Political Order in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The advent of the epoch known as the Anthropocene has been treated as a paradigm shift throughout parts of the natural as well as the social sciences. This shift entails mankind becoming a geological force alongside others. Political theory and International Relations in particular have, however, been slow to pick this up. This thesis is an attempt to fill this gap. In this thesis I examine the idea of our modern conception of political order – how it is conceptualized, legitimated, and what the consequences for it may be upon facing the changes suggested by the Anthropocene. In doing so, I engage a wide variety of sources on the political theory of order, as well as on the contested nature of the Anthropocene in itself. I furthermore adopt a realist notion of political legitimacy in order to clarify the possibly problematic political trade-offs we may face when going forward into this new epoch.

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Contents

1 Introduction p. 1
2 Dawn of a new epoch p. 3
3 Political legitimacy and realism p. 7
4 A realist notion of political legitimacy p. 10
5 Order in political theory p. 16
6 Political order in the Holocene p. 19
7 The legitimacy of the modern order and the international system p. 25
8 The territorial logic of the Anthropocene p. 27
9 The possibility of order p. 32
10 Dreams of order in the Anthropocene p. 39
11 Bibliography p. 42
1 Introduction

The geological epoch known as the Holocene began approximately 12,000 years ago, at the end of the last glacial period, as the ice slowly receded from what is today the central and northern parts of North America, the elongated territory of Chile, the South Island of New Zealand, the British Isles, the Baltic states, the Scandinavian peninsula, and modern-day Russia. At roughly the same time, in the Fertile Crescent of Southwest Asia, agriculture was slowly developing on a scale that would prove to entail a lasting transition for humanity in general\(^1\).

The Holocene comprises all of the history of mankind as we know it. It is within the limits of this epoch, merely a sliver of time compared to the vastness stretching back to the earliest stages of primate life, that everything we have come to know as the history of our civilization has taken place: the large-scale cultivation and domestication of plants and animals; the invention of writing, of mathematics, of metallurgy, of civil law – in short, all the technological inventions enabling the creation of sedentary societies, city states, and later, empires. But the Holocene also encompasses the technological, scientific, philosophical and, not least, political upheavals of the Bronze Age, the Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. The Holocene epoch is, geologically speaking, part of the larger Quaternary period, which in turn is part of the Cenozoic era, known more commonly as the Age of Mammals, that stretches back approximately 66 million years. Consequently, the Holocene, from Greek *holos*, whole, and *kainos*, new – the ‘entirely recent’ or ‘completely new’ epoch – constitutes only a tiny part of Earth’s history, or *big history* (Dukes, 2013), albeit the entirety of human history, including parts of its prehistory (Goodrum, 2012).

Characteristic of the Holocene has been a state of comparative climate equilibrium (cf. Rockström et al, 2009a; 2009b). Comparative – because climate cycles and their events within the Holocene, though powerful enough to at least correlate with and possibly even exacerbate historical episodes of civilizational collapse\(^2\), have not (thankfully) been as extreme as in the Late Pleistocene epoch.

\(^{1}\) Instances of agricultural practices, ranging from foraging to cultivation and even domestication, had most likely taken place before at individual sites scattered around the globe where favorable locations and climatic circumstances were to be found. The archeological evidence to this is, however, spotty at best, due to the fact that many of these sites may have been located in places later claimed by rising sea-levels in the early Holocene epoch (cf. Barker, 2006; Head, 2014; Davies, 2016, p. 157).

\(^{2}\) So called ‘Bond events’ (Bond et al, 1997) have been related to, for instance, the decline of the Akkadian Empire and the Old Kingdom of Egypt (around 2200 BCE), the Late Bronze Age collapse (around 1200 BCE), the Migration Period following the decline of the Western Roman Empire (around 500 CE), as well as the Little Ice Age in Europe (around 1500 CE). ‘Bond events’ denotes cyclical episodes of drastic climate fluctuations characterised by rapid warming followed by longer periods of colder weather which in areas not prone to glacial expansion (due to latitude and height) would translate into long periods of severe drought (as the result of reduced evaporation from bodies of water and thus reduced precipitation).
preceding it; rather than shifting between extreme climate events such as the last glacial period, the Holocene has so far been exclusively interglacial. Nevertheless, episodes of societal and civilizational collapse in relation to climate fluctuation easily suggest the possibility of political order during periods of rapid and prolonged climate change. Even more so if we also accept what many already have stated – that we are no longer in the Holocene, but rather have entered an entirely new geological epoch\(^3\) – the Anthropocene.

\(^2\)I should clarify that the usage of the term ‘epoch’ has a particular meaning pertaining to the way in which time scales are defined within the field of geology, see Maslin & Lewis, 2015, pp. 112-113. Since the concept of the Anthropocene was originally coined within this field, and its particular meaning (to which I return below), this is the term I will use in relation to the Anthropocene. This is not to be confused with other temporal designations such as ‘age’ or ‘era’ that I also use, albeit more freely, throughout this thesis.
2 Dawn of a new epoch?

The Anthropocene, from Greek, *anthropos*, human, was originally coined by biologist and Earth scientist Eugene F. Stoermer sometime in the 1980’s, and initially published in a short newsletter article for the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme in 2000 by Stoermer, alongside the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). These two suggested the adoption of the term as the designation of a new geological epoch where mankind, as it were, have been acting upon the global climatic and ecological Earth system to such a degree as to be considered a geological force in itself, and that, bar anything resembling a major catastrophe in the Hollywood-sense of the word (i.e. a global all-consuming pandemic, a thermonuclear war, or an asteroid impact) this will continue for millennia ahead. This statement was later repeated essentially verbatim in an article published in the prestigious journal *Nature* in 2002 (Crutzen, 2002) which aided in the popularization of the term.

As a starting point of this new epoch, Crutzen and Stoermer proposed the latter half of the eighteenth century which coincides with the invention of the steam engine, the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and the subsequent dramatic rise in the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases. But competing claims have naturally been made: the Neolithic Revolution (Ruddiman, 2003); in the 1450s (Moore, 2015); somewhere during the long and turbulent seventeenth century (L. Williams, 2016); 1610 in particular (Lewis & Maslin, 2015a); more like 1800 (Steffen et al, 2011a); or rather 1945 and the advent of the Great Transformation, in which mankind has managed to triple its population and push ‘the CO₂ concentration of the atmosphere outside the boundaries of the Holocene [...] to heights not seen in the past 870,000 years [...]’ (McNeill & Engelke, 2014, p. 208; see also Lewis & Maslin, 2015a; 2015b; Steffen et al, 2011a; 2015; Zalasiewicz et al, 2010; 2015) – the multiplicity of proposals point to the fact that it in no sense is a question of whether or not we have entered the Anthropocene, but merely a question of when it started and how to establish that date properly (Maslin & Lewis, 2015). Thus, it is not only up to scholars from separate scientific disciplines to reach conclusions within their respective fields, but also, hopefully, to find a common understanding across disciplinary boundaries. As long as empirical evidence allows it.

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4 The concept has some historical precedence, as noted by Steffen et al, 2011a; cf. also Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Crutzen, 2002; Bonneuil & Frescoz, 2016, p. 3-5.

5 A few excellent overviews of the debate on which I have relied are found in Bonneuil & Frescoz, 2016; Brondizio et al, 2016; Davies, 2016, Lewis & Maslin, 2015a; Steffen et al, 2011a; Trischler, 2016; cf. also the introductory chapter in Hamilton et al, 2015 and Pattberg & Zelli, 2016.
The Anthropocene, as a concept, has since its very inception been hard to contain within the clutches of the natural sciences (especially stratigraphy), and Autin & Holbrook (2012; cf. Dalby, 2016a), not without vitriol, go as far as to suggest it has become part of a pop culture vernacular. Hamilton et al (2015) trace three broad conceptual strains similar to the distinctions outlined above: the Anthropocene as a new interval in geological history; as a holistically understood shift in the complex Earth system; and as a ‘threshold marking a sharp change in the relationship of humans to the natural world’ (p. 3). Regardless of their distinctive differences, these definitions all share the notion that mankind now shape the Earth system that we depend on for our very survival, that we have done so for quite some time, and that our impact on that system most likely transcend any conceivable human or even civilizational time scale (Steffen et al, 2007, p. 618; Lewis & Maslin, 2015b). The Holocene Earth system which we associate with conditions stable enough to have sustained the flourishing of our species and its civilization, is, most likely, a thing of the past – rapid global warming, rising sea-levels, ocean acidification, the global distribution of persistent organic pollutants, soil erosion, disruptions of both the carbon cycle and the nitrogen cycle, not to mention the dwindling biodiversity (Williams et al, 2015) characteristic of the possible ‘extinction event’ Earth’s biota is currently facing (Ceballos, 2015; Dirzo et al, 2014) – these are the conditions of the Anthropocene epoch. Whereas Earth system scientists look for evidence of these conditions in changes in the interaction between the Earth’s spheres – the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the biosphere, the cryosphere, and so on – as well as the impact of human societies on these spheres, and environmental historians look for changes in human societal organization pertaining to the origins of this impact (and vice versa, Bristow & Ford, 2016), geologists and paleobiologists (whose responsibility it is to actually decide on geological chronology) look for stratigraphic evidence, so-called, ‘golden spikes’, that mark the human impact on a future geological record. One such mark, recently proposed, would be the global presence of artificial radionuclides, present in the world’s strata since the beginning of the Atomic Age: the detonation of the first nuclear bomb, *Trinity*, in 1945 (Zalasiewicz et al, 2010, p. 2230; 2015)

The challenge for political theory and International Relations is however quite another. We may ask: *what does this new age, this apparent conceptual disjunction, the Anthropocene, hold in store for our present understanding of political order and future global coexistence? What political order does the conditions of the Anthropocene epoch imply, or even legitimate?* These questions are motivated by the insistence that the Earth system shift characteristic of the Anthropocene forces us not only to envision novel political strategies for the future, by adopting time scales and conceptions of political space previously thought improbable or illegitimate, but it also, simultaneously, forces us to retrace

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6 Although, as I have alluded to above, Davies (2016) stresses the fact that the Holocene in no sense can be easily equated with the idea of climatic or environmental stability.
currently persistent notions of politically legitimate orders in order to lay bare their dependence on Holocene conditions no longer present.

One caveat is in order here. Due to the limited space available I am naturally not able to provide a full outline of how a legitimate political order will look like in the Anthropocene – that is, what shape or form the governance structure and institutional solutions will take in actuality or what values these ultimately will try and correspond to (nor will I dwell on the plausibility of attaining such a scenario as to render this transformation possible). Rather, this thesis is an attempt to further elaborate on some of the decidedly political implications of the Anthropocene for our current ways of conceptualizing political order. Many have already noted the inherently political nature of the paradigmatic changes brought about by this new epoch, to which I return below. Few have, however, considered what the consequences might be for political theory and the framework it provides for international politics. How do the concepts with which we legitimize our current political order hold up under pressure from increasingly unstable or collapsing ecological systems and potentially violent Earth system fluctuations – the ‘hot, sticky and chaotic’ climate (Hamilton, 2014) brought forth by the fact that mankind conjures enough power to shape the Earth system itself? It has even been suggested that the field one would have expected responses from the most – International Relations – have essentially failed to address the issue, largely due to its habit of reducing environmental concerns to variables affecting strategic goals rather than providing the very context in which abilities are assigned and political entities constituted (Harrington, 2016, p. 481). International relations have, according to this view, sought to instrumentalize environmental issues, whereas the Anthropocene suggests that it is the environment (and us as eternally embedded in it) that is doing the instrumentalization (ibid, p. 494) – ‘International Relations has failed because the planet does not match and cannot be clearly seen by its institutional and disciplinary frameworks.’ (Burke et al, 2016, p. 501)

Any literature on and in response to the Anthropocene should, by proxy at least, be considered part of an overall discourse on what constitutes a legitimate future political order, however indirectly, by outlining the conditions such an order – and the principles upon which it is supposed to be built – must take into account. That is, what we, as a species, have to achieve in order to alleviate the threats posed by the advent of this new epoch (however implicitly). The purpose of this master’s thesis is thus mainly to engage with the recent literature on the Anthropocene in order to discern the suggestions for and conceptualizations of conditions for a future order found therein. What, if any, type of order is envisioned? What are the threats a potential order must adapt to? And what are the criteria that will render this order legitimate? In order to answer these questions, I draw upon a realist and sociological understanding of political legitimacy, as outlined by Bernard Williams (2005). This is a conceptualization of legitimacy.

