



Leviathan lives: A short play about hierarchy and cooperation

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abstract

When people work together, who decides how their collective efforts are allocated and who receives the benefits from their collective product? This short one-person play contrasts several influential organization theories to explore these central questions of collective action. As personified mystical characters, theories of Hobbes, Marx, Anarchists, statisticians, and neoliberals present themselves in verse as forms of analysis. I have three primary goals exploring these questions in theatrical form. First, I aim to denaturalize the mundane systems and theories of organization by anthropomorphizing them into strange characters to which audiences can freshly react. Secondly, I widen the timescale so the present systems, which can feel inevitable and unchangeable, can be seen as a mere moment within a long history of change, poised for new developments. Finally, I aim to shape current efforts which strive toward cooperation and mutualism; by embracing the complexity of the task before us and sparking the imagination and creativity needed to renegotiate the way we organize ourselves to accomplish tasks and share the benefits.

Introduction

Even for those who consider the costs of capitalism and hierarchy to be unacceptable, a viable alternative remains elusive. Elements of cooperative ownership and leadership hold promise, but are currently a peripheral microcosm within the global capitalist system. Aside from formal institutions of ownership and management, organizational patterns are heavily embedded in culture, intuition, and habit. The task ahead is a drastic re-negotiation of the personal, social, and material fabric of our society.

To approach this task I use a tool that seldom finds itself in the hands of an economist – a play. This short one-person play explores several major organizational theories of the modern era. The theories generally agree that there are benefits when people work together. They diverge, however, on the questions of ‘who decides?’ and ‘who benefits?’ What tasks are worth doing, who does them, and how is the collective product distributed? The play engages with these questions by using one of the most basic building blocks of change – our imagination.

This play is inspired by Ben Halm’s work *Theatre and ideology* (1995), in which he writes about the Ghana National Theatre Movement. The Movement aimed to build a new identity for Ghana beyond the self-and-world consciousness which had been so deeply scarred through the era of colonialism. Similarly, we can create new stories and images of who we are and what our society can look like. We can engage in mental rehearsals of how to navigate that world with its problems and possibilities. In this play, I personify the organizational theories as characters that interact through a condensed history. These characters are alive and well in contemporary debates and their personification is intended to give those debates a fresh perspective.

Finally, a word on how to read this play. You will notice an extensive collection of footnotes; I advise that you ignore them in your first encounter. The main body of the play is intended to be read as it would be performed – as a work in and of itself. The allusions and imagery which the footnotes elaborate are intended to reward re-reads and further contemplation, and allow further research for those interested.

I would like to thank my wife, Adrienne Showalter Matlock. I am indebted to you for your critical feedback, support, and help in turning this play into a publication.

The play – Leviathan lives

Leviathan:

I am Leviathan – great dragon of the sea¹,
I’m told I’m scheduled for extinction but nothing yet has been able to defeat me.

¹ Leviathan is a sea creature mentioned several places in the Hebrew Scriptures, described in Isaiah Ch. 27:1 as ‘dragon of the sea’. This image of a great sea monster was appropriated by Hobbes to represent the commonwealth in his book *Leviathan* (Hobbes and MacPherson, 1982/1651).

I am the uber-dragon² foretold of by my sycophantic prophet Nietzsche; who in his syphillactic³ madness received a vision concerning me. My defining characteristic, besides my countenance so dour, is certainly my ever all-consuming will to power⁴. My stature is composed of all the straining, striving people⁵ whose efforts are woven together by control – my knitting needle.

Qoheleth⁶:

[giggles, clapping] Well done!

I apologize for Leviathan, waiting his turn is not his revealed preference⁷.

I am *not* his companion, though by now I am accustomed to his presence and must admit that I admire his delectable irreverence.

Ah yes, how rude of me! Just because we've met before doesn't mean you recognize me.

I am Qoheleth, Wisdom, the One who destroys⁸, the One who dances!

² Related to Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* (overman/superman) from *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 2012/1883). After the death of god, who was the source of otherworldly values and meaning, the *Übermensch* creates new meaning and values based on the present, and imposes these created values on others who passively accept the world and values as given.

³ There was a popular rumor that Nietzsche had syphilis, and this brought about his madness and death. This is contested, and other theories of his apparent dementia are given by those such as Schain in *The legend of Nietzsche's syphilis* (Schain, 2001).

