

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sovereignty as an environmental practice: the problem of territoriality and anthropocentrism

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Abstract

The article is a theoretical study of state sovereignty. By looking at the concept in a different way from traditional methods, it tries to discern whether sovereignty is necessarily antithetical to a sustainable world. Emphasis is put on its territoriality and anthropocentrism – both of which make it into a major obstacle when tackling global and transnational environmental problems. State sovereignty is analyzed as an environmental practice of the state, which allows for the control of resources to be used by capital. The analysis is conducted using theoretical and conceptual critique as the main method. It is based on various sources ranging from critical geopolitics and critical geography to political science and political ecology, including the concept of Capitalocene. As long as sovereignty remains utilized by the state in service to capital, it will be used to cement its ability to control space and extract resources. However, a different kind of sovereignty is imaginable and therefore the institution itself is neither friend nor enemy to environmental politics. This new understanding of sovereignty opens up new avenues for theoretical research in political ecology and International Relations, bridging the gap between traditional state-centric approaches and the transboundary nature of ecological problems.

Keywords

sovereignty, territoriality, anthropocentrism, Capitalocene, political theory, environment

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Introduction

In the context of an ecological crisis that is both global and multi-faceted, we need to rethink many concepts and categories which we have always taken for granted in social sciences. One of the most common proposals is escaping the traditional confines of anthropocentrism of all our historical projects.¹ It is obviously a grand undertaking for every field of social science, including – if not most of all – international relations (IR). One of the possible paths of intellectual innovation may lay in the contestation and redefinition of concepts and categories that form the foundation of the discipline. They coalesce into the very core of IR and can be summarized as the “relationships between the normative categories of humanity, the international system of states based on sovereignty and non-interference, and the natural world”.² The study of the international system traditionally perpetuates many anthropocentric and statist concepts and questions that come out of old models, many of which are centered around state sovereignty.³ The sacredness of the institution of sovereignty has already been challenged for at least three decades,⁴ but its problematic features need to be studied more closely, mainly in light of its usage as an argument against numerous international as well as domestic environmental policies. It needs to become a central theme of analysis rather than a mere background assumption. More effort should be put to understand why processes that had started in the 1970s – and culminated in many environmental agreements and new institutions – have not weakened, but only altered the practice of sovereignty.⁵

Sovereignty appears to be a problematic concept – by nature it is anthropocentric and territorial, both of which are also the main obstacles to transforming IR into planet politics.⁶ It is also the concept and the institution that underpins and gives permanence to everyday policies and provides the foundation of discourse on both domestic and international politics.⁷ This article aims to explore the limits of

¹ See D. Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197–222.

² C. Harrington, “The Ends of the World: International Relations and the Anthropocene,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 479.

³ O. Corry, *Constructing a Global Polity: Theory, Discourse and Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22.

⁴ E. Laferrière and P.J. Stoett, *International Relations Theory and Ecological Thought* (London: Routledge, 1999), 12.

⁵ K.T. Litfin, “Sovereignty in World Ecopolitics,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 41, no. 2 (1997): 167–204.

⁶ A. Burke *et al.*, “Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 499–523.

⁷ J. Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty: Beyond the Territorial Trap* (London: Rowman & Littlefield: 2018), 1, 2.

our contemporary understandings of state sovereignty, focusing on anthropocentrism and territoriality and its relation to capitalism. This is done in order to open a discussion on how we can critique and possibly redefine a concept that is central both to the science of IR as well as modern politics. The article is born from the manifesto of Burke *et al.*,⁸ as well as its critique by Chandler *et al.*,⁹ as both texts formulate an intellectually inspiring dialogue that tackles various important problems in different ways. The discussion borrows from other sciences as well, including innovative concepts such as the Capitalocene.¹⁰ It starts with indicating the reasons for a critique of sovereignty in light of the many transnational and global environmental crises. Then sovereignty is redefined as an environmental practice subservient to capital. The article ends with the idea that a new understanding of the well-established concept may provide valuable insights into its apparent animosity towards global environmental initiatives and its persistence in world order.

The necessity for a critique of sovereignty

Reiterating what it means to live in Anthropocene seems unnecessary nowadays.¹¹ It is the idea about the age of the human which culminates in a global ecological crisis.¹² Even if the geological term is still controversial to geologists, the scientific consensus about humanity's destructive influence on the world is undisputable. The enormous burden of facts is troubling both intellectually and psychologically.¹³ Most of all, it challenges our way of governance. This is because every issue that has its roots in our relation to nature is by default tackled by sovereign territorial states – even if the issue itself has little to do with national borders. National sovereignty is still invoked relatively often during discussions about environmental politics, especially when they are related to policy areas traditionally connected to sovereign capacities of the state and its security, i.e. energy or foreign policy. Controlling borders and strengthening jurisdictional boundaries is the first line of thought for many politicians and intellectuals alike. In a kind of wishful thinking, the territorial modes of jurisdiction prevail over relations and consequences

⁸ Burke *et al.*, "Planet Politics."

