

# “You’re Forever Stuck in Neutral, Manmeat” : Hobbesian Biopolitics and the Rise of the Transhuman

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**Abstract** For the past forty years, mainstream American comics have openly invited discussions of biopolitics and bioethics, challenging the positivistic metanarrative that genetic engineering will yield tremendous benefits to humankind. Using Hobbes’ consideration of the monstrous sovereign in *Leviathan* and, by extension, Derrida’s recently published lectures on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, this paper investigates the ways in which science fiction comics—most notably Jonathan Hickman’s *Transhuman*—represent the field of genetic research as a force that eschews political and ethical boundaries in order to further a selective vision of the enlightenment trajectory. *Transhuman* adapts the tropes of dystopian science fiction to the study of bioethics and offers a bold challenge to the Derridean conception that beasts and sovereigns function as easily interchangeable forces.

**Key words** Biopolitics; Transhumanism; Science Fiction Comics; Hobbes; Derrida; Hickman

In the posthumously published *The Beast of the Sovereign, Volume I*—which, we are told in the book’s preface, is the first in a projected annual series of forty-three volumes of Jacques

Derrida’s lectures—Derrida argues that there exists a relationship between beasts and their masters that is complex, interchangeable, and even communal, as “sovereign and beast seem to have in common their being-outside-the-law” (Derrida 17). Such commonality causes beast and sovereign to have a “troubling resemblance; they call on each other and recall each other, from one to the other; there is . . . even a worrying natural attraction, a worrying familiarity, [a] . . . reciprocal haunting” (17). To make this argument, Derrida lists a series of examples—many of them culled from Western fairy tales—in which tyrants transform into ferocious animals and vice versa. It is this “troubling resemblance” between beast and sovereign that elicits the rise of the transhuman, which, as comic author Jonathan Hickman has suggested in the graphic novel *Transhuman*, is a “transitory state” that underscores “the evolutionary progress from human to posthuman” (Hickman 113). Before a

beast mutates into a sovereign, it must first occupy a space in which, for a time, it is neither beast nor sovereign but a fusion of both states. Transhumanism, then, cannot function as a permanent condition, and its temporality allows for the “worrying natural attraction” between beasts (or monsters) and kings that Derrida highlights in his consideration of sovereignty.

Additionally, Derrida draws upon a monstrous narrative of a different sort, namely, Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Derrida is particularly struck with Hobbes’ introduction, in which the philosopher of early modern sovereignty argues that “Art . . . imitat[es] that Rationall and most excellent work of Nature, *Man*. For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN, called COMMON-WEALTH OF STATE, which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended” (27). For Hobbes, the creation of the “Artificiall Man” leads to a potentially paradoxical dominion over the animal kingdom via the “right of nature” (30). And yet, we must ask, what is the nature of the artificial man? If the collective body Hobbes refers to as the “Man” is more than a metaphor for sovereign governance, as Derrida certainly suggests, then what is the “Man?” Does his artificial nature render him more human than the original man, and thus impossible to wholly differentiate from the beast who is outside the law? How might the beast rise to rule, and what might its ability to rule imply about the temporal, transhuman nature of the state?

While Hobbes could not have anticipated the historical permutations of the concept of statehood that would lead Derrida to his arguably peculiar (though not unreasonable) reading, the political apparatus detailed in *Leviathan* does, even by early modern standards, depict a beastly creature that, by Hobbes’ own admission, exists both within and outside the realm of political policy. Categorizing Hobbes’ political philosophy as an act of early modern transhumanism would, of course, be anachronistic, yet Hobbes’ contention that beasts and sovereigns exist outside the law—that is to say, human law—leaves a trail of proto-transhumanist breadcrumbs that Derrida is easily able to follow. Indeed, Hobbes makes the following odd juxtaposition regarding the law’s inability to restrict non-human entities when explaining his interpretation of the first and second Natural Laws of Contracts:

[1] To make covenants with brute beasts is impossible because, not understanding our speech, they understand not, nor accept of, any translation of right, nor can translate any right to another; and without mutual acceptation, there is no covenant.