⁴ 'The will to power', or *Wille zur Macht* is something Nietzsche dealt with as a basic part of life – beings have the impulse to use their power and potential, and to expand it even at risk of death (Nietzsche, 2014/1886).

⁵ Hobbes uses the metaphor of Leviathan's body to describe the commonwealth – the various parts of the body are unified in action by the direction of a single head, representing the power of the state. The state maintains unity by imposing the will of the ruler(s) to direct, punish, and protect the rest of society (Hobbes and MacPherson, 1982/1651).

⁶ Qoheleth is the original Hebrew name of the book/author of the Greek 'Ecclesiastes'. The word means 'assembler', or 'gatherer'. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the author famously tries to find meaning and satisfaction in various activities, both virtuous and illicit, and one by one concludes that these pursuits are 'meaningless, a chasing after the wind' (Ecclesiastes 1:14, New International Version).

⁷ A reference to Paul Samuelson's (1938) theory of revealed preference in his consumer choice theory whereby the consumers 'reveal' their preferences for goods by their purchase.

⁸ This is imagery of the God Shiva, who is an amalgam of various traditions. Shiva is widely regarded in Hinduism as one of the three primary aspects of the divine – the one who destroys or ends all things. In the process of Samsara (the reincarnation life cycle of birth, life, and death) there is Brahma who created the world and begins life, Vishnu who sustains life, and Shiva, who ends life. Life is then begun again. Shiva is

I am gifted with many hands; my most famous one invisible⁹.
 I am your narrator and promethean guide throughout this dragon's tale.
 'Everything is meaningless!' is the moral of this story as I expect it to be;
 [giggles]
 but the authors are not yet finished, so we'll just have to wait and see.

Our subject is this pernicious drake who emerged prehistorically
 and henceforth has directed serfs and proles with his authority.
 The dragon and his devotees contend his reign inevitable¹⁰ ad infinitum,
 although some suspect the doing can be done *devoid* of his dominion.
 I myself have dealt him a thousand deaths but each time he is reborn,
 and this last time he emerged from the sea with seven horns!¹¹
 A thoroughly religious man, he is adept at juggling both God and Mammon¹².
 He managed to only drop one of them! Poor God. [giggles]

Let us go now to an academic conference to hear what the wise, (well,
 intelligent) have to say about our serpentine subject.

Hobbes:

I am Sir Thomas Hobbes, the foremost Leviathanologist.
 Look merely at his handiwork – who doesn't stand in awe at all he hath
 accomplished?
 Who can complain? Who suffers injustice?
 Does not a runner beat her own body to cross the finish line first¹³?
 Does anyone care of the aches and pain suffered by the ankles and lungs
 That *they* should take the victor's glory when the race is won?

depicted as dancing in many traditional renderings, and is sometimes known as Nataraja, 'Lord of dance'.

⁹ 'Invisible hand' is taken from Adam Smith specifically in his *Theory of moral sentiments*. Smith attempts to show how people seeking only their personal betterment are fooled into hard work, the fruits of which are primarily distributed through society, not attained by the self-interested (Smith et al., 1987/1759).

¹⁰ The 'neo-Hobbesian view' described by Sam Bowles (1985) includes those who see hierarchy as the necessary and natural organizational form. An important example of this is Alchian and Demsetz's Hobbesian-style explanation for the persistence of hierarchy in capitalist firms. They argue that workers willingly agree to be monitored and cede profits to the capitalist in order to keep everyone from shirking (Alchian and Demsetz, 1972).

¹¹ An allusion to the apocalyptic imagery from book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible.

¹² 'You cannot serve both God and Mammon [the god of money]' (Mathew 6:24, King James Version).

¹³ Imagery drawn from 1 Corinthians Ch.9 and Ch.11.

Wouldn't we all love to wear the crown, to be the achiever of sublimity...
and *that* is the problem which Leviathan has vanquished providentially!
We are all bound into his body and he decides to what end we are directed.
In his absence 'twould be war declared and the body detonated!

This would be far worse¹⁴ than the dragon who... devours a few.
And takes the cream for himself and lets the milk trickle¹⁵ down through.
For it is fear that binds us to him¹⁶, of one another's actions.
In his auspices alone we can work under the safety of his lashes.

