Hobbes in the Anthropocene: Reconsidering the State of Nature in Its Relevance for Governing

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The straight line is godless and immoral
Friedensreich Hundertwasser

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this. [...] The astonishment that the things that we see, are still ‘possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. It is not at beginning of knowledge, unless the effect that the idea of history from which it is derived, is not to keep.
Walter Benjamin, On the Concept of History, VIII

You can’t trust freedom
When it’s not in your hands
When everybody’s fightin’
For their promised land
Guns n’ Roses, Civil war

Abstract
The theoretical work of Thomas Hobbes marks the dawn of political modernity and thus also the beginning of modern reasoning about governing. In his Leviathan, Hobbes creates the modern space of the political through the exclusion of the world’s social and natural abundance. This crossroads of political thinking might not least be of relevance for the Anthropocene. After all, affirming the Anthropocene returns mankind to a cosmos of infinite human–nature interrelationships, which strongly resembles Hobbes’s conceptual depiction of the premodern state of nature and its incomprehensible, contingent, and precarious world, a world that Hobbes had intended to ban for good. In this context, this article reconsiders the state of nature’s internal dynamics in its relevance for governing in the Anthropocene—at the expense of the normative claims of modernist governing. After all, embracing the complex ontologies of the Anthropocene and the state of nature disperses agency among the human and nonhuman world, which questions the idea of ethical and political accountability. Without such a reference, governing runs the risk of becoming arbitrary and thereby another shallow projection of modernist conceptions. This article develops an interpretation of political subjectivity as a reference for governing, deriving from the materialistic world of the Hobbesian state of nature. On this foundation, the article elaborates on how this reading of subjectivity reconfigures the conception of political space and how this shift affects the scope of governing.

Keywords
subjectivity, posthuman, authority, political power, legitimacy, multitude, violence

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Having experienced political strife and violent unrest which culminated in Civil War in 17th century’s England, Thomas Hobbes dedicated his theoretical work to the issue of political order. His *Leviathan* seeks to provide a rational foundation for political authority and thus marks the dawn of political modernity (Ryan, 2016, pp. 39–42). Hobbes conceptually binds together the premodern and modern condition of governing. Accordingly, his conception of political authority incorporates a fundamental sense of ambivalence (Agamben, 1998, pp. 35–36). A strong notion of ambivalence has accompanied political modernity ever since. On the one side, technological advances, economic growth, and civil and political rights brought prosperity and peace. On the other side, the accomplishments and triumphs of political modernity were continuously clouded by social and political catastrophes like wars, genocides and mass slaughter, mass plight of refugees seeking safe havens as well as ongoing devastation of areas due to capitalism and (neo-)colonialism.

Given the catastrophic events of the 20th and early 21st centuries, the crisis of modernist reason and humanism seems to be almost a banality (Braidotti, 2013, p. 16). The claim of the modern subject as exemplified by the Cartesian cogito or the Kantian transcendental ego to order the world along rational considerations and thereby advance mankind toward humanist ideals of freedom, liberty, or peace obviously failed. Therefore, the notion of human reasoning as sovereign and independent from the world has to be reconsidered. Instead, a posthuman condition has to be embraced, which acknowledges that all living matter is situated in a dynamic relationship with the world beyond the modernist nature–culture dichotomy (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 1–25). Embracing those posthuman claims affirms the condition of the Anthropocene which is based on the recognition of mankind’s devastating influence on the natural environment and thus the declaration of mankind as an environmental force that equals nature (Crutzen, 2002; Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Accordingly, human influence in the course of geohistorical, political, economic, and scientific developments from the late 18th century onwards—at least—made humans a geological force which has been altering the most basic physical processes of planet earth. The devastating consequences of these anthropogenic alterations dramatically introduce the possibility of a global future without mankind. This account is among others of decisive ontological relevance. After all, it reveals that nature has always been a crucial actor in human history rather than its background. While we move earth, earth is also moving us (Latour, 2014, p. 4). Ironically, the human assertion of autonomy, which was paved by the extensive use of fossil fuel, led to the erosion of its very preconditions. It blurred the separation between nature and culture and thereby shattered the very foundation of modernity’s claim to disenchant the world (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Chakrabarty, 2009). Human thinking and life are thrown back into an integrative relationship with nature, which introduces a fundamental contingency to a world that was believed to be a domain of human sovereignty. This “intrusion of Gaia” (Stengers, 2015, p. 43–50) reveals the irrational character of the world and thus irritates and shocks the guardians of reason and enlightenment.