[2] To make covenant with God is impossible, but by mediation of such as God speaketh to . . . for otherwise we know not whether our covenants be accepted or not. And therefore, they that vow anything [OL: to God] contrary to any law of nature vow in vain, as being a thing unjust to pay such vow. And if it be a thing commanded by the law of nature, [OL: they vow in vain;] it is not the vow, but the law that binds them. (Hobbes 85)

It is this slippery space between beasts and sovereigns (in this case, the divine sovereign) that Derrida pinpoints in his lectures. Both archetypes are outside “the

law" in a human sense, yet are bound by the Hobbesian conception of natural law, thus imbuing figures at the opposite end of the power scale with the possibility of interchangeability. In *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Roberto Esposito also makes note of this conundrum, arguing that, for Hobbes, "the force of sovereignty . . . [is] directly proportional to the renunciation precisely of its exercise" (39). Derrida, as we might expect, ups the biopolitical ante, employing some rather baroque imagery and wordplay that will lead us to a discussion of the representation of biopolitical discourse in science fiction comics; this application, I should note, has not been foregrounded in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*. Before we arrive at that point, let us grapple with the Derridean interpretation of sovereignty one more time.

Returning to the dichotomy of beasts and sovereigns and its depiction in the schismatic image of the Artificiall Man, Derrida suggests that sovereignty is an "Artificiall Soul;" we may think of this artificial soul as a fractured conglomerate of life and lifelessness, a force outside the law that causes a biopolitical breakdown of the social order it seeks to establish. Let us further consider Derrida's vision of Hobbesian sovereignty:

This sovereignty is like an iron lung, an artificial respiration, an 'Artificiall Soul.' So the state is a sort of robot, an animal monster, which, in the figure of man, or of man in the figure of the animal monster, is stronger, etc., than natural man. Like a gigantic prosthesis designed to amplify the power of the living. . . But this state and prosthetic machine, let's say prosthatic, this *prosthstate* must also extend, mime, imitate, even reproduce down to the details the living creature that produces it. Which means, paradoxically, this political discourse of Hobbes's is vitalist, organicist, *and* mechanist. . . This systematics of Hobbes is inconceivable without this prosthstatics (at once zoologicistic, biologicistic, and techno-mechanist) of sovereignty. (28–9)

It is this idea of the prosthstate, that is to say, the artificially constructed state that is subject to revolutionary mutations, with which I wish to graphically engage. Derrida's analysis of sovereignty as not just an "Artificiall Man" but an "Artificiall Soul," in conjunction with descriptors such as "robot," "animal monster," "iron lung," and "gigantic prosthesis," strongly suggests that the interchangeable nature of beasts and sovereigns is contingent upon the process of grafting a new vision of biopolitical sovereignty onto the older, existing political body. The prosthatic, according to Derrida, serves as a kind of leveling mechanism, one that may potentially reverse the hierarchical political structure implicit in Hobbes. If grafting cannot abolish the system that places beasts in the service of the sovereign, it at least affords an opportunity in which the vertical mechanism of rule may realign itself so that the boundaries between beast and sovereign become increasingly unclear.

While Derrida's entry into the realm of biopolitical philosophy is somewhat radical and challenging in its execution, I would like to point out that the theoretical maneuver to which Derrida refers has functioned as one of the dominating tropes in science fiction comics for more than four decades. As is often the case in the history of

comics, all roads generally lead back to Jack Kirby. In this case, we may most concretely track Kirby's interest in biopolitical systems to the creation of the Inhumans, a species of moon-dwelling super-beings who are subjected to genetic manipulation at the hands of the alien race known as the Kree and subsequently become invested in a program of genetic self-augmentation. Within the Inhumans, the tenuous relationship between beasts and sovereigns is more clear than in any other corner of the Marvel Universe.<sup>1</sup> The society of the Inhumans, led by their monarch Black Bolt, are indeed a royal family, and yet, for decades, they have been one of the most disadvantaged and oppressed factions in the comic book cosmos. Consistently represented as a vulnerable culture in need of protection, despite Black Bolt's sovereign status, the Inhumans have spent most of their narrative history living in secrecy and seclusion while applying the process of Terragenesis, a breeding and mutation scheme that is as likely to leave the subject horribly deformed as it is to grant the recipient biological augmentation in the form of superpowers. Consequently, the Inhumans have, for most of their history, been the beasts of the Marvel Universe.