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7 Biermann & Dingwerth (2004) being one exception.
8 A similar case has been made by Lars Tønder (2017) vis-à-vis political theory.
explicitly based not on normative concerns, but rather on contextual factors – what is considered legitimate is assumed to be so due to certain conditions in a specific moment or situation (more on this distinction below). The last point is particularly important, since this conceptualization stipulates that political order is essential for there to be political legitimacy, or demands thereof, at all. That is, it is a theory that ties the possibility of legitimacy to a previously existing state of political order. Political order should in this instance be understood as a sufficiently organized and/or institutionalized condition wherein power is distributed by an authority (any figure; any political body) throughout the constitutive parts of this very organization or institution (any type of community). This understanding thus neither confines political order to a specific institutional shape, nor to a geographically demarcated space, but only to this particular bond.

In order to answer the question about what kind of political order the Anthropocene legitimizes it becomes imperative to also, however briefly, examine the bedrock upon which our current political order rests. Can we assume that our political concepts, hammered out and adjusted as they have been to conditions pertaining to the Holocene, will hold up in the face of the Anthropocene? Can we assume that the principles by which we legitimize our current order will remain unchanged in the face of global and relentless climate change? The line of argument here is naturally that the ability to elaborate on a possible future political order ultimately depends on also scrutinizing the current one, and in this way, hopefully, infer from conclusions reached in such an analysis, what kind of characteristics the future order must reasonably acquire in order for us to be able to deem it legitimate.\(^9\) If the Anthropocene entails a paradigmatic shift in the environmental conditions upon which we ultimately erect our current political order – and I argue below that it does – we may be forced to rethink the viability of this order. Moreover, if this order is one that essentially consists of an international system held together by the principle of spatially demarcated sovereign states – this also a contention I hold to be true – then this principle is likely to be questioned first. Hence, my aim throughout this thesis is to engage with the conceptual nature of the Anthropocene and the changes it is destined to herald, in the sense that I will try to bring this phenomenon down and truly situate it within, as well as against, the modern political conception of order.

But how do we conceptualize the current order? What is its main features; its most telling traits? The question of defining our current order, alongside the question concerning how we legitimize that order, need to be addressed further before we move on.

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9 In this way my aim bears many similarities to William Ophuls', who in much the same manner has attempted to imagine a future order by way of criticizing the old or present one (1997, p. ix). That is, in order to fully appreciate the nature of an inevitable paradigm shift – what it entails for the future – one must revisit in depth the premises of yore. As will be made evident further on, however, my analysis also diverges a lot from that of Ophuls, most notably in terms of the little attention I pay to the possible goals of individual fulfilment and human flourishing, even though I fully concur with the following conclusion of his: ‘This, then, is the political challenge of the twenty-first century: to invent a new form of politics that manifests this higher purpose and promotes this larger enterprise [a sustainable political order] – but that also preserves, as far as possible, the basic civil and human rights which are the precious legacy of liberalism.’ (ibid, p. 277)
3 Political legitimacy and realism

First off, is it, for instance, at all credible or even possible to transpose a concept originally coined for the Earth sciences into one that would be of relevance to political theory and international relations? This objection is possibly valid, at least to the point that it warrants some further methodological justification, although one would be tempted to retort that such an objection in itself is a telling example of the type of assumption which the adoption of the concept, by the social sciences and the humanities, is designed to transcend (Trischler, 2016) – since this move is borne out of the conviction that a clear distinction between politics and science, or the social and the natural, has been rendered implausible, or even impossible, as a result of the paradigm shift brought about by the Anthropocene (Latour, 2014a, cf. Brondizio et al, 2016). It is, in this view, time to break with the ‘legacy of Cartesian thought’ – the nature/society divide – that try to convince us ‘that state formation, class structure, commodification, and world markets are purely about relations between humans… which they are not.’ (Moore, 2015, p. 96, emphasis in original; cf. also Altvater 2015; Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016)

However, the analytical strategy of grafting the Anthropocene unto political theory and issues pertaining to this field may be justified in more traditional ways by relating it to the wider debate within political theory and political philosophy on the nature of the relation between normative political principles and the facts of political life, or in other words, between theoretical exposition and empirical enquiry. This debate has seen some upsurge in the last decade or so, which indicates a development in disputes concerning the methodology of political theory in general (Stears, 2005, p. 326, cf. also Miller, 2016, p. 156). Rather than the contestation of theoretical concepts and ideal normative principles, previously thought to be the main task of any political theorist, the debate has since the turn of the 21th century increasingly come to involve the issue of whether normative principles should be fact-dependent/fact-sensitive or not – an issue sometimes portrayed as the opposition between political moralism and political realism (B. Williams, 2005), or ideal and non-ideal theory.¹⁰

¹⁰ That is, when it is not interpreted as the division between political theory and political philosophy in general (Miller, 2008, pp. 30-31). Michael Freeden has, for instance, argued that political theory as a discipline is one dedicated to the investigation of political thought along two dimensions: one in which political thinking is separated from other kinds of thought, and one in which specifically political ‘ideational configurations’ (presumably the end product of the first dimension) are analyzed (2008, p. 197). This distinction leaves to political philosophy the somewhat more arduous task of constructing ideal
This neat partitioning of theoretical tasks is of course, in the end, mainly a heuristic device, as aptly shown by Stears (2005), whose review of the most polarized positions on either side of this debate manages to illustrate the fact that political theory cannot be (nor should be) based purely on either empirics or principles, but rather on both (cf. Rossi, 2016)\(^{11}\). One account, duly mentioned by Stears, that is in line with this conclusion, is attributed to David Miller. Miller has, throughout his oeuvre, engaged in political theory based on the assumption that moral principles, described and determined by political philosophers and theorists alike, ultimately are dependent on a certain set of underlying facts about the surrounding world (2008; 2013; 2016; cf. also Hall, 2013):

\^[E\]ven the basic concepts and principles of political theory are [already] fact dependant: their validity depends on the truth of some general empirical propositions about human beings and human societies, such that if these propositions were shown to be false, the concepts and principles in question would have to be modified or abandoned. (Miller. 2008, p. 31)

According to this view, political theory is conceived of as a project or vocation (Stears, 2005) dedicated to ascertaining whether existing principles and ideas are coherent in terms of their consistency with the empirical reality in which they are situated, or not; to ‘correct distortions’ (ibid, p. 339) by resolving how and when certain circumstances render specific principles applicable (Miller, 2008, p. 38). This strategy may look like a retreat in the sense that it seems to simultaneously impede the ability of the political theorist to prescribe politically novel solutions from scratch, since favouring the project of an initial evaluation or assessment of currently prevalent positions (Stears, 2005, p. 341), also potentially, entails favouring conceptions closer to the status quo. By always returning to current underlying conditions and their role in determining principles, one runs the risk of treating these conditions as immovable or unyielding, thereby circumscribing the ability of the political theorist or political philosopher to formulate and foment changes in these conditions whatsoever (which also, supposedly, is what we would expect from a political philosopher, Miller, 2008, p. 47; 2016, p. 157). What Miller calls for, not in order to circumvent this objection, but rather to render it obsolete, is a particular understanding of political feasibility. Rather than sheer political feasibility (all too constrained by its emphasis on infinitely fickle political support) or technical feasibility (all too panglossian in its insistence that everything is technologically manageable and thus free from social or political constraints\(^{12}\)) Miller proposes a condition of feasibility regarded as ‘realistically utopian’ in the sense that it is within the purview of what a given society can be assumed to ‘be brought to accept by reasoned discussion [...]’ (2008, p. 46),

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\(^{11}\) Hall (2015a), however, claims to have reached a methodological position (incidentally in favour of political realism) that effectively transcends this dualism altogether.

\(^{12}\) For a general discussion on the topic of feasibility, political and technical, see Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012; Lawford-Smith, 2012.
thereby also suggesting the ability to change some of the underlying conditions (in this case concerning social support or acceptance). In this way, no longer confined to a one-way street, so to speak, the dependence of principles upon facts – and the realignment of the two where deemed necessary – can, at least theoretically, be brought to also invoke changes in both.

The methodological position stated here is significant for the purpose of this thesis inasmuch as the underlying assumption of the general question advanced is that the paradigmatic shifts of the Anthropocene in some sense calls for certain adjustments also to what can be claimed to be politically legitimate, since any understanding or assumption of political legitimacy is dependent on particular empirical conditions. That is, the question about what kind of political order the Anthropocene legitimizes is borne out of the conviction that political thinking – interpreted here as the legitimation of past, present, and future political order – cannot be analytically set apart from the material conditions that make the existence of that order possible. Changes in the environmental conditions grounding and enabling our present order – assumed to be deemed legitimate (at least tacitly) – will necessarily entail certain changes also in the conceptual, as well as the institutional, particularity of the arrangements through which this legitimacy is secured.
4 A realist notion of political legitimacy

The assumptions expressed above concerning legitimacy are largely congruent with those advanced by the late Bernard Williams, who in a posthumously published collection of essays tried to outline a political philosophy in tune with a more realist view of the political life. In this collection Williams proposes a realist theory that acts as contrast to those who ‘make the moral prior to the political’ (2005, p. 2); those according to whom political solutions may be evaluated based on moral judgements prior to, or even oblivious of, the workings of politics itself (Hall, 2015b, p. 466). According to this view, the act of moral deliberation – to persuade actual political actors, or the general public, to change their mind on any particular topic – is an act that in itself also presumes the existence of a prior political sphere – the sphere wherein this deliberation takes place. The political sphere is in this sense perceived to be logically prior to the moral since the implicit goal of any moral deliberation – complete consensus on moral principles – effectively precludes the need for political contestation as such (Miller, 2016, p. 160). Consequently, Williams’ theory identifies an initial foundation for any specifically political inquiry, namely: ‘the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation.’ (B. Williams, 2005, p. 3; p. 62, emphasis added) The purpose of the state – or any other polity we may think of for that matter – should therefore be required to provide an answer to this initial problem; an answer which in turn will make up a necessary, albeit not necessarily sufficient, condition of political legitimacy. The varied responses to this problem, which reasonably may be called the problem of political order, would therefore have to meet what Williams describes as the ‘basic legitimation demand’, meaning that the particular solution proclaimed would have to both (successfully) establish order and ‘offer a justification of its power to each subject.’ (ibid, p. 4, emphasis in original). Legitimacy thus becomes something granted unto a particular and ordered form of domination or authority by those governed, rather than something one merely traces back to pre-conceived moral standards this authority must meet (Hall, 2015b, p. 469).

In its initial formation, this theory makes no specific demands on the particular nature of the order in question, other than those already stated – to ensure the continuing existence of a political sphere. Further appeals to desirable

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13 Williams notes (2005, p. 3) that for Hobbes, to whom this type of reductive, minimalist political order or project is usually ascribed (cf. Tuck, 1993; 1999), an answer to this question would in actuality be sufficient, due to the demanding historical circumstances of his time.
conditions or virtues would have to be added on top of this baseline criterion, rendering the theory inherently indifferent to whether the solution be ultimately liberal or illiberal in kind. Any given order, in any given space or time, would have to be a response to certain specific historical circumstances, which leads Williams to concede that it may very well be the case that an order has to be liberal so as to attain these goals, while at the same time acknowledging the possibility that it might not (B. Williams, 2005, p. 4).