Acknowledging the far-reaching consequences of human-induced climate change urges us “to think of the world as not inert matter only moved through physical laws, but as something acting upon us” (Harrington, 2016, p. 491). Therefore, in the Anthropocene, nature is not an empty stage where humans act at will and design their rational and moral orders. Rather, it is neither human society nor nature alone, but the complex interrelations between them that shape and guide nonhuman as well as human processes (Harrington, 2016). This has direct implications for politics. In light of humans being deeply embedded in a dynamic relationship between nature and culture, politics is no longer an autonomous sphere, carved out of nature and shaped and guided by human rationality (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 211; Chandler, 2018, pp. 15–21).

The context of the Anthropocene sheds light on the fallible character of modern politics and invites us to reconsider its assumptions. This article contributes to the issue of governing in the Anthropocene
from a Hobbesian perspective. After all, Hobbes’s conception of the state of nature and the creation of the artificial Leviathan are located at the dawn of political modernity. His argumentation starts off with the materialism of the state of nature and enters the idealist world of modern political reasoning. As a result, the Hobbesian state of nature and its constitutive infinity of human–nature interrelationships represent a crossroads of political thinking. While Hobbes builds his argumentation to leave this crossroads on a modernist path on its unbearable existential uncertainty, the Anthropocene embraces this precarious cosmos and introduces it as an analogy of the state of nature. Building on this resemblance, the Hobbesian state of nature might be of value for the issue of governing in a world that rejects modernity’s distorting restrictions.

Adapting political reasoning to the complex ontological cosmos of the Anthropocene’s infinite human–nature interrelationships allows us to reconsider the shortcomings of modernist politics. Yet, it also complicates the idea of governing. Whereas modernist conceptions of politics, such as liberal theory, provide a normatively strong foundation for governing on the basis of an idealist ontology and an idealist conception of human agency, the complex ontology of the Anthropocene disperses agency among humans, objects, issues, and things. After all, both earth and mankind are subjects in a twofold sense: as actors and as objects which are acted upon. To be “a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy” (Latour, 2014, p. 5). At the same time, however, the boundaries of subjectivity fade away and thereby add a notion of blind necessity to societal processes (Häkli, 2018, p. 172). Without a point of reference, there is no site of political and ethical accountability (Braidotti, 2013, p. 102). A related concept of governing runs the risk of becoming redundant and thus a shallow projection of human signification, “parasitic on precisely that kind of humanist conceptions” (Häkli, 2018, p. 172) it seeks to avert (Howarth, 2013, p. 158). Therefore, the need for alternative conceptions between a fully autonomous cogito and a dissolved subject has already been recognized (Chernilo, 2017; Delanty & Mota, 2017; Hornborg, 2017; Rothe, 2017). Suggestions to approach this dilemma are often based on theoretical frameworks with ideational and symbolic foundations. This article seeks to develop an interpretation of political subjectivity deriving from the materialistic world of the Hobbesian state of nature. In this context, it discusses the idea of governing within a world consisting of infinitely entangled human–nature interrelationships.

While the emphasis of Hobbes’s argument in his Leviathan is on the legitimation of absolute authority, the premises of his state of nature introduce the notion of human equality and autonomy as preconditions for governing. It is therefore not surprising that Hobbes’s ideas have been adapted in favor of diversity and tolerance (Owen, 2005; Bejan, 2016), cosmopolitism (Gallarotti, 2008), or for understanding dynamics of armed conflict and peace (Abizadeh, 2011). In international relations, the Hobbesian Leviathan was of fundamental relevance for the realist theories of Carr (1939) or Morgenthau (1948). Discussing the state of nature and its ontology and sociality in the context of the Anthropocene might provide new aspects for the critical reception of Hobbes in International Relations, not least regarding the discipline’s traditional emphasis on nation-states at the expense of human activity on the substate level (Christov, 2017, p. 306).

This article develops a Hobbesian conception of political subjectivity as a reference for governing in the Anthropocene. It shall avoid the deficiencies of modernity’s sovereign cogito and cope with dissolution of the boundaries of subjectivity within the Anthropocene’s complex ontology. The first two sections set the stage for this endeavor within the context of the state of nature by scrutinizing its resemblance to the Anthropocene and by tracing the deficiencies of modern political reasoning along the path that Hobbes paved and liberal theory followed. The third section introduces a Hobbesian interpretation of political subjectivity. Finally, the article elaborates on how this relational and materialistic reading of subjectivity reconfigures the idea of political space beyond the triad of political modernity comprising sovereign, territory, and citizen—in short, how this shift opens up the scope of governing. While this shift allows for a wider range of governing, it also comes with a modest
reconsideration toward its desired outcomes. After all, life in the Anthropocene necessarily remains unpredictable and uncertain as in the state of nature.