Qoheleth:

As with all academic conferences, during the question and answer session
there was one who acted on the Oedipal urge to unfound and upend the
expert's mastery
with eloquent condescension and self-righteous blow-hardery! [giggles]
Karl Marx everyone! [golf-clapping]

Marx:

Pardon me dear Hobbes,
whose handiwork did you say? Leviathan's only 'work' is to take out credit.
The feats are accomplished by the many, to whom he is indebted.
He is the heir to the product of their duty,
along with all the other sharers in the stolen booty¹⁷.

Great feats have been accomplished by virtue of our synthesis¹⁸ -

¹⁴ Hobbes argued that the injustices and indulgences of the leader(s) of the commonwealth do not compare to the problems that would exist without the commonwealth. Hobbes concludes that people thus have no grounds to question the sovereign even in the face of injustice or malfeasance (Hobbes and MacPherson, 1982/1651: ch.17-18).

¹⁵ This is a reference to supply-side or 'trickle-down' economics. This theory puts policy focus on increasing profitability for the capitalist class in order to entice them to invest. The logic is that this investment would then provide jobs and growth which would benefit the rest of society.

¹⁶ In chapter 18 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that whether people cede power to a democratic government or submit to a foreign conqueror, they do so out of fear of the alternative.

¹⁷ In *Capital: Vol. 1* ch. 24, Marx refers to classes that receive a distribution of the surplus from the capitalists (such as land lords, politicians, managers, etc.) as the 'sharers in the booty'.

¹⁸ *Capital: Vol. 1* ch. 13: *Co-operation* (Marx and Mandel, 1992/1867)

not based on the innovation or hard work of our protagonist.
 The verdict comes swift in this invective -
 it is plainly stated that the nature of production is collective.
 The extractionary rule of the dragon fiend must be overturned -
 value is created by labor and to the laborers must it return.

Qoheleth:

And as with all academic conferences, their words were immediately put into
 action!
 The people appear to be gathering at the Red Square,
 Let us see what it is they are up to there!

Leviathanovna¹⁹:

I am Leviathanovna, and I serve only as the head of this collective of equals
 the true Marxian vision of surplus shared with all the working people.
But as one more equal than others²⁰, to question or defy me is henceforth
 illegal.
 Do as I say, your surplus I'll take, but don't worry, I represent you!

The Anarchist: [In the style of Rage Against the Machine]

Who are you to represent the will of the masses?
 So diverse the individuals, so varied their passions²¹.
 I am an anarchist, one among the many
 who find this coerced cooperation to be deadly.
 You boast of the division of labor – facilitating expertise and artistry;
 but do you not seek to turn us into silent and stupid machinery²²²³? [grunt]

¹⁹ Leviathanovna: Russian patronymic meaning 'daughter of Leviathan'.

²⁰ 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others' (Orwell and Hitchens, 2003/1945: 134).

²¹ From Bakunin's letter about his excommunication from the First International: 'Who would dare flatter themselves that they could even encompass and comprehend the infinite multitude of diverse interests, tendencies, and actions in every country, every province, every locality, every trade, the vast array of which, united, but not made uniform, by a great shared aspiration and by a few fundamental principles which have already penetrated the consciousness of the masses, will constitute the coming social revolution' (Bakunin, 2001/1872: 193-194)?

²² Braverman (1998/1974) argued that increased technology does not result in increased skill and pay of workers, but a separation of those who conceive of work and those who execute work. The result would be a deskilled and poorly paid production labor force.

²³ The other influence to this line was Adam Smith's famous use of a pin factory as a praiseworthy example of the division of labor, but later in *The wealth of nations* he writes that those who spend their lives in factories doing a few simple and mindless tasks,

Is this the orthodoxy of your royal priesthood -
 for there to be a commonwealth, we must descend into beasthood?
 Mutualism presses bricks while federation mixes mortar;
 for freedom is the mother, not the daughter of order²⁴ [x5]
 If I can't dance it's not my revolution!²⁵

Leviathanovna:

How cute, you are a unique little snowflake.
 Well, welcome to the snowstorm, you want my crown? Come and take it!
 I have accomplished already with force what you hope to do by magic.
 Your faith in human nature so naïve and *stupidly* tragic.
 While your spirit is admirable and your dancing so 'effective',
 please accept my apologies on behalf of the collective.
 For the people!
 [Pantomimes dangling the anarchist above her mouth, dropping him in, and
 swallows him whole]

Qoheleth:

Meanwhile, in the Fordist factories of Yankeedom,
 picketing Marxies poised to storm the Dragon's inner sanctum.