This insistence on the dependency of legitimacy on a particular historical context is, however, also found elsewhere. For instance, Max Weber’s classical theory of political legitimacy is similarly involved in examining on what grounds authorities have laid claim to legitimacy in the past, thus creating his famous tripartite typology: by invoking tradition; by exhibiting charismatic qualities (most notably expressed in the presence of the charismatic leader); or by reference to existing legal structures. This approach is not only oriented towards how and why certain authorities have portrayed their rule as legitimate – towards the perceived sources of legitimacy – but engages also the question of when and why people have or do put up with domination (Weber, 1919/2015, p. 137). Despite this, Weber is often (somewhat unfairly) described as one who is paying too much attention to current beliefs in legitimacy, and consequently also often accused of implicitly suggesting that legitimacy has no other specific inherent requirements (Beetham, 2013, pp. 8-9).

David Beetham, in his masterful treatise on the subject of legitimacy (2013), tries to outline the main features of political legitimacy in much the same sociological vein as Weber, while also, simultaneously, attempting to escape this criticism by differentiating between current popular notions of legitimacy and the reasons people may have for justifying these notions (ibid, pp. 10-11). Weber, according to Beetham, is guilty of having passed down a definition of legitimacy far too constrained, in turn concealing its dependency on the ‘complex of factors which give people good grounds for compliance [...]’ (ibid, p. 23, emphasis added) In arguing this, Beetham manages to show, that if taken at face value, Weber’s conceptualization lacks sufficient explanatory power in situations when people suddenly seem to withdraw their support of an order hitherto deemed legitimate, or may only find such explanations in unexpected shifts of faith among the people subjected to that power (ibid, pp. 34-35). Simply put, it favours the constrained interpretation that the failure of a political system reside almost exclusively in its lacking capacity to win the hearts and minds of the people, despite the fact that it may be due to ‘a developing discrepancy between the rules of power and the norms that provide their justification.’ (ibid, p. 23) Beetham’s critique in this sense also has a prescriptive streak, suggesting that the task of the political scientist becomes one of assessing the amount of discrepancies between any political system and the ‘beliefs, values and expectations that provide its justification [...]’ (ibid, p. 11), rather than merely analyzing the presence of certain ideas among its population.14

14 Incidentally, this analytical strategy is similar to Miller’s, at least if we accept the way it is represented by Stears (2005).
Nevertheless, even if we were to agree with the statement that Weber relies a bit too much on the analytical task of simply identifying ideas of legitimacy, his perspective has a certain advantage. If one compares it solely to the political philosopher’s view, against which Beetham himself also ultimately constructs his own analysis of legitimacy (similar to Williams’ stance against the political moralists), this advantage is rendered more obvious. The typological account proposed by Weber means also (implicitly at least) that political entities attempt to secure legitimacy based on the perceived success rate of any strategy ultimately chosen. A king, for example, reasonably attempt to wield executive power based on the widely accepted notion that heritage conveys the legitimate right to do so, whereas the president most likely may not. What Weber’s analysis presumes is that demands made on the polity holding and exerting power, by those governed, are variable in nature. It also presumes that the analysis of current notions of legitimacy, rather than universal ones, is a fruitful way forward for any study of government or politics (cf. Barker, 1990, p. 25-26). This definition of legitimacy as thus always being ‘legitimacy-in-context’, a definition to which Beetham himself adheres (2013, p. 38), owes more to the analytical strategy considered, and possibly introduced, by Weber than Beetham seem willing to acknowledge. This insertion of a strategic rationale into the question of legitimacy may very well be the reason for why we still return to Weber on this topic at all. Beetham’s theory of political legitimacy is intended to be universal in its analytical capacity (ibid, p. 21) but shares with Weber, as well as with Williams, the insistence on analyzing particular configurations, and thereby the reliance on contextual factors, in any evaluation of political legitimacy. Consequently, these three theories of political legitimacy are all decidedly based on the notion that justification of power must always speak to the particular situation at hand; must always answer the question of ‘what makes sense now?’ (B. Williams, 2005, p. 11)

The advantage of Williams’ argument in particular for the purpose of this thesis, however, comes as a result of the fact that it establishes legitimacy as the central problem of political theory and political philosophy alike (Miller, 2016, p. 161, cf. Barker 1990), albeit a legitimacy judged by comparatively vague standards. In Williams’ view, as I have already mentioned, the question of political legitimacy is intimately tied to the historical context in which the

15 That is not, however, to say that Beetham’s further development of this notion of legitimacy is not comparatively more developed than the original enunciation, for it most certainly is.

16 Aforementioned Miller provides somewhat of a critique of Williams’ position, one that effectively takes the edge of the latter’s criticism of the purported ‘moralists’. For instance, Miller (2016, p. 164) raises a question about whether the priority of the political is just that – a priority, or whether the justification that is a result of the ‘basic legitimation demand’ being met is based on principles found elsewhere (in moral theory perhaps?). In Miller’s rendition of Williams’ theory three issues are highlighted (2016, p. 161): Why is the securing of order a political rather than a moral question? Why is the political more desireable than its alternatives? How is the ‘basic legitimation demand’ met? All these are valuable questions, and Miller’s attempt to provide answers to them using Williams’ own theory points out some of the limits of that theory. However, this is a discussion far too wide for the purposes of this thesis and I will not address it further. Suffice it to say that Miller concludes his critique with the acknowledgement of the centrality of legitimacy in politics, while simultaneously noting that legitimacy need to be conceptualized by some kind of reference to moral values (ibid, p. 174). To some degree, Williams actually recognizes this fact by noting the possible existence of moral ideas in politics (2005, p. 8), but Miller is very much on point in stating that this relation could be developed further.
demands on a particular order are made, thus allowing him to differentiate between the first political question – whether the necessary criteria of order are met or not – and the specific expression of the answer provided. This in turn enables us to imagine different answers to different contexts, all sharing the possibility of being sufficiently legitimate if also managing to formulate an answer to the necessary first question. It is by distinguishing between the first political question and any ensuing answer in the first place, that the question of order is revealed. Order, political order to be precise, is here the crucial link between politics and legitimacy, whereby the former essentially enables as well as conditions the application of the latter.\(^{17}\) In this sense, Williams’ analytical application of the concept takes one step further than Weber’s, since it ensures that legitimacy in every instance can be held accountable by at least demanding conditions of order. Williams’ definition of political legitimacy thus manages to transcend Weber’s comparatively thin sociological approach, while at the same time erecting a firm bulwark against more normatively oriented definitions.

This relationship between politics and legitimacy is arguably translatable also into the international sphere, at least if we assume the international sphere to be the political arena where the political rights and expectations of individuals are extended also to states in what is commonly referred to as the domestic analogy (Suganami, 1986).\(^{18}\) For as Ian Clark contends concerning the legitimacy in global order – legitimacy is only feasible in the context of an existing community. Moreover, the fact that we may even put forward demands for legitimacy and hope to be heard on those demands simultaneously postulates the existence of a community where this is possible – it is in this sense a case of ‘mutual formation’ (I. Clark, 2003, p. 80). It does not follow from this that legitimacy is in any sense inevitable when an order is established, but only that demands for the former are made possible in the presence of the latter, and only then. The obvious follow-up question concerning the purpose of legitimacy is made more comprehensible in light of this fact, as is the question of the ability of legitimacy to foment change in existing orders, that is, the question concerning the practical capabilities of

\(^{17}\) On a side note, this is squarely at odds with Beetham’s conception, according to which legitimacy in no sense can be reduced to politics (2013, pp. 39-40). For Beetham it is the object of power that is in need of legitimation, rather than politics, even though the demand for legitimacy mainly arises in organized societies. This leaves the case of sheer coercive use of force, by one group of people upon another which, according to Beetham, also constitutes an act in need of legitimation. For Williams this is rather a case of something pre-political which the political in turn is intended to act as a bulwark against. Hence, no demand for legitimacy can reasonably arise unless political order has either already been established, or is in the act of being so – a process wherein the following would apply: ‘If the power of one lot of people over another is to represent a solution to the first political question, and not itself be a part of the problem, something has to be said to explain (to the less empowered, to concerned bystanders, to children being educated in this structure, etc.) what the difference is between the solution and the problem [...]’ (B. Williams, 2005, p. 63, emphasis in original). For Weber, legitimacy is of course intimately tied to the monopoly on the use of physical force held by states (2015/1919, p. 136), and thus also inseparable from the political sphere. To expand the concept of legitimacy further to include any use of physical force, regardless of the existence or context of a political sphere, would in this view be nonsensical. This, since the use of physical force, to attack as well as to defend oneself, would in theory be permitted to anyone, albeit not equally successfully so.

\(^{18}\) An analogy whose modern characteristics also have been traced back to the early seventeenth century Dutch lawyer and proto-IR theorist Hugo Grotius (Tuck, 1993; 1999), rather than to Hobbes to whom it is usually attributed, for example by Hidemi Suganami (1986). The viability of the domestic analogy is, however, highly contested, and has been so since its inception (cf. Bartelson, 2014, pp. 98-99). At the same time, as Suganami makes abundantly clear in his article, it exhibits a curious persistence in IR theory despite claims to the contrary.
Historically, legitimacy has been accredited with the ability to garner support and thereby to also ensure the stability and longevity of any particular order (ibid, pp. 81-82). Nevertheless, as I. Clark argues (ibid, p. 83), this claim is hard to back up as it has traditionally been made by inferences from the actual presence or lack of beliefs in legitimacy, and is therefore liable to the same critique Beetham levels against Weber: it runs the risk of merely affirming a status quo direction of events, from legitimacy to stability. It is rarely acknowledged that it may be the other way around. Stability and the criteria (material, economic, military, institutional, or otherwise) necessary in order to attain it may just as likely be what drives the development and consolidation of particular conceptions of legitimacy (ibid, p. 87). This is not to suggest that orders cannot be made more stable by efforts to secure legitimacy, for this is surely the case. Public and popular support matter, regardless of the order in question (cf. Reus-Smit, 2014, pp. 347-348). Nor is it to suggest that orders cannot be both illegitimate and durable – arrangements can almost always be made to alleviate the lack of popular support, at least to a certain degree.

The theoretical possibility of a sturdy but ultimately illegitimate order is also clearly indicated by Williams’ rendition of the relationship between order and legitimacy in the first place (cf. also I. Clark, 2003, p. 83), even though any conclusive empirical argument on this topic is ultimately a question of consulting historical data.

However, what one may suggest is that the way legitimacy is generally treated in the international sphere is indicative of a ‘loosely-based Weberian approach’ (ibid, p. 80): as an activity or practice shaped by the relative strength and influence of individual actors (most often states), rather than as a purely external reserve of moral or political resources to draw from in times of need (I. Clark, 2005, pp. 29-30). It therefore seems clear that the dilemma identified by I. Clark is complementary to the dilemma identified by Williams, albeit stated in terms more common to the field of IR: notions of legitimacy, regardless of their actual transformative capacity, cannot be separated from the establishment of order, since it is within this order, however provisional it may be, that particular notions of legitimacy also take shape. It also seems clear that Williams’ articulation of legitimacy differs from that of the other Weberians (as well as the moralists), precisely in that it actually establishes a set of minimal conditions or criteria that is beyond and above the registered existence of beliefs in legitimacy: ‘the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation.’ (B. Williams, 2005, p. 3; p. 62, emphasis added) In this way, Williams’ realist

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19 For a more thorough overview of this question, see Ian Clark, 2005, ch. 1. For one perspective that distinctly asserts the transformative capacity of legitimacy, partly due to its conceptual sui generis character and relative autonomy, see Bukovansky, 2002.