While the political status of the Inhumans has endured a series of permutations too numerous to count in this paper, their standing within the Marvel Universe has experienced its most substantive shift within the past two years. With authors Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning at the helm, the Inhumans have recently decided that they have had enough. After being abducted and tortured by the Skrulls, a longstanding alien militant army and enemy of the Inhumans, Black Bolt returns to his homeland with plans of conquest and political ascendancy.<sup>2</sup>

Reaffirming their biological advantages and their royal bloodline (i. e. their right to rule), the Inhumans launch a full strike on their makers, the Kree. Despite their mastery in military affairs, the Kree are almost too easily defeated by Black Bolt, his wife Queen Medusa, and their entourage of genetically augmented warriors. In a highly uncharacteristic moment, Ronan the Accuser, the current leader of the Kree, offers a quick surrender and a recognition of the Inhumans' genetic superiority. Ronan views the Kree as a stagnant race, and it is his hope that a new regime of Inhuman rule will result in the biological advancement of his own people; in short, he hopes the Inhumans will perform augmentation experiments on the Kree, as the Kree once did for the Inhumans. Instead of opting to fight to the death, Ronan acknowledges that the Inhumans have "come to destroy the ancient Kree" and that "it was *always* going to be this way" (Abnett and Lanning 37). Ronan acknowledges the prosthetic nature of sovereignty, explaining that his role as head of an empire was meant to "kee [p] the gears oiled, waiting for the real thing" (39). In comics terms, where such story arcs and cosmic power struggles can sustain themselves for years, even decades, this turn of events occurs astonishingly fast, indeed, within a single issue (i. e. the one-shot issue *Secret Invasion: War of Kings*). Indeed, despite decades of struggle, the power balance between the beast and the sovereign, in this case, reverse themselves within a matter of hours. As a reward for his submission, Ronan is granted the boon of marriage to Crystal, sister to Queen Medusa. This political alliance further complicates the role between ruler and ruled, and Crystal's vehement dislike of her family's monarchical policies (as well as her genuine affection for Ronan) suggests that a biopolitical reversal may occur yet again in future stories.

While the above scenario appears to clearly illustrate Derrida's conception of the beast who is outside the law, the long tale of the Inhumans is also imbued with several of the tropes of Jack Kirby's artistry: cosmic battles, fallen heroes, family sagas, and a kind of eventual optimism that goodness and justice will prevail over the forces of corruption and coercion. In their recent rendition of the Inhumans' mythos, Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning have closely adhered to Kirby's original vision while also granting Black Bolt his long-awaited rise to power. Abnett's and Lanning's suggestion that the ascension of the Inhumans may be short-lived aligns this cosmic saga with Derrida's postulate of monarchical reversibility, that is to say, the king that is easily made can be just as easily unmade. Although this premise is not entirely without political truth the complexities involved in the shifting of statehood have been justifiably reexamined in other biopolitically-charged comics. At long last, the Inhumans have successfully grafted themselves onto the state, but can such an operation be so easily undone? Can the Artificial Man undo the intricate workings of the prosthstate? I will now turn my attention to two works of graphic fiction that call into question the likelihood of such a complete reversal.

