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Abstract

This essay is part of a special issue celebrating 50 years of *Political Theory*. The ambition of the editors was to mark this half century not with a retrospective but with a confabulation of futures. Contributors were asked: What will political theory look and sound like in the next century and beyond? What claims might political theorists or their descendants be making in ten, twenty-five, fifty, a hundred years' time? How might they vindicate those claims in their future contexts? How will the consistent concerns of political theorists evolve into the questions critical for people decades or centuries from now? What new problems will engage the political theorists (or their rough equivalents) of the future? What forms might those take? What follows is one of the many confabulations published in response to these queries.

Climate change exacerbates conflict, but also heightens our motivation to resolve it. A new form of sovereignty is the key to doing just that.

Thomas Hobbes, April 30, 2051

The story of modernity is in many ways a story of triumph. Characterized by never-ending interpersonal violence, our natural state is an ignoble and unimpressive one. Through the power of human reason and ingenuity, however, we moderns have envisioned and engineered a form of sovereignty that resolves the war of all against all. Politically wresting order out of chaos, and

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rescuing ourselves from our own antisocial nature, the achievement of state sovereignty is a remarkable accomplishment—one in which we might even take pride.

For all its successes, though, the modern project has also set us up for failure. Unleashed by the forces of modernity, anthropogenic climate change hazards a new state of nature in which the human condition looks to be far more abominable. Crippling material shortages enflame the survivalist recourse to violence. Existential despair introduces a novel drive to domination. Laid low by an environment we have left in ruins, our natural state in the Anthropocene promises to be nastier, more brutish, and shorter than ever. In endeavoring to escape our natural state, we have altered it for the worse.

Yet this new state of nature may also present a unique opportunity. Posing an extinction-level threat to the species, climate change issues an imperative to protect humanity writ large, multiplying both our rational and emotional motivations to seek peace. Rendering the fundamental law of nature universal in scope, our new natural condition demands a resolution that encompasses the entirety of human beings: global sovereignty. Compatible with a plurality of governmental forms, the creation of global sovereignty would represent the greatest feat of human agency the world has ever seen. If, that is, we can manage to pull it off, and in time.

In that case, let us begin once again with the “state of nature.” Yes, modernity has ravaged our environment, but we should not abandon its world-building hopes or refuse its categories and concepts. Instead, we should green them. Modernism must become ecomodernism. In a biosphere devastated by climate change, what does humanity’s new natural condition look and feel like? Given this altered state, what kind of political formation could secure peace for people and planet alike?

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Humans are naturally equal. This is as true of the Anthropocene’s state of nature as it was in the Holocene’s. Some people might be gifted with greater physical strength and others with sharper minds. But taken together these differences are a wash; whether through conspiracy or coordination, the weak can easily overpower the strong.

Brains are no different from brawn and may offer an even more compelling case in point. Setting aside the kind of learned intelligence that comes from years of careful study, people’s cognitive abilities are remarkably similar. This is because wisdom and foresight are and always have been experiential. Where people apply themselves to a task in equal measure, for the same length of time, experience-based knowledge accrues to them equally. To believe otherwise is simply vain. We might be comfortable acknowledging

that others are wittier, better spoken, or more credentialed, but loath to concede that they're just as wise. Really this isn't all that surprising. We see our own cleverness up close and other people's only at a distance. Yet surely this is a testament to our fundamental equality. What greater indication of equal distribution is there than that everyone's happy with their share?

Equally capable, we're equally hopeful about and confident in our ability to satisfy our various wants and needs. But what this means is that when two or more people want something that can't be shared, they become enemies, each bent on subduing the other. Scarcity has always been a feature of the material world and the human condition, but environmental crisis radically compounds it. As natural resources diminish and degrade, scarcity in the Anthropocene creates more competition for fewer goods. Anyone who capitalizes on or enjoys access to scarce resources must expect others to try and seize them, potentially with lethal force. This a cyclical prospect as well as a deadly one. Once in possession of precious stock, successful attackers must be ready to be attacked in turn.