20 Not to mention the hypothetical vulgar-Weberian perspective that an order is always de facto legitimate until the very point it breaks down.

21 For a few telling examples of this, see Buchanan, 2002; Buchanan & Keohane, 2006; Hurd, 1999; Hurrell, 2005; Reus-Smit, 2014; Steffek, 2003; Zürn, 2004. A partial exception to this trend is Rengger, 2005; 2013. One author that equates the two perspectives of Williams and Weber, respectively, is Valentini, 2012b. The difference between the two perspectives is, I think, pace Valentini, that Williams manages to sneak in the first political question (which enables the act of a tentative objective evaluation) although he also essentially comes down on the side of the sociological approach suggested by Weber.
adaptation of the concept of political legitimacy lends itself to an initial evaluation of the possibility of deeming a particular political arrangement legitimate or not.
5 Order in political theory

According to some scholars, the problem of order, or rather, the question of how to successfully stave off disorder and chaos, is and has always been the kernel of all political theory. Pasquale Pasquino, for instance, traces the historical development in political theory and thought to ever changing conceptions of threats to political order (1996, p. 19). Thomas Hobbes is the one, following this view, who ushered in the distinctively modern answer to the question of alleviating societal threats. According to Pasquino, pre-modern political thinking had assumed some kind of mixed government to be the best answer to the threat of disorder within the polity, Machiavelli’s defence of the republic being the case in point (ibid, pp. 23-24). For Machiavelli, the republican constitution with its principles of division and power-sharing was intended to be a solution to the threat of the ambitions of the affluent classes of the city, as well as that of the growing dissent among their less affluent counterparts. In consideration of the nature of these threats, the response proposed by Machiavelli would in effect be an attempt to institutionalize moderation (ibid, p. 27). For Hobbes, the threat came in a quite similar disguise, that of the threat to social cohesion. This threat was for Hobbes, however, so grave in nature as to warrant a widely different kind of response. Rather than the mere threat posed by two opposing classes with conflictual interests, a threat that possibly could be accommodated constitutionally, the Reformation (and the Renaissance) had, according to Hobbes, established the persistent possibility of individuals choosing their own philosophical and religious doctrines and thus the ‘difficulty, not yet sufficiently resolved, of obeying at once, both God, and Man, then when their Commandements are one contrary to the other.’ (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 402) Any society suffering from the ‘radical uncertainty’ invited by the advent of the modern age would thus risk societal instability (Tuck, 1993, p. 396), since the reformed religious doctrine (as well as the renewed interest in moral scepticism, see Tuck, 1993 in toto) effectively had rendered every individual equal to any politically established authority in matters concerning moral and religious disputes (Pasquino, 1996, p. 29). Hence, formulating an answer to the question of how to establish political order under these circumstances became the main purpose of Hobbes’ political theory (Tralau, 2007, p. 264). The distinctively modern answer Hobbes ultimately provided to this distinctively modern problem would be the reduction of any multiplicity within a polity to that of two types of subjects: individuals and their sovereign (Pasquino, 1996, p. 31). Through this abstraction and the wider treatise of which it is a crucial part – the Leviathan – the first systematic theory of the modern state was constructed (ibid, p. 20).
The order proposed by Hobbes was, however, not a liberal one. Pasquino accurately asserts that Hobbes objective was answering the question of why a state, rather than the question that would come to preoccupy later liberal and republican theorists, namely, how much state? (ibid, p. 21) The question of how much state, or how much governance, was already negatively implied in the sovereign power suggested by Hobbes: the power exerted by the sovereign could not be of the same nature as, or could not contribute to, the problem of disorder and social ills this power was intended to alleviate. The theory of order formulated by Hobbes assumed that the right to self-preservation – ‘the right men have by Nature to protect themselves, when none else can protect them’ (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 153) – would act as the outermost limit or restriction on sovereign power, since self-preservation had been the reason for consenting to the establishment of a political order based on this concept in the first place.

The threat of disorder is, however, not an issue exclusive to the domestic political sphere, but a problem that also transcends individual political units. Nicholas Rengger, who happens to proscribe to the notion that ‘the search for a practically efficacious and normatively justifiable conception of political order has been a central question for political theory for much of its history [...]’ (2000, xii), suggests furthermore that political order is, and always has been, inevitably international in nature (ibid, p. 2). Even though this aspect has been largely absent in the political philosophy of the last two centuries (ibid, p. 3), Rengger traces ‘the problem of order’ far back in written history only to return to its expression within the field of IR in the short twentieth century. In his view, order has undergone several shifts and transformations along the way, although one major such change in particular stand out. Political order once conceptualized in accordance with the Greek emphasis on an orderly harmony between the world and the wider cosmos, developed into the later (but still early) Christian notion of order, exemplified by Augustine of Hippo, for whom order since the fall of man has essentially been impossible to attain, thus reducing the objective of secular and religious authorities alike to that of ‘minimizing [...] instability, disorder and conflict.’ (ibid, p. 5) This divergence symbolizes in a sense the difference between two distinctive directions in terms of conceptualizing order that have continued to go head to head with one another: that of an idealism seeking or striving to achieve order through the resemblance of something otherworldly, and the realism (comparatively speaking at least) inherent to a strategy aimed at outlining and transforming the crisscrossing patterns of actual authorities present, that is, in the practice of ordering.22 Roughly summarized, whereas the former seek to erect an order on the basis of a preconceived understanding of an orderly composition, no

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22 That is not to suggest that this practice lacks ties to ideational conceptions of divinity. Rengger quite clearly explains the inherently theological grounding of this practice in feudal Europe: ‘It also meant that “order” was related to an eschatological pattern, God’s divine plan, which allocated a place to everyone and everything, and the administration of which was in the hands of the ruler [...]’ (2000, p. 6) However, this divergence is somewhat similar to that proposed by John Meyer (2001, ch. 4), who in Hobbes sees the application of a mechanistic understanding of nature unto politics as the first definitive break with the Aristotelian and teleological understanding of politics that preceded it. Tuck has however, thoroughly and convincingly might I add, argued that the disenchantment with Aristotle began much earlier, namely following the renewed interest in scepticism and stoicism in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century (1993; 1999).
matter the level of impracticality or feasibility, the latter seek to clarify and strengthen order where it is already present, albeit not necessarily in a desirable form.

Rengger, in much the same manner as Pasquino, discerns in the works of Hobbes one of, if not the first, specifically modern justification of this particular conception of order. The notion of ‘placing order within the realm of human institutions […]’ (ibid, p. 6) had by the advent of the seventeenth century perhaps lost its immediate connection to Augustine, but would reach its fruition in the way in which Hobbes subscribes to a radical and nominalist conception of sovereignty, and the way in which he attaches any successful order to this concept. Every effort to secure order would thus with Hobbes be found within the emerging institutional structure of the state, and furthermore, every such order would at best be a makeshift solution:

The ‘sovereign’ creates order not just in fact but in name also. By definition, therefore, there can be no ‘order’ where there is no sovereign and since there is no sovereign in the ‘international realm’ there is no order. Hence the ‘problem’ of international relations and Hobbes’ understanding of it as a ‘warre of all against all’. (ibid, p. 7, notes omitted)

For Rengger, this rendition of the problem of order, is largely equivalent to where we find ourselves today (ibid, p. 9). Even if more contemporary discourses on order almost always adopt a distinctively international or global approach, the same assumptions introduced by Hobbes apply. Order is a question of keeping conflict, death, and despair at arms length by crowdsourcing the sovereign power of individuals into one all-encompassing figure, be it, ultimately, a monarch, a parliamentary assembly, or any other conceivable representative body. The problem of order within the state and the way in which we, since Hobbes, have understood its premises, also apply in and to the system of states. Following Rengger, the issue has throughout the twentieth century, not to mention throughout the evolution of the field of IR as such, mainly been one of assessing and evaluating ways of managing order: be it through the balancing of powers, the attempted creation of an international society and shared values, or the establishment of international institutions or regimes. Even those critical perspectives that would have us abandon any project of achieving order on these premises – those that wish to transcend or end order on the basis that such an abandonment carry a certain emancipatory potential – in a sense still have to (however reluctantly) retreat to order understood and conceptualized on these terms (ibid, pp. 165-166).

Rengger is also, perhaps surprisingly, adamant concerning the fact that something since the days of Hobbes has radically altered this inherently Augustinian notion of order. That something is the way in which order, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gained a renewed connection to an Aristotelian telos, the difference being that the lack of a divine order as a reference point became substituted by conceptions of historical and scientific progress, thus enabling the growth of the big ideologies of this period: liberalism and socialism. For Rengger, these ideologies are fundamentally ideologies of progress (ibid, p.
8), and it is the resurgence of this element of progress that has underlined any discussion of either managing or overcoming order in the twentieth century. Political order has in both of these perspectives come to be identified with a *teleocratic* trajectory (Rengger, 2013, pp. 29-35), in which the agency of the modern state is permeated by the purpose of a very particular enterprise, multifaceted in character: that of maintaining a social, cultural, or even religious cohesion; of developing the state’s capacity by ‘exploiting the resources of the Earth’ (ibid, p. 34); and that of fusing these two purposes into a wider moral ambition aimed at ensuring the continued welfare of the state’s inhabitants, and ultimately the state itself.23 Even if this enterprise is not equally stressed by those favoring attempts to manage order as it is by those trying to criticize it, the notion of progress acts as a framework for both. Order is in this regard seamlessly tied to progress.

A similar interpretation of the historical transformation of the concept of order is suggested by Charles Taylor (2003). Taylor, however, frames the notion of progress inherent to the modern idea of order in distinctively economic terms, and places the birth of this development much earlier in time. What Taylor emphasizes is the way in which the economic thinking of the eighteenth century came to favor the idea that exchanges of services between individuals would be mutually beneficial not only to these particular individuals, but to society in general. In this way, Taylor manages to concoct a slightly different narrative than Rengger, mainly because he acknowledges the notion of telos as having been present throughout the whole course of European thinking on the problem of order. The Aristotelian telos as expressed in the innate purpose of achieving harmony between the world and the divine plane – assigning to every object between the Earth and the heavens a certain natural role, as ‘Forms-at-work in reality’ (Taylor, 2003, p. 77) – would in this view merely give way to a *different version of telos*, rather than having telos disappear altogether and then return anew.

According to Taylor, the inherited purpose of order as a reenactment of a preordained trajectory turned with the rise of economic thinking in the eighteenth century to one of ensuring the creation of mutual benefits between individuals and between states through economic transactions. With this turn, order became reduced to following a trajectory more akin to a particular functional necessity: that of moulding political society to better accommodate the flourishing of economic prosperity and security alike. Order came, essentially, even to be recognized as the equation of economy and security, not only in practice as it had surely been for ages, but also, principally, in philosophical and moral terms (ibid, pp 70-71). The progress inherent to the modern conception of order thus came to be equated with the notion of economic progress.24

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23 This idea, albeit in slightly different terms, is put forward also by Andrew Hurrell, according to whom ‘the conditions of global political life in the twenty first century [...] require the identification of substantive collective goals and the creation of institutionalized structures of governance to implement them.’ (Hurrell, 2007, p. 298)

24 Bonneuil & Fressoz describe this as two divergent trajectories: one being the suppression of any notion of telos within the natural sciences – that is, pertaining to the Earth system and life as such; the other being the affirmation of telos within the
social sciences – that is, in history and society as affairs essentially disconnected from the vagaries of the natural world (2016, p. 23ff and ch. 2 in toto)
6 Political order in the Holocene

As should have been made clear by now, the adoption of the realist notion of political legitimacy proposed by Williams leads quite naturally to the engagement with the question of political order, since this theory suggests that it is within an existing order the demands for legitimate rule may arise, and that no demands for legitimacy can be made in conditions where order has not yet been established. Even if we may assume (as Williams himself does) that liberalism as an answer to the first question of political order in some version or other seem to be the only game in town at the moment (cf. Bell, 2014; Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999; Dunne & Flockhart, 2013), this is not to be interpreted as liberalism being inherently more morally correct (even if the political philosopher may very well make this claim). Rather, the sway held by certain perceptions of sovereignty, autonomy and self-governance favored by liberalism or a liberal global order is consistent with a particular time in history where an answer to the ‘basic legitimation demand’ can only be met by an order embracing these values. That time in history is modernity (Williams, 2005, pp. 8-9).