Leviathan:

Though oft accused of being dense and hard of hearing,
 I have taken notice of the crowds of peasants, torches in hand, approaching.
 [picks up list of demands]
 Um... on an unrelated note out of my own goodness and patent generosity
 I grant, uh, potty breaks for all and [looks more closely at list of demands] *a*
40-hour work week!?
 [quickly regains composure and a smile]
 This of course applies only to the sovereign state;
 the colonies remain with their current fate.
 After all, we must allow them to be free to choose²⁶,
 for all we know they may prefer lose!

'become as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become'
 (Smith, 1994/1776: 302).

²⁴ A quote-turned slogan from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *Solution of the social problem*
 (Proudhon, 1927/1849).

²⁵ This anarchist slogan is a paraphrase of the response Emma Goldman gave to a
 young boy who told her that 'it did not behoove an agitator to dance... with such
 reckless abandon' (Goldman, 2006/1931: 42).

²⁶ *Free to choose* (Friedman, 1979)

Besides, their lower standard of living justly doth ensue
because obviously... er... markets or what have you.

Qoheleth: [enters, joyfully dancing]

Let me interrupt this story, with yet another story.

It is about a poor man's son²⁷.

He felt his father's lot unbearable; such toil to produce so much yet left with none.

He thirsted for the lot of the wealthy and powerful authorities;
you see, castles need no apologists, but neither do they give apologies.

The son spent his life in stress as he labored and agonized
in pathetic obsequience to superior strata – just to be recognized! [giggles]
Now, I will not tell you how the story ended, for its dénouement is not what's
fundamental.

He experienced more headaches in a month of ambition than in a life of
poverty, transcendental.

[brief pause]

So what then is the moral?

The virtue of contentment?

The injustice inherent in the system?

The social beneficence of self-delusion?

Yes! Yes! Yes!

[giggles]

Oh, look who beheld my story!

Here comes Leviathan, who has no ears to hear for himself,
but knows how to turn all things to his advantage. [grins]

Leviathan:

Yes, my human capital²⁸! Listen to Qoheleth, listen to Wisdom!

As her story plainly showed, the pursuit of wealth is a prison.

Be content to labor under my paternalism so fatherly.

Submit to my direction and I will ensure you blissful poverty!

Let us return to the former glory before the socialistic lies,
we will be neo-liberated when you tax incentivize!

²⁷ This story is from Adam Smith's *Theory of moral sentiments* (Smith et al., 1987/1759).

²⁸ *Human capital* (Becker, 1994/1964)

Regardless of your wage, you can only buy what I supply.
Deregulate and privatize; else ALL of us shall surely die!

Qoheleth:

And so it was in those days that the length of the workweek increased;
productivity rose while wage growth appeared to decrease.

There is yet a final character in this epic saga of Leviathan:
Why, it is *you* my ever hospitalatious audience!
For Leviathan lives, and you must decide what sort of role you'll play.
Will you attempt to take his crown and name or be content to produce his
hay?

What do I ask of you?
That you work 90-hour weeks fighting for the 30-hour workweek? [giggles]
That you read 100 books a day so that you can convince Leviathan how wrong
he is? [giggles]
Perhaps if you work hard enough you will spread the word in a journal no one
reads in a language no one speaks! [giggles]
Perhaps when *you* are Leviathan *you* will be the most generous Leviathan ever!
[giggles]
I've heard that one before! [giggles]

Ah, please don't lose hope, for I'm an equal opportunity destroyer.
You see; threads of aspiration and absurdity make up the same embroider.

Consider that we lend each other our imaginations;
to sit within and without ourselves with all these complications.
For we may not see it all but can expand our intuitions,
though even I may never see its full form come to fruition.

Can there be a future without the dragon lumbering o'er it?
Can we work together without descending into warring?
The answers don't exist until they live in minds and practice.
Our daily experiments and vision-seeing are our only tactics.

For is it not a revolution to choose people over greed?
Is not *love* the greatest propaganda of the deed²⁹?

So learn we must and share we shall our progresses and failures, as we
embrace and co-define cooperative human behavior.

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²⁹ 'Propaganda of the deed' is the practice of certain anarchist groups who use bombings, assassinations, or destruction of property to inspire further insurrection and expose the weakness of dominant power structures.

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