The State of Existential Uncertainty as Conditio Humana

In order to bring the Hobbesian thinking closer to the context of the Anthropocene, this first section presents the state of nature in its ontological complexity. It builds upon the complexity of the human world which derives from the absence of any kind of institutional or moral restrictions for human behavior in the state of nature:

“To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law, where no Law, no Injustice.” (Hobbes, 2011, p. 90)

Given the state of nature’s absence of any restrictions, human beings are unconstrained in their behavior. Hobbes describes that “each man is drawn to desire that which is Good for him and to Avoid what is bad for him” (Hobbes, 1998, p. 27). Thus, any kind of human activity follows designated ends. However, Hobbes does not further conceptualize those ends. They represent anything that one is either drawn to or seeks to avoid. In essence, every situation is determined by the already acquired ends as well as by further ends that are articulated as desired ones—they may be pursued in whatever way is deemed appropriate. Thereby, Hobbes introduces a fundamental human equality by natural law. Thus, humans are equally free to pursue whatever end they are drawn to in whatever possible way. This equality is not based on substantive characteristics, but on the structural equality of unrestricted behavior.

The equality of unrestricted behavior fosters an equilibrium of fear. Since human beings are free to choose their strategy how to pursue certain ends, every interaction in the course of pursuing certain ends represents a situation of existential uncertainty. After all, Hobbes describes two overarching strategies that guide behavior in such interactions: the strategy of cooperation and the strategy of violence. Hobbes says, “Man is a God to man, and Man is a wolf to Man” (Hobbes, 1998, p. 3). While the cooperation strategy rests on mutual trust, the wolf strategy takes no such gamble. After all, a sudden change of strategy will always reward the use of violence. Consequently, Hobbes’s instrumental and pragmatic conception of human rationality recommends the wolf strategy (Hobbes, 2011, p. 87).

The permanence of the equilibrium of fear is crucial for Hobbes’s arguments. Nevertheless, it seems as if Hobbes’s definition of power as the ability to achieve and sustain certain ends would destabilize this equilibrium (Hobbes, 2011, p. 63). After all, Hobbes emphasized the natural differences in the constitution of the human body, experience, reason, and passion. Still, this inequality is superseded by the equal vulnerability “to death at hands of others” (Hoekstra, 2013, p. 90). As a result, every actor is equally confronted with the possibility of dying in any interaction (Hoekstra, 2013, pp. 76–112): “Nature has made men…equall, in the faculties of body, and mind. […] For as to the strength of body, the weakest has the strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himselfe” (Hobbes, 2011, pp. 86–87).

Unrestricted behavior and the equal likelihood to die are crucial in Hobbes’s political philosophy since they sustain the equilibrium of fear (Arendt, 1970, p. 68). But, the state of nature does not describe a state of permanent violence and warfare. It refers to the permanent struggle of human beings to pursue certain ends in situations of existential uncertainty. Accordingly, Hobbes’s homo homini lupus (“man is wolf to man”) refers to the ever-present possibility of violence in interactions between humans and therein entailed the possibility of being killed. As Hobbes writes: “So the nature of War,
consisteth not in actual fighting but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary” (Hobbes, 2011, pp. 88–89).

In essence, the equilibrium of fear in the state of nature fosters a situation beyond hope, as there is no existential guarantee and thus a fundamental uncertainty. Most importantly, the conditions of the state of nature do not allow for destabilizing this equilibrium of fear and thus overcoming this state of uncertainty. Since one’s situation depends on one’s already acquired and currently pursued ends, which again depends on someone else’s pursuit of the same and other ends, one’s situation is beyond control. Hobbes also adds the inanimate world of nature and all living beings as factors that influence human agency and vice versa. His depiction of science as knowledge of consequences causally relates the “great parts of the world, as the earth and stars” to the “liquid bodies that fill the space between the stars […] such as […] air” all the way to “bodies terrestrial” such as “minerals, as stones, metals,” “vegetable,” and finally “men” (Hobbes, 2011, p. 61). In other words, mechanic events on the macroscale, like the movements of celestial objects, are linked to meteorological processes, which again affect unliving nature, like the earth’s flora and fauna, and finally mankind and its ideas on ethics, philosophy, logics, or politics (Hobbes, 2011, p. 60–61). Therefore, both the nonhuman as well as the human world are deeply interwoven in the Hobbesian materialistic conception of the world.

In this complexly interrelated ontology, agency is fundamentally codetermined by human actors beyond oneself and thus dispersed within the human realm. On the other hand, agency is also crucially shaped by nonhuman actors, such as nonhuman living beings, creatures and plants alike, the weather, or earth’s nonliving nature. Those many factors influencing human behavior disperse agency beyond oneself across an infinitely complex cosmos that spans from the human to the nonhuman (Read, 1991, p. 511–514; Kersting, 2002, p. 72–73). Since there is no way to overcome the uncertainties and precarities of daily human life which amounts to an unpleasant equilibrium of fear, there is no possible way to build humanity a stable home in the state of nature. Life in the state of nature is “nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, 2011, p. 89).