For a long time in history, however, orders were upheld by completely different principles. Early human societies, nomadic as well as sedentary, most likely saw fit to adopt notions of reciprocal altruism as a way of ensuring smooth continuing coexistence within small groups (Fukuyama, 2011). As these societies grew larger – to the point that all members no longer reasonably could be expected to be acquainted with one another – so did the need for social coherence by way of religious and cultural symbolism: ‘[S]hared stories enabled people who did not know each other personally, indeed had never met, to trust one another so that they could co-operate and share the same living space in peace.’ (Black, 2016, p. 12) The need for more coercion, the establishment of firm hierarchies, and the centralization of power – in the hands of a priest-king for example – likely came about as a response to the need for protection from external enemies, or in response to the need for internal consolidation in times of crisis. Following this of course, came the growing need also to legitimize this authority. Not until around the fifth century BCE, in China and Greece respectively, would humans attempt to formulate ideas with which to do this almost entirely by reference to necessity. Up until then, the order of the day had always been attached to the legitimizing force of divinity itself, or some presumed resemblance to a divine order present elsewhere. In this sense, Plato and his contemporaries truly were the creators of political philosophy (ibid, p. 14).

These ancient modes of establishing political orders were in many senses pre-territorial (Ruggie, 1993, p. 149). Societies held together by kinship and a shared heritage had no necessary connection to any particular geographical place,
but were essentially non-territorial in that they functioned solely on the continued close proximity of their constituent members. To these ancient sedentary societies, notions of territory were akin to possessions – the land acted as a source of revenue first and foremost – rather than as ‘an object of political rule’ (Elden, 2010, p. 758; cf. Elden, 2013, pp. 39-42). Later nomadic tribes established distinctively territorial orders, albeit orders based on mobility and migration as livestock were herded from pasture to pasture in an intricately drawn, and most importantly – politically contested, pattern following the seasonal rains. By the Middle Ages political ordering had more clearly come to imply the idea of a demarcated territory, even if this idea and that of exclusive authority not yet had aligned with one another (Spruyt, 1994, ch. 3) – authority could still mainly be a question of a personal bond between ruler and subject. Two forms of political organizations in particular would early on embrace protean versions of an arrangement actually based on more closely fulfilling this alignment, at least in Europe: the free cities of Northern Italy and Flanders, and the absolutist states of France and England. These political entities would in their subsequent development try to leave an earlier feudal order wherein authority had been complex, multiple, and scattered; stratified and hierarchical, yet always overlapping; wedged between the interests and caprices of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope, respectively. Or in the words of the aforementioned Spruyt:

[F]eudal organization, with its crosscutting and overlapping jurisdictions, lacked both a clear center as well as territorial borders. Empire and church both claimed final decision-making power but lacked clear territorial specification of their authority. In theory all other political actors were their subjects. (1994, p 154)

As these centres of economic and military power became accustomed to the idea that they could detach themselves from the intricacies of this order and consolidate their power within a clearly demarcated area, the alignment of political authority and territory would slowly come in place. That is of course not to suggest that this development went ahead evenly or unhindered, and geographer Alexander B. Murphy argues that even though the idea of territorial states increasingly came to dominate the mindset of societal elites in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, the actual political landscape by this time still exhibited an abundant ecology of political entities (1996, pp. 85-86; 92). This plurality would, however, over the coming centuries come to be reduced to an international system consisting of largely identical political entities: sovereign states. A few distinct reasons have been given as an explanation of this (Spruyt, 1994, p. 155; ch. 8; cf. also Reus-Smit, 2014; Ruggie, 1993). One is the fact that the political entity of the state, with a final and unified decision-making authority, proved to be more efficient than its counterparts, mainly in terms of the ability to rationalize and streamline the economic and legal framework within a given area. Another is the fact that the state also proved more able in defining its subjects and thereby also more able to curtail ‘freeriding and defection’, altogether entailing the greater capacity to harness the resources necessary for continued survival. But
perhaps most importantly, the state in its ability to more clearly demarcate the external limits to its own authority proved to be better suited for interaction with neighboring polities, since this enabled as well as favored mutual recognition across established borders.

The principle or ideal with which this development came to be associated was of course that of sovereignty.\(^{25}\) This principle depended upon the existence of discrete political, and simultaneously territorial, units that would blossom in the milieu provided in the tumultuous sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the need for more stable and functional conditions between as well as within these same units. According to Murphy, sovereignty came to be the dominating ‘spatial framework for political life’ (1996, p. 91) precisely because it proved more able to accustom and balance the various power structures within Western Europe. It bears repeating, yet again, that this in no sense was a process that developed uniformly. As larger states came to be proportionally more powerful than smaller states, the principle of sovereignty that previously had functioned as a stabilizing or organizational mechanism, turned (in practice) into a concept whereby larger states justified the acquiring of new territory through coercion and warfare (ibid, p. 94). After the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815, however, the territorial framework of sovereign states became the cornerstone of a political order aimed precisely at restricting these types of activities by enforcing the principle of restriction inherent to the notion of sovereignty understood as mutual exclusion (Ruggie, 1986). In this regard, it also bears clarifying that this process largely took place within Europe as a consequence of the fact that a different set of rules could be applied in relation to states outside of this agreement, as well as in relation to colonial holdings in Africa, South America, Asia and elsewhere (and semi-colonial spheres within Europe before that, cf. Moore, 2015). In these places, the principle of sovereignty still entailed the right of fully sovereign European states (deemed equal in status in their dealings with one another) to essentially act as they saw fit in dealings with states or similar polities deemed non- or only partially sovereign (Anghie, 2005).

The long nineteenth century furthermore saw the rise of nationalism which came to shape notions of sovereignty, effectively adding to it another layer by infusing it with a more firm connection to a particular population. If for Hobbes the sovereign of the state had been (preferably at least) equal to the figure of the monarch, albeit in a highly performative sense – full sovereignty rested as much on the ability to wield it as on the specific character animating it – the populations of the slowly consolidating nation states came to be considered the new source of this power.\(^{26}\) Rather than bringing about the upheaval of the territorial logic of the sovereign state, this development further entrenched it, this due to the fact that the

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\(^{25}\) Whereas I would like to have given a full and fitting account of the history and transformation of the concept of sovereignty, there is neither place here, nor am I really capable of doing so. A few terrific sources worth mentioning on this topic are Bartelson, 1995; 2014; Kalmo & Skinner, 2010.

\(^{26}\) Barkin & Cronin (1994) outlines the ways in which these two separate logics of sovereignty – the state sovereignty and the popular sovereignty of the nation, respectively – have been undermining as well as animating one another over the course of the centuries since the initial inception of the concept.
territorial logic of the state came to be equated also with an order providing security to the newly empowered social community of the nation (Murphy, 1996, p. 100). And so it would continue well into the twentieth century. The great upheavals of this century – two world wars; the fall of an empire (the British) and the rise of others (the US and Soviet) – arguably stemming partly from this territorial logic, would not in any sense aid in its demise, but only strengthen this logic further, and ultimately usher in the era in which we find ourselves today:

With the extraordinary destructiveness of the two world wars, however, the act of challenging the territorial status quo itself increasingly lost legitimacy. Thus, even in the face of great functional and perceptual challenges to existing territorial structures, the sovereign territorial ideal came to be conceptually circumscribed by the lines that appear on maps of the world’s states. It was into this world that the former colonial territories of the 1950s and 1960s emerged, and they necessarily adapted to its norms. Thus, by the late 1960s most of the habitable land surface of the Earth was neatly compartmentalized into units that were seen as proper – even inevitable – building blocks for human social organization. (ibid, p. 102)
The legitimacy of the modern order and the international state system

The main argument made by Murphy is that even though the notion or concept of sovereignty has altered many times over, its initial connection to a territorially defined logic of a clear division between separate political units (and the definition of the latter by the former) (cf. Ruggie, 1986, pp. 142-143) has not. This territorial logic, described by Murphy as the ‘sovereign territorial ideal’, has in modernity been the constant around which every expression of political order has been constructed, intentionally or not; it is, as has been suggested, ‘the most distinct feature of modernity in international politics [...]’ (Ruggie, 1993, p. 168; cf. also Reus-Smit, 2014). Inherent to this process is an act of differentiation whereby notions of legitimacy pertaining to the international system of states are perpetuated (Krasner, 2016, pp. 521-522). Internally, within states, legitimacy is produced as an effect of the enabling and provision of order and safety – mainly in the economic terms suggested by Taylor (2003, ch. 5). Externally, between states, legitimacy is produced as an effect of the restriction this process (ideally at least) puts on ‘primitive expansion and aggrandizement’ (Ruggie, 1993, p. 161; cf. Murphy, 1996, p. 87), thereby also favoring the practices of liberal trade regimes, market expansion, and economic development, as a direct means of ensuring order (Ruggie, 1982).

Order in the modern age is thus based on the notion of an international system of territorially defined sovereign states successfully managing an ever-increasing state of, or struggle for, security, growth and prosperity, ultimately entailed by the emphasis on the inherently economic nature of modern political society. Not only Western European states, which one may perhaps assume based on the highly eurocentric overview I have presented, since, as Reus-Smit has argued, ‘modern international society is indeed a practical association, but in an equally important sense, a deep structural sense, it is informed by the institutional and organizational values of the constitutively prior European (now Western) gemeinschaft society.’ (1999, p. 38)

Legitimacy is in this order, per the Weberian definition of this concept I have outlined above, located mainly in the degree to which the population of each state can be said to acknowledge this trajectory as a legitimate one; the degree to which this system manages to maintain order understood on these terms.27 For Williams,

27 Both Rengger (2000, p. 8) and Reus-Smit (2014) call attention to the alleged legitimacy crisis agonizing the current international order based on territorially sovereign states. But whereas Rengger, however tentatively, situates this crisis in the
however, the issue of attributing legitimacy to a particular order is, as I have attempted to show, close but not identical to the strictly sociological methodology adopted by Weber. The distinction between necessary and sufficient criteria, introduced by Williams in his analysis of legitimacy, by separating the first political question from that of legitimacy proper (B. Williams, 2005, p. 3; p. 62), enables an analysis in which it is at least possible to stipulate the conditions upon which any future order may be erected. That is, this analysis is possible due to the fact that it is intended to provide an answer to the first political question, rather than to the question of what is inherently legitimate according to some external moral standard, a question that Williams quite elegantly brushes aside.