Anthropogenic climate change increases anticipatory distrust, ratcheting up the logic and necessity of preemptive aggression. Under conditions of intense suspicion and uncertainty, taking offensive action to overpower others seems like the surest path to security. Where everyone is a potential threat, overcoming them before they overcome you appears necessary for survival. For some, preemptive violence is more than just a self-protective necessity: they enjoy it. Relishing power for its own sake, a handful of egoists can be counted on to attack beyond what security demands. Environmental emergency makes the social psychology of this behavior worse too. When the natural world becomes disordered and unreliable, domination can contrive a reassuring sense of control. Reckoning with the reality that self-pretension will drive others, even the most level-headed must step up their preemptive aggressions accordingly.

Taken together, then, we see in humanity's new natural condition four main causes of strife: first, competition; second, distrust; third, pride; and fourth, an environment transformed.

The first makes us attack for gain; the second, for safety; the third, for reputation; and the fourth, for survival. Those motivated by the first use violence to make themselves the masters of other people and their possessions; by the second to protect against as much; by the third to confirm and defend their sense of self-worth; and by the fourth to eke out bare existence.

Nature, especially as we've destroyed it, condemns human beings to live in a state of war, each against every other. War, after all, doesn't just describe what happens on battlefields or in the act of fighting itself; it describes any period during which violence could break out at any moment. War, like

weather, is a matter of atmospheric condition. Just as inclement weather doesn't consist of a one-off storm but the ongoing possibility of stormy stretches, war consists of the continuous, unbroken possibility for conflict. Here, of course, weather is both metaphor and cause. Climate change makes storms of all sorts more frequent, more violent, and more unpredictable. An ever-warming planet stands poised to decimate the human species and heighten our combativeness toward one another.

When beset by such extreme uncertainty, there can be no place for industry, agriculture, shipping or transportation; nothing but the most barebones of building or construction; no technological innovation; no scientific advances; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and, worst of all, the constant, unyielding fear and threat of violent death, leaving human life solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

This description might sound overly bleak to some. Is it really the case that people are innately hostile toward each other? Everyday experience drives the point home. Consider, for example, what your habits and behaviors suggest about how you view others. When you park your car, do you lock it? What about your house? As you come and go, do you bolt the front door? Think about your computer, your phone, and your online accounts. Do they have PINs? Login codes? Passwords? We take all these security measures despite there being laws to protect us and authorities to enforce those laws. What opinion does this indicate we have of one another? Don't you, by your actions, accuse humanity just as much as I have by my reasoning above? Even still, neither of us accuses human nature itself. There's nothing morally wrong about the way that we, as human beings, happen to be programmed. Nor are the behaviors that our programming inclines us to wrong in the absence of actionable laws that explicitly forbid them. But I'm skipping ahead. There are no laws in the state of nature, new or old, nor can laws be instituted until we've first agreed on who's authorized to make them.

Others might protest that the state of war I've described has no historical basis and likely never existed. Peering back as far as the eye can see into the deep recesses of human history, was there ever really such a period of total and complete lawlessness? Maybe it's true that the whole world has never been simultaneously embroiled in a war of all against all. But environmental catastrophe means it may well be soon. Severe drought, water rationing, and sheer water scarcity are now facts of life in many parts of the world. Other regions struggle with deadly heatwaves, while wildfires raze desiccated terrain and make the air unsafe to breath. Elsewhere, rising sea levels mean that dangerous floods are a perennial menace to life and livelihoods. Increases in extreme weather events make each of these threats worse. Taken together,

they've also started to strain systems of food production, threatening hunger and malnutrition across the world. As the atmosphere fills with carbon, such planetary shocks risk anarchy and mayhem: material scarcity may catalyze large-scale resource conflicts; mass migration propelled by environmental constraints and pressures may spark violent backlash; climate-induced economic instability may trigger mass rioting and destruction. The havoc and brutality will be locally specific, but global warming—totalizing by definition—threatens a universal state of war.

Anthropocene or not, sovereign actors have long endured a mutual state of war. Outfitted with all manner of arms—from fighter jets to tanks to nuclear weapons—and equipped with standing air, sea, and ground forces, nation-states stand ready to attack at a moment's notice. At the same time, they conduct sophisticated intelligence operations, running cyber espionage campaigns and maintaining human assets within their rival polities. Historically, states have often been able to ensure that this kind of war at the international level doesn't trickle down to the domestic: by preemptively opposing one another, they've sought to ensure stability for their citizenries at home. Disregarding territorial boundaries, however, anthropogenic climate change imperils this model. Nature neither knows nor respects the demarcations of nation-state sovereignty just as environmental crises spawn sociopolitical crises that readily bleed across borders. In the face of planetary systems breakdown, to what extent can intranational peace continue to coexist alongside a supranational state of war?