In the state of nature, it is impossible to control the contingencies of life by human means as agency is dispersed among the human and the nonhuman world. Since there is no way to evade the permanent existential uncertainty within the state of nature, Hobbes seeks to alter its given conditions through the “Art of man” and creates the space of the political as a safe haven for mankind (Hobbes, 2011, p. 9). Thereby, he paves the modernist path of political reasoning. The next section will follow the Hobbesian step out of the state of nature and will elaborate on related distortion of the nonhuman and the human world that accompanies the construction of the ideal sphere in Hobbes’s argument as well as in liberal theory following the same tradition.

**Modern Governing and Its Reductive Ontological Foundations**

Hobbes declares that human ingenuity can imitate nature insofar as it can create an artificial space, in which alternative conditions allow human beings to live a life beyond the brutish uncertainties of the state of nature in a commonwealth or state: the Leviathan (Hobbes, 2011, pp. 9–11). Creating an artificial nature to shelter humanity from the contingencies of everyday life means to lock out various actors in order to regain control over one’s agency and thereby build a safe haven.

Hobbes constitutes such a political space through a twofold exclusion. For one thing, this exclusion concerns the nonhuman world. Nature for Hobbes is inscrutable to humankind as God’s creation, whereas the human world is human-made and thus comprehensible and controllable (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 201). In his argumentation directed against Boyle, Hobbes denounces nature as a possible foundation for a stable home for humankind. Where Boyle imagines the laboratory as a source for a unified society based on universal facts, Hobbes sees sources of eventual contingencies and therefore disunity. After all, the laboratory represents a secluded space beyond political control, where arbitrary
natural actors such as immaterial forces might be revealed. That might foster deviating opinions that endanger unity (Latour, 1993, pp. 13–32). In essence, nature is too arbitrary to comprehend and control, which is why it has to be excluded from the space of the political. What remains is an empty stage of human history, cleared from nature’s infinite particularities affecting human agency. And while the world and its various actors disappear beneath the veil of artificial nature, its diverse and innumerable entities reappear as subjects of human reason and exploitation (Serres, 1995, pp. 35–36).

Excluding nature from the political space still leaves the contingencies of the human world to affect one’s agency and foster existential uncertainty. After all, Hobbes describes every human as fundamentally different through varying conditions of rationality, customs, power, wealth, religion etc. The resulting diversity of behavior affects one’s agency in unforeseeable ways. Hobbes’s argumentative trick of equal vulnerability and thus equal existential fear despite one’s particular characteristics allows to fully constrain autonomy and thereby exclude any kind of human particularity from agency. That also constrains everyone’s agency to a total extent and renders the capacity of governing unlimited. Absolute governing on the foundation of a conception of fully restricted human agency and the exclusion of the nonhuman world is now able to order human interactions in any kind of way in order to prevent from any kind of existential uncertainty.

Liberal theories continue the Hobbesian path of constructing the space of the political through the exclusion of nonhuman and human particularities. And while they do not fully constrain and thereby suspend autonomy, they do constrain the articulations of human autonomy and thereby limit human agency accordingly. In essence, certain ideal concepts of freedom, equality, fairness, and justice define a set of ends to which human beings are drawn. A related constrained conception of human agency provides a solid foundation for ordering human interactions and thus society (Ackerman, 1980; Dworkin, 1983; Fried, 1987; Rawls, 1971). After all, governing as responding to predefined ends excludes all uncertainties (Sterba, 1986, pp. 5–11). In the end, however, any ideal conception does not evade its creator’s perspective on the status quo. Rather, everyone’s particular social situation is of constitutive relevance for defining the content of what is deemed an end and for locating the respective human particularities that are to be included as relevant factors of influence. Some would argue that an ideal like justice would nevertheless serve as a corrective for any unjust situation regardless of the particular circumstances. Yet, with the ideal not at all corresponding with everyday life, the normative seems to be oddly detached from the prescriptive (Mills, 2005, p. 166–177). In those cases, the gap between the normative and the prescriptive is inhabited by cultural, moral, religious, economic, or other social particularities which might, among others, define discriminatory conditions. Those human particularities represent crucial actors which do influence human agency, regardless of whether human beings subscribe to certain normative ideals or not.

