviathan thinking! Two groups are simply more efficient and the proof is that two groups dominate the sphere. Cogs like binary thinking—no or yes, left or right, off or on, zero or one.

The ramifications of cog theory are far reaching and as far as a philosophical discussion on identity is concerned, it is a foregone conclusion that the wonderful snowflake we think we are has melted and what remains is a generic, artificial, and mundane existence. Truth in the New Leviathan is defined by how efficient something is and efficiency decisions override moral decisions.

At this point there is nothing, or no one who can control the cogs. There is no light switch that can be flipped or a cord which can be unplugged. There are simply too many cogs forcing other cogs to move, which implies (though does not logically force) a strong view of technological determinism. In the words of the western watchman, Jacques Ellul, “Life in such an environment has no meaning,” and I tend to agree(6).

In part two, I will examine possible reasons for our current situation and reactions to it. I will also attempt to point the reader to an escape route from the inescapable strangle hold of the New Leviathan.

Works Cited

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