The necessary criteria pertaining to a state of legitimate order, in this regard, become those of institutional conditions whereby cooperation and security de facto can be accommodated, in order for subsequent ‘basic legitimation demands’ to be heard. This in turn implies continued environmental conditions wherein these institutional conditions are possible to sustain. A change in the environmental conditions of the Holocene to the environmental conditions characteristic of the Anthropocene provides us with enough reason to be wary of whether or not that will be the case. How will the modern territorial logic of the late Holocene, dependent as it is on relatively stable environmental conditions, fare when facing conditions of a widely different epoch – that of the Anthropocene? What impact will this have on the existence of political order as we have come to know it? These are questions I elaborate on in the following section.

context of a loss of faith in progress more generally, Reus-Smit makes no similar attempt to explain or outline the sources of this crisis.
8 The territorial logic of the Anthropocene

One immediate way of conceiving of the paradigmatic change entailed by the Anthropocene is the way in which it highlights the existing boundaries within which mankind as a whole is inevitably confined. These are the boundaries resulting from attempts within the field of the Earth system sciences to map out a space of environmental sustainability; boundaries intended to trace the outermost limits of what our modern societies reasonably can be expected to adapt to. In other words, these are intended to outline a ‘safe operating space for humanity’ by attempting to maintain conditions close to those of the Holocene (Rockström et al, 2009a; 2009b). One group of Earth system scholars have made out nine such boundaries, all working in tandem with one another (ibid). These range from levels of oceanic acidification and the rate of biodiversity loss to the amount of carbon dioxide concentrated within our atmosphere and the disruption of the nitrogen cycle. Most of these boundaries are quantified and given proposed boundary values that are not to be transgressed (Rockström et al, 2009b, p. 473), which also enables us to keep track of our development in those areas, be it in terms of progress or in terms of decline. Others, however, are not, leaving us partly in the dark concerning the threshold amount of atmospheric aerosol loading or chemical pollution, not to mention vanishing topsoils. This element of uncertainty also pervades the degree to which these boundaries intersect with one another. As they are currently defined, these ‘proposed boundary positions assume that no other boundaries are transgressed.’ (Rockström et al, 2009a, p. 4) They are nonetheless invariably linked to one another – the conceptual distinction between such boundaries as those that would constitute a planetary or at least continental threshold (systemic processes) and those that merely point to local or regional equivalents (cumulative processes) does not escape their inherently inseparable relationship. Local and comparatively small-scale changes do inevitably contribute to transgressions of system-wide thresholds and vice versa (ibid, pp. 6-7; cf., Young & Steffen, 2009, p. 299ff): ‘Transgressing the nitrogen–phosphorus boundary can erode the resilience of some marine ecosystems, potentially reducing their capacity to absorb CO$_2$ and thus affecting the climate boundary.’ (Rockström et al, 2009b, p. 474) The Earth system is just that: one system of natural forces eclipsing the width, length, and depth of the Earth, forever (hopefully) embraced in a continuous feedback loop; a ‘complex set of interacting physical, chemical, biological, and anthropogenic processes that define the planet’s environment.’ (Young & Steffen, 2009, pp. 295-296, notes omitted) The last part is particularly important, since it is the existence
of a certain degree of anthropogenic factors driving changes in this system that essentially defines the Anthropocene – mankind as one geological force among others.

To this date, three of these boundaries have been transgressed, suggesting that incrementally rising sea levels are to be expected due to heightened temperatures and diminishing ice sheets around the poles, a development that also most likely will produce drastic and threatening changes in weather patterns and storm tracks. Likewise, the continued disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycle, in combination with the diminishing fertility of global croplands due to the extensive use of synthesized pesticides, risk putting further stress on food security in many parts of the world (Steffen et al., 2011a, p. 854). Such a development will in turn likely lead to increasing deforestation, as more and more areas are converted into farmland, which will exacerbate the amount of CO₂ being released into the atmosphere further, driving global warming to even higher levels. The bumpy voyage into the state of environment that is the Anthropocene will most likely prove to be a security challenge on a hitherto unseen scale, on par only perhaps with the looming threat of global nuclear war during the height of the Cold War (Dalby, 2013; 2014). One thing is certain, the boundaries highlighted by the Anthropocene are irrevocably and irredeemably global. We are, in the words of Bruno Latour (2015), ‘Earthbound’ rather than ‘Earthlings’ – there is no conceivable quick escape from the global conditions in which we find ourselves; (the outer) space does not seem to be a new frontier. The Anthropocene is indicative of an increasingly unstable environmental scenario in which mankind, in toto, is locked in a relationship of radical interdependence, posing immense challenges for future geopolitical solutions by effectively transcending existing political and territorial boundaries. In this sense, the Anthropocene arguably entails conditions suggestive of a political order other than those made possible by the conditions of the Holocene.

The degradation of environmental conditions have on a number of occasions been depicted as a threat to political stability and security (Deudney, 1999, cf. also Dalby, 2009; 2013). As Simon Dalby points out, however, the threat discussed in these and similar discourses on environmental security has often been framed as issues of instability in peripheral regions, that is, the threat is ultimately perceived as spillover effects – such as terrorism, disruptions to international trade, and unwanted migration – of phenomena originally located elsewhere (2016b, p. 82). That is, threats are always conceptualized as inherently territorial, albeit at times expressed in transnational patterns that aid in exacerbating the perceived level of the threat in question. From this assumption concerning their territorial origin follows that they can only be addressed and contained on a similarly territorial basis. The environmental security often taken for granted in the Holocene, one in which nature and the threat of environmental change has been treated as a static background to societal conflict and social processes (cf. Deudney, 1999, p. 50; Litfin, 1999), is severely subverted in the Anthropocene. The traditional practice within the field of IR of taking an inherently deterritorialized threat such as ecological collapse and effectively re-territorializing it, will not prove to be valid or even plausible in this new epoch.
(Lövbrand & Stripple, 2006; cf. Grove & Chandler, 2016). No longer can we assume drastic changes to only have local or regional effects; in no sense will we be able to govern intensified storms, increasing desertification, or unpredictable and possibly global bouts of drought. We will only be able to respond – to alleviate rather than to ameliorate (cf. Young & Steffen, 2009, p. 302). The challenge posed by the Anthropocene is in this way indicative of the fact that environmental threats no longer in any meaningful or reasonable sense can be compartmentalized into neatly divided territorial spaces, but rather transcends both spatial and temporal boundaries upon which the international system of states is organized, since ‘the Earth as a whole has emerged as a social-ecological system [...]’ (ibid, p. 305)

Central to this challenge is the breakdown of the modern divide between nature and society, or nature and culture. Nature is in the Anthropocene clearly no longer the backdrop to an entirely social drama, but is rather an actor among others on the stage (Dalby, 2014, p. 7; Latour, 2014b) – the ‘human and non-human worlds are inextricably intertwined.’ (Grove & Chandler, 2016, p. 6; cf. Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Young & Steffen, 2009) Or, in the words of Hamilton et al:

Politics in the Anthropocene is about the collision of the system Earth with the system world, traditionally conceived as the political and social organisation of the former, which served as a background for the latter. This can no longer be the case in the Anthropocene, which signals a new era for geopolitics. (2015, p. 10)

The dynamic between the two – wherein one effectively affects the other and vice versa – furthermore displaces the very stage in question. There is in principle no firm and immovable foundation, no stage, for political actions and responses to be stabilized upon. Environmental security has in this sense, in the Anthropocene, no ‘safe, confined, predictable interior space [...]’ (Grove & Chandler, 2016, p. 6) to be tethered to; ‘a stable ecological context for humanity can no longer be taken for granted.’ (Dalby, 2016b, p. 84) This development is most obviously exemplified by the ways in which humans and societies is collectively par	aking in the very act of destabilization. If traditional geopolitics, that is, geopolitics in the Holocene, and the strategies adopted therein, assumed that one had to neutralize threats by acting in response to the field of events – assumed to be pre-existing or at least external in some sense – these same responses are now constituting the field in itself (Dalby, 2014; 2016b). The tacit notion that the environment embeds and circumscribes human action is replaced by the revelation that this perceived boundary between natural and social is but a chimera: ‘We are not just in the system; we also help drive its parameters.’ (Dryzek, 2014, p. 940).

Agency thus becomes a critical issue to address, since the feedback-loop between human agency and the conditions for human existence which this implies

28 For accounts that do more justice to this issue than I have space to do here, see Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Latour, 1993; Moore, 2015; Morton, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2011.
affects us all, while simultaneously being affected, literally, by all. Long gone are the effects of the Copernican revolution in which the Sun replaced the Earth and man as center of our cosmology: effects that ‘moved humans to ever-increasing insignificance.’ (Maslin & Lewis, 2015, p. 112) Humanity has, as it were, been brought back to the limelight – ‘Homo sapiens are central because the future of the only place where life is known to exist is being determined by the actions of humans [...] humanity has become a geological superpower.’ (ibid, p. 111, emphasis in original) Framed as an issue of environmental security on a global scale, this entails the politicization and securitization of almost every action imaginable. Activities previously assumed to be banal or even innocent are now permeated by their relation to the environmental condition in which we find ourselves: ‘When I turn the key in the ignition to my car, I am relating to global warming.’ (Morton, 2013, p. 20; cf. T. Clark, 2015, p. 11); ‘Human action is visible everywhere [...]’ (Latour, 2014a, p. 6) The Anthropocene thus implies entirely new definitions of what is to be deemed political: ‘[T]o understand the Anthropocene means widening the focus of sociopolitical critique and working toward an analysis of the power relations between geophysical actors, both human and nonhuman.’ (Davies, 2016, p. 62, emphasis in original)

The scale of the challenge at hand suggests that it is imperative to fully understand the sense in which the planetary boundaries implied by the Anthropocene constitutes a definitive break with the modern notion of order based on mutually exclusive territories, so as to be able to construct a valid concept of order fit to meet the demands posed by these conditions. Geopolitics is in this sense no longer first and foremost a matter of controlling resources or of staving off war, but of attempting to keep within the planetary boundaries – to restructure the infrastructure of our global society, to arrange for the global supply of sustainable energy et cetera (D’Souza, 2015). This task is, however, easier said than done, considering that the actors assigned to provide for the order in question are the very actors disrupting the chances of attaining it. For instance, Joyceeta Gupta asserts that the traditional assumption of geopolitics effectively negates the type of rigid external limits suggested by the Anthropocene. This is true also for Andrew Hurrell, to whom the notion of planetary boundaries implicit in the ecological challenge facing poses ‘material limits to the kinds of progress and development around which Western political theory has traditionally been constructed [...]’ (Hurrell, 2006, p. 168) Geopolitics, shaped as it is by the international system, sovereign states, and economic accumulation, is largely built on the ideal of ‘first come, first served’ (Gupta, 2016, p. 278–279), suggesting that the ability to intervene, or ‘intravene’ (Harrington, 2016, p. 494), in the entanglement between individuals, states, and other natural forces, is severely

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29 This is not to suggest that the effects of ecological degradation and even destruction is in any way evenly distributed. The Global South is of course carrying an unreasonable burden even in this regard by disproportionately suffering from the effects while at the same time having little or no responsibility in the historical development that led us here (Gemenne, 2015; cf. also Biermann et al, 2016; Chaturvedi & Painter, 2007; Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015; Head, 2014). Likewise, further rising temperatures and extreme climate fluctuations in the near future will (there really is no justice in the world) hit the poorest first (Harrington et al, 2016).
limited. As David Schlosberg points out: ‘Limits discourse immediately faces opposition. However justifiable it may be in both economic and ecological terms, dominant actors in political and economic systems cannot buy into such talk of boundaries.’ (2016, p. 198-199) What is to be thought about order – our current order – if this is indeed true? What if it is the very constitution of the present order that is at fault; what if the possibility to successfully address the problems of environmental security and global order in the Anthropocene is precluded by the very territoriality upon which this order rests? This is the issue I turn to next.
9 The possibility of order

Many times before have the international system of sovereign states, and the territorial logic upon which it is premised, been treated as structurally disadvantaged vis-à-vis environmental issues (cf. Hurrell, 2006; Lipschutz & Conca, 1993; Litfin, 1997; 1998; 1999), with some going as far as to suggest that it is state sovereignty as such that endangers the planet (Falk, 2015). For instance, Karen Litfin (1997) has carefully investigated the nature of the relationship between sovereignty and environmental issues and found it to be based on principally two misconceptions: sovereignty is either seen as inherently unable to address questions of environmental degradation and sustainability, or as the only hope we have as evident in the practice of transforming and extending state-sourced sovereignty to existing intergovernmental environmental regimes. In manichean fashion, state sovereignty becomes thus either the enemy or the protector of environment (ibid, p. 168), which rather suggests that different conceptions of sovereignty are at work: ‘The scope of state autonomy may be narrowed by pressures from above and below, as the erosion-of-sovereignty thesis claims, even as the problem-solving capacity of states increases, as the second view argues.’ (ibid, p. 169) In a similar vein, Ken Conca (1994) has suggested that the effects of environmental concerns upon sovereignty, and vice versa, are multifaceted, in itself indicative of the fact that the concept of sovereignty is inherently malleable. It is therefore, according to both these authors, entirely possible for sovereignty, here understood as the ability of the state to act autonomously, to be constrained in some areas, while simultaneously be furthered in others by the participation in international cooperation (ibid, p. 703).