Both Hobbes and his liberal heirs deem an infinite amount of nonhuman and human particularities irrelevant for human agency. While that allows for clearly defined conceptions of human agency and thus for normatively strong foundations for governing, it also excludes a plethora of nonhuman entities, phenomena, social institutions, human articulations, and human beings from the sphere of the political. That leaves an empty political space which is populated by abstract subjects. Specifically, the social contract leaves the world on the sidelines and reduces various human and nonhuman beings, things, and phenomena to “the status of passive objects to be appropriated,” mastered, and possessed and dooms them to destruction (Serres, 1995, p. 36). For one thing, this exclusion is outrageous from an ethical point of view, since it epistemologically legitimates any kind of discrimination and extermination of nature and humans alike culminating in (post-)colonialism or genocide (Lakitsch, 2013). On the other hand, this ontological reduction is of relevance for governing in terms of effectivity. After all, politics is less like an island but more like Plato’s metaphor of the ship, whose conductors have to permanently deal with unsteady streams of water. Ignoring that forces beyond and underneath the boat actually define the fate of its passengers only conveys the deception of control which is shattered once the ocean’s untamed waters sink the boat (Serres, 1995, p. 38). Rather,
governing in the state of nature has to permanently seek to respond to the constant and complex flow of nonhuman and human particularities and occurrences in order to be effective and to contribute to shaping the fate of its dwellers. While Hobbes also implies that responding to the articulations of human beings affects their interactions, he deemed this task so daunting that he sought to define other ways of governing. However, ignoring the full spectrum of actors will only uphold the illusion of governing, while the sidelined and hidden actors determine the world’s processes behind the presumptuous veil of modernist mastery.

It is only a matter of time until the structurally excluded others strike back with full vengeance and shatter the modernist deception of control, such as rioting humans living under precarious circumstances or global warming threatening to eradicate mankind (Braidotti, 2013, p. 37). At one point, the sidelined, discriminated, ignored, excluded, and veiled nonhuman and human actors of the world themselves climb the stage of history. From there, they reveal that the world resembles less the modernist image of empty space populated by abstract subjects, but comprises an abundance of others living in all kinds of particular places at “all kinds of scale: dinner table, house, street, neighborhood, Earth, biosphere, ecosystem, city, bioregion, country, tectonic plate” (Morton, 2016, p. 10).

The ethical deficiencies, the ineffectiveness, and the unsustainability of modernist governing emphasize the inevitability of embracing the state of nature and the need to deal with its existential contingencies and precarious. Coming back from the modernist path of political reasoning to the state of nature introduces it as an analogy of the Anthropocene. As a result, the nonhuman and the human world, which were both tamed by Hobbes within his space of the political, rise again from underneath and beyond it to reveal that the world of the state of nature had been there all along. That brings back the underlying problem of dispersed agency and the difficulty of grasping a point of reference for governing. However, acknowledging the resemblance between the ontologies of the state of nature and the Anthropocene also opens up the possibility to introduce a reference for governing from a Hobbesian perspective.

The Hobbesian Multitude as Political Subject in the Anthropocene

In the Anthropocene and the state of nature, human beings find themselves constitutively entangled in the complex interrelationships between the human and the nonhuman world. The crucial question for the issue of governing, however, is if life entangled in those complex interrelations is able to articulate its respective ontological situation as a distinct perspective (Strydom, 2017) in contrast to other perspectives (Chernilo, 2017, pp. 54–56). Both conditions are the sine qua non of political subjectivity. Without it, governing might be an arbitrary endeavor at best and a perfidious undertaking at worst. For Hobbes, claiming both that causal factors determine one’s behavior and that action is voluntary does not represent a contradiction:

When “first a man has an appetite or will to something, to which immediately before he had no appetite nor will, the cause of his will is not the will itself, but something else not in his own disposing. So that whereas it is out of controversy that of voluntary actions the will is the necessary cause, and by this which is said the will is also caused by other things whereof it disposes not, it follows that voluntary actions have all of them necessary causes and therefore are necessitated.” (Hobbes, 1999, p. 38)

According to Hobbes, every human being is fundamentally constituted through its relations to other human beings, their situations, and an infinity of nonhuman factors. In essence, one’s situation depends on one’s position within a complex web of human–nature interrelationships. Correspondingly, one’s articulations relate to one’s distinct position within a distinct interrelationship at a distinct point in time. While those articulations are fundamentally shaped in and through an infinitely complex web of interrelationships, each articulation is genuinely different depending on its exact position and
point in time. Through their unique positions, subjects constitute themselves as incommensurable as well as integrative parts of the infinitely interrelated cosmos of the state of nature. Those positions within the web of human–nature interrelationship locate the site of ethical and political accountability.