The precarious relationship between beasts and their at least temporary masters is, of course, not limited to Kirby's durable creation. In the 1980s and early 90s, the biopolitical trajectory of the sovereign who exists outside the law was demonstrated in a number of prominent science fiction serials. In Carl Potts' and Alan Zelenetz's 1986 graphic novel *The Alien Legion: A Grey Day to Die*, a military force in the pay of the "galarchy" is ordered to assassinate the leader of the Technoids, a "myoelectronic race who espouse participant evolution, choosing to change themselves . . . using technology to improve on nature and creating interfaces between electric and organic matter" (187). While "myoelectronic" may sound like an invented term meant to add a sense of authenticity to the science fiction world of *Alien Legion*, myoelectric engineering (as opposed to "myoelectronic") in fact refers to the process of creating prosthetic limbs that can be grafted onto the human body. The durable design of myoelectric prostheses has allowed such devices to "dominat[e] prosthetic development," although "[p]resent systems [of design] provide less than satisfactory solutions. . . [and the] means of control is very difficult if not impossible to achieve in a prosthesis" (Englehart, Hudgins, and Parker 157). This tension between the desire for prosthetic control and the difficulty in navigating such a system is recurrent throughout *A Grey Day to Die*, as the galarchy, an interstellar empire ruled by a small sovereign council, determines that the Technoids' program of "participant evolution" constitutes a threat to the current rule of law. What the galarchy fails to recognize, however, is that the Technoids' unstable revolution is destined for failure; that which the sovereign body cannot perceive will be clearly assessed by the Alien Legion's infantrymen, for the Technoids, despite volunteering for prosthetic augmentation, are less than willing participants in their own evolution.

Near the conclusion of *A Grey Day to Die*, the Technoid leader, Commander Dethron—a name that explicitly mimics the verb "dethrone"—is revealed as a former (and heavily decorated) member of the Alien Legion who has seized control of the Technoids in order to exact revenge upon the military power for abandoning him during an earlier skirmish. Ultimately, the Technoid rebellion is undone because of De-

thron's lasting ties to humanity. This supposed weakness is overtly represented during a monologue in which Dethron bitterly crushes a flower, lamenting that he cannot "feel [its] delicate petals...or smell [its] sweet, subtle perfume. . . except as particles and waves coldly analyzed by the sensor-computer apparatus of this damned body" (Potts and Zelenetz 192). Dethron may have successfully utilized myoelectric surgery to place his consciousness within a mechanistic body, but his consciousness nonetheless remains humanly sentimental, vengeful, and fallible. In short, the leader of the Technoids is not beastly enough to execute a successful political revolution.

Dethron's revolutionary failure underscores a critique of the Derridean conception of monarchical interchangeability; although Derrida argues that beasts and sovereigns may assume and reassume the respective role of the other, *Alien Legion* points out that the relationship between beasts and sovereigns is far more inflexible than Derrida's reading of Hobbes indicates. *Alien Legion* argues that such extreme reversals of centralized power are not so easily achieved, and if they are achieved, a return to pre-revolutionary politics is improbable at best. In their epic tale of revolutionary failure, Potts and Zelenetz highlight the difficulty of rolling back political authority in a government that is defined by hierarchical principles. Prosthstates, then, are not so easily grafted onto an existing political body; furthermore, if such a grafting is successful, the process may be irrevocable.

The most recent graphic novel to address—and, indeed, challenge—Derrida's consideration of the beast who is outside the law is Jonathan Hickman's *Transhuman*, a work that offers a bittersweet counterpoint to Kirby's, Abnett's, and Lanning's optimistic vision of royal liberation in *Secret Invasion: War of Kings*. While Hickman's work can simultaneously be read as an endorsement of and a satire on Darwinian idealism, the series also raises provocative questions regarding the legitimacy of sovereign power in the digital age. In *Transhuman*, readers are immersed within the petty, duplicitous world of corporate finance and venture capitalism, as two startup companies compete in the race towards developing new genetic technologies that will result in human augmentations, that is to say, superpowers. As the arrogant Princeton-educated scientist and head of the Institute for Integrative Genomics Anton Rebere explains in issue one, "transhuman" is a term best defined as "the expression that refers to the evolutionary progress from human to posthuman . . . [and] 'future man.' A person whose capacities so exceed current man that we would no longer easily define them as human" (Hickman 14). Rebere's vision for transhuman development proves somewhat chillingly accurate, as the text demonstrates that scientific enthusiasm coupled with the drive for wealth does indeed produce a "posthuman 'future man'" with highly problematic (albeit entirely ironic) results.