The underlying question here is of course whether or not the sovereign state is deemed capable of undergoing a necessary transition to sustainability; whether or not the quality of sustainability is something the sovereign state at all is compatible with. Some would have it that it is – that the sovereign state and the international system can be transformed into a more environmental-friendly and democratic configuration (cf. Baber & Bartlett, 2016; Barry & Eckersley, 2005; Dryzek & Stevenson, 2011; Eckersley, 2004). Others would preclude this possibility entirely, on the basis that the positive order needed to ensure sustainability is antithetical to the power of the exception held by the sovereign – at every instance at liberty to upend this order (Smith, 2009). Robyn Eckersley (2004), who has produced the arguably most well-composed effort at

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30 The latter naturally, according to these perspectives, coinciding with the former.
31 An attempt to mitigate the impasse between these two positions has been offered by Rickard Andersson (2015).
conceptualizing the ‘green state’, is naturally a stout defender of the very possibility to render the sovereign state ‘green’ (ibid, pp. 127-128). One might even say, as Eckersley herself does, that this position is somewhat revisionist, since it is adamant in tracing the ability to implement the necessary reforms back to the state first and foremost, rather than to global governance initiatives (ibid, p. xi). Central to this understanding is the assumption that the sovereign state is able to ‘systematically prioritize sustainability’ (Andersson, 2015, p. 63), an assumption in itself supposedly premised on a prior understanding of what the historical role and purpose of the sovereign state has been and possibly still is. Eckersley clearly points out that the promise of greening sovereignty is just that – a promise. It is based on a purported trajectory inferred from a noted shift pertaining to the purpose of the state since the advent of modern environmentalism, namely ‘a shift in the purpose of the modern state from environmental exploiter and territorial defender to that of environmental protector, trustee, or public custodian of the planetary commons.’ (Eckersley, 2004, p. 209).

As evidence of this trajectory, Eckersley invokes three things: the observed willingness of states to engage in or at least support practices of environmental multilateralism; ‘ecological modernization’ as a developing strategic resource for companies as well as states; and the emergence of a growing environmental awareness in the civil society of many states (ibid, p. 15; 211ff). However, as true as this might be of current tendencies, Eckersley also outlines three major forces working to ruthlessly undermine any environmental initiative: the purportedly anarchic character of the international system; the inherently capitalist nature of said system; and the “‘democratic deficits’ of the liberal democratic state.” (ibid, p. 14; ch. 2-4) As much as Eckersley contends that ‘it is too hasty to assume that the social structures of international anarchy, global capitalism, and the liberal democratic state are necessarily anti-ecological and mutually reinforcing [...]’ (ibid, p. 14), one may feel inclined to resort to disbelief. This disbelief is furthermore hard to shed upon scrutinizing the argument Eckersley provides to bring this point home, since she manages to prove that these countervailing forces indeed are reinforcing one another. Eckersley suggests (through a constructivist approach) that the state, despite external pressure within the international system, is able to adopt the role of ‘ecological trustee’ (ibid, p. 51), that ‘ecological modernization’ may provide an element of economic competitiveness (ibid, p. 83), and that civil society organizations have successfully managed to frame and put ecological issues on the agenda in many liberal states (ibid, pp. 109-110). Simultaneously, she suggests that it is the economic forces of the capitalist system permeating the international system that is to blame for creating the pressure inhibiting further ecological multilateralism (ibid, p. 51). Likewise, she insists that the capacity of the state to undergo a transformation to ecological modernization is being undermined by the state’s dependency on capital accumulation to fund these reforms (ibid, p. 83), expressed by the fact that the state ‘succumbs to the alluring moment of material progress and the belief in rational, technological mastery of nature in ways that uphold economic freedoms while ruling out more critical deliberation over the ultimate purpose and character of the modernization process.’ (ibid, p. 109) Moreover, if the international system (to a large degree
dominated by Western liberal states) can be assumed to be that which upholds and effectively secures the capitalist nature of the global economic order, then the question rather becomes one of how much more mutually reinforcing these could possibly be.

The question remains, however, to which degree these forces are inherently anti-ecological. The irretrievable connection between the international system, sovereign states, and a global capitalist economic order (cf. Strange, 1999; Teschke & Lacher, 2007) is pretty much taken for granted in the literature on the Anthropocene (cf. Altvater, 2015; Moore, 2015). Christian Parenti has, for instance, called attention to the way in which the modern state in a capitalist economic system ‘must work to reproduce the conditions of accumulation’ which, considering the fact that the defining trait of the modern sovereign state is its territoriality (2015, p. 174), inevitably forces the state to provide for this process by utilizing the resources found within its borders (2015, p. 167). This suggests that the state is to be understood and treated as an intrinsically environmental entity, built and perpetuated by its ability to harness and possibly deplete the natural use values of the Earth. Some have even argued that the world-wide dissemination of the modern notion of sovereignty – as territorial sovereignty over resources – partly or even largely arose out of the need to construct and enforce legal frameworks surrounding the efficient extraction of natural resources – a process deemed easier by the adjudicating force of a centralized state (Emel et al, 2011, cf. also Moore, 2015). A similar account is given by John Dryzek:

But many of the institutions that developed in the Holocene, such as sovereign states and capitalist markets, were complicit in generation [sic] of the unstable Earth system that now characterizes the Anthropocene. States have a priority for economic growth that subordinates ecological concerns, and a preoccupation with sovereignty that impedes global collective action. Capitalist markets for their part are equally addicted to material growth, and only recognize ecological constraints when forced to do so by non-market forces (such as government regulators). (2014; p. 941)

To put an end to this process, to effectively put a brake on progress as we have come to understand it – in terms of economic growth – will pose immense challenges, potentially even more so in democratic states, pace Eckersley’s contention that further democratization is the only viable solution (2004, ch. 4; cf. also Dryzek, 2014, p. 938) Luc Semal has, for instance, pointed out the expected hardships facing democratically elected politicians proposing a reduction in the material affluence afforded by easy access to cheap energy (2015, p. 97). The same may be said for Hamilton et al:

‘How to do democracy at home is an urgent question when the timescales of the Earth and the human experience no longer align yet cannot be separated. How can democracy account for very long-term, multigenerational issues that extend beyond the human experience? What should

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32 The right to do so, and to do so at one’s own behest, is moreover referred to by Eckersley as the ‘traditional prerogative of states [...]’ (2004, p. 206)
politicians do? How should they speak? One of the fundamental principles of democracy is that any newly elected government can undo what the previous government has done. This is one reason why crusading governments of left or right attempt to embed their policy shifts in the deepest cultural and institutional foundations.’ (2015, p. 11; cf. Dryzek, 2014)

Elisabeth Ellis has similarly reflected upon the intrinsic limits facing democratic states in particular in tackling environmental problems. According to her, there are three structural and theoretical challenges: paternalism, irreversibility, and scope problems (2016, pp. 506-512). The problem of paternalism pertains to the fact that one of the defining traits of democracy is the absence of ‘correct answers’. What is to be decided is ultimately a decision that comes down to the democratic electorate and no one else – ‘it is a feature of democratic government that the people have a right to act wrongly [...]’ (Walzer, 1981, p. 385, quoted in Ellis, 2016, p. 507). Yet, as Ellis notes, environmental degradation seem to offer, even demand, certain answers rather than others. Democratically elected politicians may very well continually support polluting industries as long as the external costs of doing so remain external (or at least as long as they are thought to be so, ibid, p. 507). The problem of irreversibility pertains to the fact that many decisions taken in the environmental area, against the democratic norm, cannot be overturned. There is, however, as of yet, no turning back from the extinction of species, or from depleted freshwater aquifers – some decisions are decidedly permanent, at least on a societal time scale. Which brings me to the third challenge: scope problems. One part of the problem of scope vis-à-vis democratic governance is of course that it is restricted to a particular set of people – the demos in question – as well as to a particular geographic territory (ibid, p. 509). The other part of the problem of scope is the dimension of time. Irreversibility is strictly speaking only crucial when adopting time scales reasonable on human or civilizational terms – measured perhaps in years, decades or even, stretching it a bit, centuries. Past extinction events have shown that life bounces back, and biodiversity with it; the carbon dioxide cycle may very well return to Holocene conditions sometime in the future. The question is, will we be around when it does? The clash between the time frame of the institutions enabling democratic decision-making and the time frame of the Earth system processes negates every chance of democratic accountability (ibid, p. 511). And whereas that may be true for the long term perspective, democratic accountability faces similar challenges also in the here and now, based on the principle of territoriality. Responsibility for ecological conservation and environmental management, two inherently trans-territorial phenomena, are repeatedly devolved to territorial units, be it states, regions, or cities, since territorially defined actors, and therefore territorially defined interests, are all there is in the current global political structure (Baber & Bartlett, 2016, p. 167). This fragmentation, combined with the fact that these units

33 Assuming that these are even enough to keep the planet habitable. Dryzek argues, for instance, that we, in the Anthropocene, need to embrace co-evolutionary efforts rather than mere preservation or conservation, as the latter implies ‘a fixed target ecological state given by non-human nature.’ (2014, p. 941-942) As I have argued above, and Dryzek does too, such a target state does not exist in the Anthropocene.
are inextricably linked to the global economy, furthermore pushes democratic decision-makers to adopt strategies that are beneficial to the economy and the electorate in the short term, while being potentially disastrous in the long term (Ellis, 2016, p. 511-512). They are effectively locked into the institutional path-dependencies offered by the territorial logic of the Holocene (Dryzek, 2014). Democratic decision-makers are in principle facing the following scenario, so elegantly put by Steffen et al:

Failure to build effective global governance systems is perhaps not surprising. Many characteristics of the Anthropocene are largely outside the range of past experience from an environmental governance perspective. For example, time lags in the Earth system can be formidable; decisions made over the next decade or two could commit future societies to metres of sea-level rise centuries into the future. Irreversibility is also a common feature; loss of species cannot be reversed if society after the fact decides they might be valuable or worth preserving. Equity issues are often magnified in the Anthropocene. The strong difference between the wealthy countries that are most responsible for the additional greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the poorest countries that are likely to suffer the most severe impacts of climate change is a classic example. Finally, the sheer complexity of the Earth system functioning, for example, the likelihood of tipping elements in large sub-systems of the planet, presents a bewildering array of problems to policymakers. (2011a, p. 856, notes omitted)

Despite this, Ellis remains optimistic in the face of these challenges to democracy. It is, according to her, the existence of a constitutional strain within the democratic tradition that possibly enables the necessary restrictions on the caprices of democratic governance in environmental matters. This line of argument is of course based on the claim that democratic decision-making is essentially open to anything as long as it is not in direct conflict with the continued possibility of democratic decision-making as such: ‘The only values that democracies must in principle preserve are those that provide the conditions of possibility for democratic decision-making.’ (Ellis, 2016, p. 510) Focusing on the people facing devastating environmental consequences right now as well as in the near future, Ellis suggests we meet the ‘stricture against paternalism’ (ibid, p. 513) by framing it as an issue of democratic injustice, something democratic theory arguably provides the necessary tools to address:

Climate change policy, like most environmental policy, involves a conflict between a relatively small group interested in extraction, and a relatively large group interested in sustainability. Of all political theoretical perspectives, democratic theory should be equipped to tell us how to redress injustice against a large majority. (ibid, p. 512)

Even so, this conclusion does not take into account the case of things being the other way around. What if it is actually the large majority, especially those citizens of affluent Western democratic economies, that is most in favor of extraction, and a rather small minority interested in the structural upheavals possibly necessary to face the conditions of the Anthropocene? What if this happen to be the case globally? How does democratic theory address the situation
in which a lot of energy and democratic legitimacy is put into not only perpetuating the living standards of the Global North, but the expected success in emulating these also in the Global South? (cf. Biermann, 2016, pp. 415-416) Does this not put strain on the plausibility of anti-paternalism remaining the staunch value of democratic theory, as outlined by Ellis? Ellis does not openly concede that it does. However, she remains adamant in repeating: ‘The only acceptable exceptions to the democratic bias against paternalism are decisions that would undermine the possibility of democratic decision-making itself.’ (ibid, p. 514)

One would be tempted to suggest that this, given the conditions entailed by the Anthropocene, would possibly cover a majority of the decisions taken on a day to day basis in democratic states.