This reading of subjectivity resonates with posthuman approaches. Both reject an independent humanist subject in favor of a relational self. From a cognitive perspective, each self is subject and object, which constitute one another. Each self-perception is defined by an “enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49). That understanding fosters a shared sense of vulnerability concerning both humans and nonhumans toward common threats, which resonates with Hobbes’s existential uncertainty (Barad, 2007, p. 334; Braidotti, 2013, pp. 49–50). The enlarged sense of collectivity and relationality expresses all relevant human and nonhuman particularities that governing has to reflect as involved agents.

Bernard Williams emphasizes the constitutive character of every situation’s particularities for governing. They constitute the articulations to which governing has to respond to in the course of a first political solution that has to be solved all the time—it is first in a conditional rather than temporal sense (Williams, 2005, pp. 3–6). In the end, the political subject that governing has to respond to is an infinitely interrelated multitude of nonhuman and human beings, things, and phenomena, which articulates itself through the subjects bearing a strong sense of relationality and collectivity. Otherwise, governing is simply not effective. The multitude articulates the plurality of everyone’s urge to be “drawn to desire that which is Good for him and to Avoid what is bad for him” (Hobbes, 1998, p. 27) on the foundation of everyone’s enlarged sense of being interrelated with human and nonhuman others.

In other words, the ability for governing based on a Hobbesian multitude represents an understanding of power as the “human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (Arendt, 1970, p. 44). That makes the multitude the ontological foundation of power. Therefore, power is not an ability that belongs to someone or something, but to everyone. As Spinoza claimed, only the power of the multitude can control the multitude (Spinoza, 1958b, p. 371). Accordingly, governing is more effective the more it coheres with the articulations of the multitude and less effective the more it deviates from them. The daunting task of governing lies in responding to an infinity of differing perspectives. Reality “is perceived differently from diverse points of view, and no single point of view can be regarded as the complete one” (Ferrando, 2016, p. 252). While the Spinozean multitude runs the risk of eradicating the heterogeneity of its constitutive parts, a Hobbesian multitude consisting of genuinely incommensurable but relational subjects is able to uphold the notion of difference (Virno, 2004, pp. 21–23; Voss, 2018).

While various notions of subjectivity in the Anthropocene remain vaguely between bodily interiority and exteriority (Latour, 2005, p. 216), Hobbes underlines the constitutive character of the interrelationships between the human and the nonhuman world and at the same time refers to human beings as distinct entities. Therefore, the selves that inhabit the planet can very well be contaminated by the encounters with other selves (Tsing, 2015, pp. 29–34) and at the same time articulate their very own perspective. Thus, no human being is a self-contained unit, but is able to articulate itself as a self. One can still engage in cooperative practices and compositions with Gaia (Stengers, 2015, p. 50) or participate in processes of becoming with (sympoiesis) others in the “multispecies muddle” (Haraway, 2016, pp. 30–31) yet maintain the ability to articulate one’s perspective as such. Most important for the issue of governing, maintaining subjectivity provides a reference to make sure that practices that compose and sustain the existing and becoming (Haraway, 2016, p. 42) can be differentiated from states of oppression (Howarth, 2013, p. 158). The Hobbesian multitude represents a foundation for governing in the Anthropocene. It introduces a relational conception of subjectivity deriving from the materialistic state of nature as a reference for governing within a complex ontological cosmos, comprising an infinity of human and nonhuman particularities. The final section concludes these thoughts and describes how a Hobbesian reading of subjectivity affects the scope of governing.
Governing in the Anthropocene

Governing based on an interpretation of subjectivity deriving from the state of nature creates a fluid and inclusive conception of political space that is constituted through the Hobbesian multitude. This space comprises all human and nonhuman particularities that subjects are interrelated with: Everything that affects everyday life is politically relevant. That turns modernist conceptions of governing upside-down. It emphasizes that human and other living and nonliving entities are not at the mercy of any kind of sovereign power. On the contrary, the ability of governing is built upon the acknowledgment of the full diversity of human and nonhuman particularities that are of relevance for agency.