Where all are at war with all, nothing can be unjust, and ideas about right and wrong have no place. As long as there is no sovereign, there is no law, and where there's no law, there's no injustice. Force, fraud, and the like are great virtues in times of war, and ideas about justice or injustice mere social constructs. Modern efforts to establish sovereign order have tried to redress this problem. But they have also helped to create a world that risks igniting an intensified war of each against every other and abasing the human condition to a new, all-time low. If sovereignty is to resolve the state of nature in the Anthropocene, then it must be of a qualitatively different kind.

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By opening the door to climate change, earlier attempts to free ourselves from the state of nature appear to have transformed our natural condition in ways that amplify violent conflict. Yet this transformed natural state in turn affects the way we think and feel about our altered condition. Recalibrating our internal cognitive and emotional landscape, this modified external environment expands the laws of nature commending peace and guides us to a new program of escape.

The very same psychological drivers that incline people to conflict also incline them to peace: fear of death; desire for the material necessities of life; and hope that through our industry and effort we'll be able to enjoy them. Anthropogenic climate change redoubles each. By introducing the cataclysmic threat of extinction, climate change tethers our individual fate to the fate of the species: only insofar as humanity endures are we ourselves secure. Confronted, then, with the specter of wholesale annihilation, we fear not only our singular death, but the death of humankind. Terrified for our individual and collective preservation, we desire the provisions necessary for both. Pursuing humanity's continuation as a condition for our own, our hope for survival expands to encompass human being in its totality.

At the same time that our hearts urge us all the more to peace, so do our minds: rationality likewise redoubles the call for an end to conflict. Because our natural condition is one of war, everyone has a right to everything they deem necessary for survival, up to and including another's life. Yet, as long as this right of nature endures, none can be truly safe. Given as much, it stands to reason that all should endeavor to seek peace. This is the first, fundamental, law of nature, and climate change further magnifies its rationale. Now preoccupied with the species' perpetuation as a prerequisite to our own, provisioning peace becomes more critical than ever. Facing total eradication, the logic of self-interest underwrites a unifying interest in humanity's preservation.

From the first law of nature follows a second: for the sake of both self and species, all must be willing to lay down their right to all things. This can be accomplished through contractual arrangement, as when all agree to mutually transfer away the rights nature otherwise grants. Here is where sovereignty comes in. To enforce the terms of any such agreement, and thereby make the laws of nature practicable, an external party with superior capacity is needed. Vesting all our individual power and strength in a single collective entity, we construct an enforcing agent that at the same time synthesizes and unites us as one. In authorizing this entity's actions, we construct sovereign power and—finally—leave the state of nature behind.

Where once this could be local, now it must be global. Menacing us with extinction, anthropogenic climate change compels global peace for the survival of humanity as a whole. Now truly universalist in scope, the laws of nature require universalist application. This can be achieved only through the worldwide agreement of each with every other, and, so, through the construction of a sovereign agent powerful enough to enforce an all-encompassing contract. Crucially, such an arrangement remains consonant with a variety of governmental forms. Like sovereignties of old, this new form can be

represented and borne by a single, partial, or totalizing body. But it can no longer be either territorially distinct or exclusive to discrete populations.

Fashioning global sovereignty will be an immeasurably arduous task. It is also one that climate change, barreling down on us at breakneck speed, affords little time to complete. The danger that we fall short—succumbing to full-scale war and ultimately the death of humankind—is palpably real. But if the risks of abject failure and humiliation loom larger today, so the rewards promise to be greater. The provision of worldwide peace, and with it the rehabilitation of the planet, would be a true testament to the power of human agency. Redeeming modernity's ambitions by greening them, such an accomplishment would be one to be genuinely proud of.

Thomas Hobbes is an independent scholar, educator, and public commentator. He is the author of *On the Citizen* and *The Elements of Law*. This essay is adapted from his forthcoming book, *Leviathan*.

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