The Anthropocene has, however, been met also with clearer visions and attempts to re-conceptualize governance and political action, to render them fit for the conditions to come (not to mention the conditions already here, Biermann et al, 2016). One such concept is Earth system governance (‘ESG’ forthwith), most eminently outlined by Frank Biermann in a number of publications (e.g. Biermann, 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2016; Biermann et al, 2016). This framework of governance allows Biermann to address what he deems to be the key challenges pertaining to the Anthropocene: the functional interdependence between societies; the intergenerational dependence between societies of today and societies of tomorrow; and the problem of democratic legitimacy (2014a, p. 58; 2014b in toto). The ESG perspective is considered a response aimed at developing better ways of steering the global political reaction toward anthropogenic climate change, an initiative striving to attain ‘long-term stability of geobiophysical systems.’ (ibid, p. 57) Political reaction should here, however, not only be understood in terms of global institutions and intergovernmental cooperation, but should ultimately include the support also of civil society and transnational (but non-governmental) organizations. Furthermore, it should be understood as advocating also for a necessary transformations in social and cultural behavior on individual and societal levels, ‘changes in public perceptions of good and appropriate lifestyles’ (ibid, p. 60) are also, by necessity, called for. The ESG approach is thus oriented both toward an analytical dimension (how is the current system of cooperation working) and a normative one (what additional changes and adaptations do we have to embrace). The ESG approach moreover assumes that the space for action and initiative, while being defined by the planetary boundaries suggested by Rockström et al. (2009a; 2009b), is inherently variable. The Anthropocene, while shining a light on the hard limits to civilizational viability and socio-ecological sustainability, offers essentially no guidelines to what we ought to do as long as we remain within these boundaries: ‘within this overall target corridor, the concept of earth system boundaries leaves human societies ample space for different political choices and socioeconomic development trajectories.’ (Biermann, 2014b, p. 33, notes omitted; cf. also

34 For a more in-depth overview of these attempts and responses, see Galaz, 2014; cf. also Pattberg & Zelli, 2016.
However, even given this apparent window of opportunity, ESG is liable to be targeted by the same scepticism aimed at any initiative based on the premise that sovereign states, and the particular institutional agency they harness, are likely to accept dwindling access to the source upon which they draw for this agency and the sovereignty they covet – their economic resources. Yet we are forced to concede, and here the approach of ESG share the sentiment of Eckersley (2004) as outlined above – there are no other actors around.

On a side note: Ingolfur Blühdorn will have us believe that this is not the case; that ecological limits such as the ones described throughout this thesis are always ultimately questions of limits to societal acceptance (2015, p. 159). This line of argument – that nature as such contain no categorical imperatives (ibid, p. 164) – is however only viable if we assume the survival of mankind and the environmental living conditions where this is objectively possible – that is where there is access to fresh water and oxygen; some source of nutrients et cetera is to be conceived of as a ‘social norm’, which, all considered, is quite an understatement. Yet this is repeated in the assertion that the possible collapse of ‘established systems of social norms and the social order’ (ibid, p. 165) in the Anthropocene is to be equated with the perceived ‘lack of external, and hence objectively valid, ecopolitical norms.’ (ibid, p. 164), whereas I would argue that the opposite is the case – the (potentially coming) collapse of social order due to Anthropocene conditions will be evidence enough that external norms are very much in place. Even so, Blühdorn is right in suggesting that the concept of sustainability is much more dependent on social acceptance than it is usually assumed to be (cf. Blühdorn, 2016). This is even more the case in the Anthropocene if we simultaneously assume the breakdown of the binary social-nature, since this renders sustainability a concept consisting both of what is socially acceptable (in the sense of what people actually will conform to) and the actual location of planetary boundaries or parameters (changing as they are by the continued social activities of humans).

Another alternative, not very well covered in the literature on the politics of climate change and the Anthropocene, is the suggested practice of geoengineering (cf. Steffen et al, 2011, p. 858), where, for example, aerosols are consciously added to the atmosphere to reduce the amount of solar radiation reaching Earth. However even if the human costs of doing so (current aerosol levels lead to approximately 500,000 premature deaths each year, ibid) are disregarded we may ask ourselves, given the fact that we are already occupied with geoengineering – are we doing a very good job of it as it is? (cf. Altvater, 2015)

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10 Dreams of order in the Anthropocene

The challenges and solutions (admittedly more of the former than of the latter) presented above notwithstanding, two key points retained by Eckersley (2004) remain for me to dwell on as this thesis reaches its end. One is of course that there can to be no illusions of ecological transformation; no order within the Anthropocene, in any sense, except if it is carried forward by the agency utilized by sovereign states – that much seems certain at this point in history. The state and the territorial logic upon which it is understood is simultaneously our greatest threat and our only hope (cf. Karlsson, 2017). The other point is that state sovereignty, which in order to be deemed legitimate in the realist sense must be able to withstand the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, will therefore have to be conceptualized as positive sovereignty – a sovereignty that preserves the ‘substantive problem-solving capacity of states and [...] their ability to make meaningful and genuinely discretionary choices on a range of issues.’ (Ronzoni, 2012, p. 574, notes omitted) This is a similar notion of sovereignty as the one suggested by Eckersley (2004; cf. Andersson, 2015), but differs from a more traditional conception wherein sovereignty most often has been understood as connected to the lawful right of non-intervention by other state actors (Ronzoni, 2012). The growing practice of justifying interventions by reference to this positive conceptualization in the international sphere thus constitutes quite a development, if, however, one that has also drawn some criticism. For instance, Jens Bartelson argues that this conceptual divergence between a traditional definition of sovereignty and a modern ‘mutable and contingent’ one (Bartelson, 2014, p. 97; p. 80) has enabled unjustified interventions and obstructions within the international community. That is, those states deemed unfit to perform well enough to retain their sovereignty have largely or partly been stripped of it, since, ‘attempts to rebuild failed states or protect their populations from atrocities assume that the ultimate threat to international order is to be found at the domestic level, and, by implication, that the restoration of sovereignty is a necessary condition of peace and progress in the international realm.’ (ibid, p. 98) This trend has also been noted by Hurrell, to whom we are witnessing, and have been so since the end of the Cold War, a return to ‘a world of unequal and differentiated sovereigns.’ (2006, p. 171) This world, the same world which now finds itself encroached upon by the realization that things have taken a turn for the worse, is not a world in which sovereignty as such is waning or eroding, but rather undergoing a pluralization (ibid, p. 181). All this of course, while simultaneously

37 cf. also Agnew (2005) to whom all there is, and always has been, is de facto, i.e. positive, sovereignty.
undergoing a unifying transformation thanks to the Anthropocene, by which the distinction between domestic and international becomes effectively obsolete (ibid, p. 171). There is no distinction to be had between domestic and international threats within the Anthropocene. The criticism against practices of interventions justified by contingent changes to the concept of sovereignty is therefore possibly warranted. Even so, the positive conceptualization of sovereignty carries some moral weight when put up against the threat posed by the Anthropocene:

It may become plausible for state sovereignty to evolve without rights of non-intervention as the forms and means of collectively recognizing unique political identities are altered by global responses to climate change. Recognition of sovereign statehood could then be based upon respect for, and participation in, policies to ensure domestic and international protection of the global environment. (Edmonson & Levy, 2013, p. 6; chs. 10-11)

Allow me, finally, to once more return to the question of legitimacy and the realist garb given to this concept by Bernard Williams. For Williams, political legitimacy is, as I allude to above, dependent on the prior first political question –’the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation.’ (B. Williams, 2005, p. 3; p. 62, emphasis added) These are, furthermore, according to this view, the conditions of political order in which demands for legitimacy are at liberty to be raised. I have throughout this thesis attempted to show that the Anthropocene entails a scenario wherein different kinds of legitimacy may be clashing, creating something of an impasse. A moral justificatory framework in which legitimacy is inseparably tied to the value of democracy; a sociological/Weberian justificatory framework in which legitimacy is tied to conceptions (contested or not) found within the existing political community in question; and, lastly, a thin realist justificatory framework interested primarily in the enabling of political order. The upside to the realist notion of legitimacy in particular is, however, ultimately the fact that it is the only justificatory framework which takes the notion of material and environmental circumstances and conditions into account, something we are arguably in dire need of facing the climate change to come. The same cannot be said for those other frameworks to whom the conditions – the demands even – of the Anthropocene is made to fit a pre-existing moral ideal or conception of what is morally desirable, rather than vice versa (cf. Baber & Bartlett, 2016, p. 168) – what is possible to deem desirable in the Anthropocene? What can be justified?

This means that a realist view would be able to guarantee the possibility of justifying the interventions into the rising amount of ‘nation states that are no longer able to provide localised order and an adequate degree of environmental management within their borders.’ (Hurrell, 2006, p. 169) A realist view would, by the same logic, possibly even justify a global authoritarian turn (Beeson, 2010)

38 Also Ellis (2016) share this insistence on democratic governance as being preferable regardless of the purpose and plausibility of this particular institution. This is not to suggest however that democratic governance in the Anthropocene will not ultimately prove to be the most efficient solution, and thus be justified on purely instrumental terms. It is also not to suggest that one could not combine a realist notion of political legitimacy with democratic governance.
if it entailed the conditions of and for political order. The basic conditions of political order are, at the end of the day, what matters. All else on top of that is ‘what makes sense now’ in a particular moment (B. Williams, 2005, p. 11).

How to achieve these conditions then, the conditions in which it may at least be possible to alleviate the onslaught of the Anthropocene; to erect a basic political order? How to render the sovereign state ‘green’ as Eckersley would have it, despite its faulty institutional nature in other aspects? Well, for once I find myself in lack of words. The prospects going ahead are far from satisfying, and despair is easier to come by for every new piece of research concretizing the threats ahead. In putting mankind – our social sphere – in the front seat, the Anthropocene has simultaneously managed to render us rather impotent: ‘the more powerful and real the collective impact of the species is, the less contemporary individuals feel capable of influencing their surrounding reality.’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 30) I have little else to add.
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