This Hobbesian paradigm shift makes the particular human and nonhuman circumstances of the places that humans inhabit part of the political space through a relational understanding of subjectivity. The nonhuman world becomes part of the political space through the articulations of subjects and their sense of collectivity and relationality: forests, glaciers, coral reefs, oceans, droughts, or viruses join the political space as concerns of subjects who articulate their shared vulnerability. Among others, allowing for the inclusion of the nonhuman world into the space of the political through the Hobbesian multitude prevents arbitrary governing measures that subject human doing to a total extent of alleged ecological intentions. Accordingly, ecological authoritarianism or eco-fascism argues against the possibility to implement sustainable policies to an extent that could actually preserve an ecological balance to ensure mankind’s survival within a democracy (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016, pp. 93–95). More often, however, nature and the restriction of human freedom relate to each other in cases of catastrophes, such as earthquakes or storms. In this vein, countries such as Haiti, Fiji, and the Philippines have been dubbed “storm autocracies” (IEMA, 2019). Similarly, autocratic concerns have accompanied government policies to fight the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, from Europe to Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Gebredikan, 2020). While in all those cases, the scope of governing does include the realm of the human and the nonhuman, and it does so in a highly reductionist way: it focuses solely on one natural phenomenon with a very abstract human concern. Hence, under the pretext of saving human lives, governing ignores the concerns of human beings living in actual places with particular nonhuman and human circumstances. In the slums of major cities all around the world, lockdowns to prevent virus-related deaths had dramatic consequences on food security, access to health services, and the infrastructures (Lakitsch, 2021; Naing, 2020; World Bank Group, 2020).

Constituting political space through the Hobbesian multitude reconfigures the modernist spatial concept of the political based on the constitutive triad of sovereign, territory, and citizen. For one thing, as already introduced, this shift abandons the notion of space as a void territory with geographically defined boundaries. In turn, political space is open and comprises a vast variety of places with distinct human and nonhuman environments. Within this space, governing is not the territorial prerogative of a sovereign power that binds together a sovereign with a conception of citizen, linked through a nationalist discourse. Rather, governing is enabled for any entity that responds to the articulations of subjects regardless of territorial borders. As Burke et al. (2016, p. 502) describe in their Manifesto from the end of International Relations: “We are an array of bodies connected and interconnected in complex ways that have little to do with nationality.”

Decoupling political space from political territoriality is of fundamental relevance for border regions and migratory flows. Having been flawed from the moment of its foundation, modernity’s normative conception of politically locating human life became even more bizarre with the increase of transnational and international processes from the 1990s onward (Agamben, 1998, pp. 131–135). While a modernist perspective seems to facilitate the securitization of migrants, political space constituted along the Hobbesian multitude depicts migrants as its integral part of a particular place with distinct human and nonhuman particularities. This paradigm shift opens up the possibility to
manage related processes by responding to their articulations on the background of their nonhuman and human characteristics, whether or not they concern global warming and extended periods of drought, wars, poverty, hunger, etc.

Reconfiguring political space along the conception of the Hobbesian multitude prevents derogatory appropriations of structurally excluded human beings. In this light, for instance, the riots of the banlieues in Paris in 2008 and in London in 2011 appear less as a manifestation of unwillingness to be part of the French or the British society. Rather, they represent articulations of indignation directed toward governments that do not make their inhabitants at the economic margins of society part of the space of the political. Reconsidering political space in light of an interpretation of the state of nature affirms the need to include all human beings within a respective space into the political in order to allow for governing in the first place.

Embracing the complex and infinite interrelatedness of a world consisting of ontologically diverse objects and phenomena ranging from the human to the nonhuman world also introduces nonlinearity and contingency as basic characteristics of social processes. That makes governing a daunting task that is barely possible. As in the state of nature, directly governing the infinitely interrelated world of the Anthropocene is not possible. Still, governing may indirectly influence the world by detecting interrelationships beyond modernist or institutional logics and thereby providing windows to affect certain processes in a certain way (Chandler, 2018). That makes governing, like any other intervention, an endeavor whose outcome is at best only of a certain proximity to the desired outcome. At the same time, the articulations of the Hobbesian multitude are far too diverse and numerous to allow for governing to respond to them adequately. Human beings are not rationally driven, unitarian actors, but subjects whose complex relational constitution exceeds the possibility to prevent violence in interactions for good. In the same vein, Spinoza discards any belief in a permanent resolution of violent conflicts, as humans will always be led by irrational motives and affections (Spinoza, 1958a, pp. 229–243). As a result, social reality always remains messy to a certain degree. And, as in the state of nature, violence remains a defining property of a world that is complex beyond human comprehension.

In any case, we have to give up the idea to eradicate violence for good. While this insight challenges traditional political reasoning in the tradition of the Enlightenment, it also frees agency from liberalist illusions and the related analytical baggage. As a result, it unveils a whole plethora of already existing ways and means to deal with everyday violence beyond nation-wide initiatives which are directed toward a whole society (United Nations, 2008). Those initiatives may not aim at preventing the society from lapsing or relapsing into violent conflict but deal with a conflict’s worst repercussion for human everyday life. Accordingly, such endeavors represent spontaneous or planned “creative non-solutions” that allow life to take place around intentionally fluid arrangements. Local communities might thereby disrelate themselves from overarching violent conflict dynamics (Pospisil, 2019, pp. 43–164). For instance, independently from internationally mediated peace processes, the arrangements of local leaders, such as tribal elders in Syria, with local militias are of fundamental relevance for the repercussions of civil war on their communities (Al-Baalbaky & Mhidi, 2018).