⁹ D. Chandler, E. Cudworth and S. Hobden, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Liberal Cosmopolitan IR: A Response to Burke *et al.*'s 'Planet Politics'," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 2 (2018): 190–208.

¹⁰ Capitalocene is a term coined concurrently by numerous scholars, including Andreas Malm. It is an alternative to the Anthropocene, proving that it is not abstract humanity, but capitalism that is responsible for the enormous degradation of the natural environment in the last five centuries. See A. Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London & New York: Verso, 2016).

¹¹ The concept itself is more than two decades old by now and has permeated into almost every discourse. See P. Crutzen and E. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17, 18.

¹² W. Steffen *et al.*, "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 81–98.

¹³ A.J. Hoffman and P.D. Jennings, "Institutional Theory and the Natural Environment: Research In (And On) the Anthropocene," *Organization and Environment* 28, no. 1 (2015): 8–31.

that care not for our abstract demarcation lines.¹⁴ The resiliency of territoriality is apparent even in the case of the post-Westphalian experiment such as the European Union (EU), where the politics of climate change are still highly territorialized.¹⁵ In scientific discourse, this mode of thinking is especially prevalent in any realist or geopolitical analysis, where the emphasis on territoriality remains strong even though the current environmental challenges to state sovereignty have us rethink the foundation of our security theories.¹⁶ The other side of mainstream IR (liberal institutionalism) also tends to uphold the sacredness of state sovereignty in relation to environmental issues as it is traditionally one of the foundations of institutional thought.¹⁷ Even critical IR theory is often guilty of not addressing the relation of territorial sovereignty to environmental issues.¹⁸ Paradoxically, it is mostly critical geographers that point out that in IR theory the state's essential territoriality is still – for better or for worse – being taken for granted and the dominating view of space is territorial (seen as chunks of planetary surface defined by territorial boundaries) rather than structural (where the spatial effects of different geographical entities result from their interaction or relationship with one another).¹⁹

Of course this critique of territoriality has its limits. It is rather general and does not go deeper into how these territories came to be. It is true that their genealogy across the globe is heterogeneous, although the article works on the assumption their historical-geographical dimension is mostly a social construction. It is assumed that modern state borders are generally based on arbitrary, but economically and strategically useful considerations of power centers. Nevertheless, when global ecological issues are at stake, it seems that most predictions about the decline of sovereignty made by political scientists in the past have been at least partially wrong.²⁰ The state-centric geographies of security and sovereignty are withering and leaking, but not disappearing.²¹ Not only is sovereignty of the industrialized

¹⁴ S. Dalby, "Unsustainable Borders: Globalization in a Climate-Disrupted World," *Borders in Globalization Review* 2, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2021): 27, 28.

¹⁵ S. Chaturvedi and T. Doyle, *Climate Terror: A Critical Geopolitics of Climate Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 116.

¹⁶ Laferrière and Stoett, *International Relations Theory and Ecological Thought*, 86.

¹⁷ Laferrière and Stoett, *International Relations Theory*, 114.

¹⁸ G. Kitting, "A Critical Approach to Institutional and Environmental Effectiveness: Lessons from the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Pollution," in *The International Political Economy of the Environment*, eds. D. Stevis and V.J. Assetto (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 182.

¹⁹ J. Agnew, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, territory and international political economy* (London: Routledge, 1995), 80–82.

²⁰ For such predictions See G. Baker, "Problems in the Theoretisation of Global Civil Society," *Political Studies* 50, no. 5 (2002): 928–943; R. Lipschutz, "From Local Knowledge and Practice to Global Environmental Governance," in *Approaches to Global Governance Theory*, eds. M. Hewson and T.J. Sinclair (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 259–283.