Although the methods employed in transhuman development are deliberately kept vague throughout the story, we are told the experiments involve a combination of drug therapies, surgeries, and, in some cases, the literal grafting of prosthetic devices. Eventually, we are treated to a detailed report of the first subjects, a group of monkeys who eventually come to simultaneously embrace and resent their role as transhuman subjects. While the results of the experiment are doctored by corporate supervisors in order to appease the investors and initiate testing on human subjects, the monkeys stage a series of revolts against their corporate sovereigns. These revolts, at least

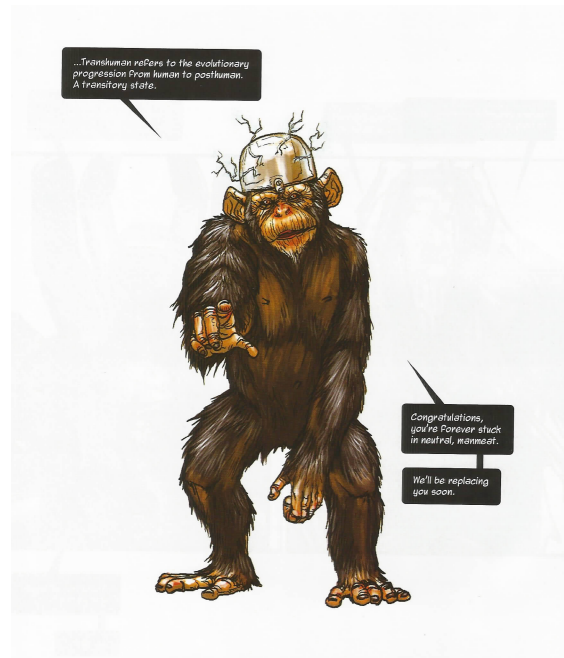
initially, appropriately correspond to the monkeys' imposed role of the beast. In an unorganized fashion, individual monkey test subjects attempt to beat, threaten, bludgeon, and rape their human captors and observers. As Test Monkey 12118, aka Wayne, repeatedly tells his human analyst, "I see you, manmeat—monkey hungry" (20). Test Monkey 12314, aka Bob, has achieved the sort of rhetorical mastery that Wayne lacks and offers a more eloquent appraisal of the tensions existing within the testing facility. While staging one of several violent protests within the confines of the testing laboratory, Bob demonstrates that he has even learned to quote Barbara Ehrenreich, though he provides a unique addendum. Charging through the hallway and lunging at one of his scientific captors, Bob declares that "'Natural selection, as it has operated throughout human history, favors not only the clever but the murderous.' We will abide no longer any banana-appeasement policy!" (42).



Eventually such attempts at overthrow prove successful, as the monkeys begin to organize and secretly collude with one of the alpha males of venture capitalism, pitting their own mutual interests against those of the scientific community. As Bob explains to a documentary interviewer (who is actually a fellow simian in a human disguise), the monkeys have made a deal that grants them exclusive license to the marketing of their augmented abilities. When the interviewer comments, "so you [i. e. monkeys and humans] would now be working together," Test Monkey Bob (albeit no longer subject to testing) replies, "I'm not sure that together is the correct word . . . I would describe it more as 'working for'" (83 – 84). Bob makes this ominous pronouncement while seated at an executive table, clearly indicating that humans will be working for the greater good of monkeys. If we think of the alleged interchangeability between beasts and sovereigns as a kind of cooperation, Bob's declaration signals that the days of "working together" are over.

The final coup for simian sovereignty occurs at the conclusion of the mini-series, and we learn that humans are to blame for voluntarily exchanging their right to rule with their beastly counterparts. Skipping ahead a few years, we learn that the transhumanist experiments, which have since been performed widely on monkeys and humans alike, have resulted in a variety of genetic products and enhancements. The transhuman revolution is upon us, with one caveat: "the inability of the human body to accept multiple types of treatments—meant that a decision had to be made: People were forced to limit choice when picking a modification" (109).

Options include superhuman strength, super speed, etc. However, the human species, seemingly with few exceptions, opts for a “beta-booster” that “prevent[s] sickness . . . and aging” (109). In short, humans have exchanged adaptability for a static brand of life extension.