Conclusion

This article developed the concept of the Hobbesian multitude as a reference for governing in the Anthropocene. It allows us to think subjectivity within the complexly interrelated cosmos of the Anthropocene, where agency is dispersed among its various ontological objects ranging from the human to the nonhuman realm. Contributing to the issue of governing in the Anthropocene from a Hobbesian perspective rests on the assumption of the state of nature and its constitutive infinity of human–nature interrelationships as a crossroads of political thinking. While Hobbes builds his
argumentation to leave this crossroads on a modernist path with its unbearable existential uncertainty, precarity is the order in the Anthropocene and thus resembles the state of nature. In this light, reconsidering the deficiencies of modern political thought in the context of the Anthropocene awakens the ghosts of the state of nature that Hobbes had tried to ban through the social contract. A Hobbesian interpretation of subjectivity within the materialistic world of the state of nature introduces a relational self as a reference for governing. It constitutes itself within and through a network of humans and nonhuman beings, objects, or phenomena.

A Hobbesian reading of political subjectivity reconfigures political modernity’s constitutive triad of sovereign, territory, and citizen. It presents an inclusive and open conception of political space that comprises a myriad of diverse human and nonhuman particularities. Within this space, governing is enabled through the adequacy of the responses to the distinct particularities that subjects articulate. Given the world’s ontological and processual complexity and nonlinearity, governing, like any other intervention, becomes an endeavor whose outcome is at best only of a certain proximity to the desired outcome. As in the state of nature, social reality remains messy to a certain degree. Nevertheless, this modest shift of perspective allows for new windows of opportunities to affect situations, which otherwise remain unalterable.

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Notes
1. Chernilo (2017, p. 55), for instance, introduces Hans Jonas’s notion of human life and its ability to decentre itself as a foundation of reflexivity. Delf Rothe proposes a symbolic conception which is inspired by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2016, pp. 65–70). Accordingly, subjectivity is constituted by a lack-of-fullness, which prevents the subject from being consumed by the signifying structure into which it is thrown (Rothe, 2017, p. 96).
2. For more details on the Hobbesian state of nature’s reception among realists, rationalists, and social constructivists, see Buzan (1993) and Wendt (1999, pp. 246–278).
3. Hobbes mentions goods in some passages as ends that people are drawn to yet relates it to all kinds of material and immaterial objects or matters. In some other passages, he uses more general terms, not least in On Citizens, where he only refers to something that “each man is drawn to desire […] or avoid” (Hobbes, 2011, p. 27). Consequently, the article will make use of the more general term ends.
4. While Read (1991, p. 514) emphasizes that Hobbes describes human beings as interrelated with the animate and inanimate world, he limits this Hobbesian notion of causal influence to the material substratum without effects on human intentions. Even if other authors such as Kersting (2002, p. 72–75) do not expressively restrict Hobbesian causality, implying that Thomas Hobbes already introduced an all-encompassing causality
that is at the heart of the Anthropocene would probably go too far. Nevertheless, the slightest hint toward an all-encompassing interrelationality of the inanimate and animate world is already remarkable.

5. He further emphasized its artificial character due to his unnatural ability to escape even the most certain facts of nature: death (Arendt, 1970, p. 68).

6. Various authors sought to argumentatively maintain the notion of difference in Spinoza’s political philosophy. While Deleuze (1980) seeks to clarify the relation between the one and the many through a Neoplatonic argument as participation of the many in the infinite modes and attributes of the one, Balibar (1997) introduces the concept of transindividuality. Nevertheless, the seed for the annihilation of differences and thus diversity seems to remain, as exemplified by Hardt and Negri’s thoughts on the multitude, which in the end appears to run the risk of becoming an exemplification of a global proletariat following a historical urge (Stengers, 2017) and thus representing another modernist concept. That is the case perhaps a little bit more in Empire (2002) than in Multitude (2005), where the authors continuously emphasize the internal difference of the whole’s constituent parts. Nevertheless, in the end, the latter’s depiction of internal difference also appears to be endangered by the sheer power of the multitude’s common urge.

7. Haraway like other theorists refers to the term Anthropocene to describe the fact that humans have become a geological force. She refers to the narrative of the Chthulucene to describe the ontological consequences deriving from the rejection of the nature–culture dichotomy (Haraway, 2016, pp. 44–57).

8. Agamben claims that already the migratory movements following World War I emphasized the catastrophically flawed conception of binding basic human rights to one’s reference to a nation state through the institution of citizenship (Agamben, 1998, pp. 131–136).

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