The monkeys, however, have chosen a very different path, opting for a wider range of genetic augmentations; in essence, monkeys have relinquished the option for personal immortality in order to purchase the sovereignty of their species. As the simian documentarian condescendingly explains, “There is now the growing concern that the repression of man’s survival instincts . . . has become stagnant overnight. A moribund herd of humanity covers the Earth. You could have flown” (109). The story closes, then, with the following admonition, during which the human-seeming filmmaker reveals his secret monkey identity:

It was always going to be this way. You overtaken by your lesser. Perhaps you should accept the reality of your situation. Nature abhors an unwillingness to truly evolve. Where did we begin with all this? Ah yes . . . Transhuman refers to the evolutionary progression from human to posthuman. A transitory state. Congratulations, you’re forever stuck in neutral, manmeat. We’ll be replacing you soon. (112 – 114)

Ironically and perhaps appropriately, it is the human drive for self-preservation that results in homo sapiens’ devolutionary trajectory. Hickman’s narrative acknowledges the human potential for ingenuity while aggressively critiquing the scientific and capitalistic metanarratives which declare that each step the human race takes is a positivistic negotiation, that is to say, a necessary and welcome step forward. In order to save its collective skin, humanity surrenders its humanness, becoming posthuman in



a biopolitically Faustian exchange. The beast that is outside the law becomes the law, and the law becomes bestial in the most servile fashion possible.

However, this reversal is notably different than that expressed in *The Beast and the Sovereign*. In the final chapter of *Transhuman*, human inertia has become an irrevocable state of being. The narrative offers no suggestion that humans will ever be able to rise up and conquer their simian masters. As the unnamed monkey states in the work's closing text, humans are being *replaced* in the biopolitical order of things. The act of replacement is notably different than an act of reversal, as replacement, within the context of Hickman's narrative, denotes a revolution with permanent ramifications. The shift from human to posthuman may be a "transitory state," but its consequences are immutable. Once the "Artificiall Man" has wholly conquered the human, there is little likelihood that the mechanism of reversal so appropriate to the saga of Jack Kirby's Inhumans will occur in the world that is envisioned in *Transhuman*. Hickman opts not to participate in the rhetoric of revolutionary optimism that Kirby and Derrida embrace. Like Hobbes' *Leviathan*, *Transhuman* enforces the notion that, in both theory and practice, there is no such thing as a positive biopolitics.

Like the most provocative philosophy of Jack Kirby, Derrida's consideration of the relationship between the beast and the sovereign is, perhaps unexpectedly, infused with a noteworthy dose of biopolitical optimism, despite Derrida's longstanding reputation as a political cynic and so-called moral relativist. In his most recently published work, Derrida obliterates these superficial critiques, arguing that the site of biopolitical struggle is one in which sovereigns may be toppled, the oppressed may seek retribution, and, if necessary, the order of things can be reversed again whenever such a shift is ethically, socially, or politically necessary. In *Transhuman*, however, the sense of struggle that defines biopolitics is rendered in less forgiving terms. Unlike Derrida and Kirby, Hickman envisions the rise of the posthuman as an evolutionary dead end; endless reversal is impossible in the world of *Transhuman*, as finitude is so clearly and starkly defined; humans will fall, monkeys will rise, and no such reversal will ever again occur. In Hickman's imagined future, we will become forever stuck in neutral, and we're racing towards that neutrality with astonishing speed.

## Notes

1. See the Marvel Masterworks edition of *The Inhumans: Volume One* for a selection of the genetically altered family's earliest forays in the Marvel Universe. The collection outlines the Inhumans' royal dynasty and the pattern of social marginalization that Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning would later explode in *Secret Invasion: War of Kings*.
2. See Joe Pokaski's and Tom Raney's mini-series *Secret Invasion: Inhumans* for the tale of Black Bolt's abduction and torture at the hands of the Skrull army. In *Secret Invasion: War of Kings*, co-authors Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning use this earlier tale of oppression to rationalize, at least for Black Bolt, the use of a pre-emptive strike against The Inhumans' former masters, the Kree empire.

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