²¹ Chaturvedi and Doyle, *Climate Terror*, 20.

state fortified through global economic governance institutions,²² the whole global politico-economic framework upheld by states and for states still depends on their territoriality. This is why, even if environmental problems are framed as ‘global’ or ‘transboundary’,²³ the response of the international system is almost always territorialized. Thus every international project in environmental politics – most notably the latest big undertaking that is the Paris Agreement of 2015²⁴ – actually reasserts the role of sovereign territorial states as the default mode of governance.²⁵ It is not only the axis of every guideline, but also the dominant discourse on the Agreement. This discourse includes state *vs* state rivalry or the ascribing of responsibility to states and not social groups or industries. As Bruno Latour puts it, the whole negotiation process showed:

“[...] the complete unrealism of their borrowed notion of sovereignty: sovereign states framed by sharp borders were discussing how to collectively bear something that crossed through all borders, and that over a few centuries had entangled them much more tightly than war or commerce had ever been able to do”.²⁶

This notion of sovereignty is used as justification for territorial rights by various voices in the politico-environmental debate. Nationalist justifications view territoriality as connected to national identity; proprietary justifications view it as the necessary condition for private property rights; and populist justifications connect it to democratic self-determination. It is also noticeable how all of these are connected to peoplehood and form a kind of ‘ecological blindspot’.²⁷

It must be noted that while territoriality’s centrality to the concept of sovereignty is usually a problem, the territoriality of the state itself is often part of a solution. It comes to fruition mainly during the implementation phase of global environmental regimes, because in a system of states, state-based legislation and its enforcement are both necessary and efficient. Thus, while ceding all responsibility to states in a pledge-based agreement – like the Paris Agreement – seems pointless when taking into account the history of such endeavors, there are examples of territorial states successfully tackling a global environmental problem, as was the

²² G. Kütting and S. Rose, “The environment as a global issue,” in *Palgrave advances in international environmental politics*, eds. M.M. Betsill, K. Hochstetler and D. Stevis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 120.

²³ K. O’Neill, *The Environment and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 31–33.

²⁴ UNFCCC, *Adoption of the Paris Agreement, 21st Conference of the Parties* (Paris: United Nations, 2015).

²⁵ Dalby, “Unsustainable Borders,” 27.

²⁶ B. Latour, “Onus Orbis Terrarum: About a Possible Shift in the Definition of Sovereignty,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 320.

²⁷ O. Dahbour, “On the ecological blindspot in the territorial rights debate,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, no. 2 (2019): 217–232.

case with the Montreal Protocol.²⁸ There is a ‘dark’ side to this success story, however, as Brian J. Gareau suggests – states have indeed been able to enforce necessary changes, but only because it was beneficial to specific industry interests.²⁹

This is where the emphasis on territoriality meets the second important problem of the international system – anthropocentrism. It is understood here not only as the centrality of human values and experiences, but mostly as the marginalization or outright rejection of any other way of political organization. On one hand it seems logical that any form of human organization, like the state and the state system, will be anthropocentric, although this view stems from a stunted political imagination that we have all been socialized into – one that does not allow us to conceptualize any form of political community other than a community of humans.³⁰ Importantly, this anthropocentrism does not exist in a social and historical vacuum, but rather, as Mathew Patterson puts it, “it has emerged as part of an ideological system underpinning the emergence of modern science, of capitalism, of the modern state, and of specifically modern forms of patriarchy”.³¹ Maybe this deep embeddedness of anthropocentrism in science is the reason why there are not many critiques of sovereignty that focus on this feature. In political theory it is most often treated commonsensically as a problem not worth mentioning.³² This may be why such a critique, when it happens, is very radical. The best example is the critique by Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, who use the controversial topic of extra-terrestrial life. That Wendt and Duvall challenge the anthropocentrism of sovereignty by using the idea of UFOs is of no importance here. What is important is that they unambiguously state that modern sovereignty is constituted and organized solely by reference to humans, and this trait is common across all institutional forms of sovereignty today.³³ Wendt and Duvall point to the fact that modern systems of rule always silently reference humanity when they need to mobilize power, use power or command resources. But this agency of humanity can no longer be taken for granted and needs to be problematized in light of the breakdown of the human-nature divide that is evident in the global ecological crisis.³⁴ Even if the

²⁸ M. Gonzalez, K.N. Taddonio and N.J. Sherman, “The Montreal Protocol: how today’s successes offer a pathway to the future,” *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 5 (2015): 122–129.

²⁹ B.J. Gareau, “A critical review of the successful CFC phase-out versus the delayed methyl bromide phase-out in the Montreal Protocol,” *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 10 (2010): 209–231.

³⁰ See V. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

³¹ M. Paterson, *Understanding Global Environmental Politics: Domination, Accumulation, Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 40.

³² A. Wendt and R. Duvall, “Sovereignty and the UFO,” *Political Theory* 36, no. 4 (2008): 609.

³³ Wendt and Duvall, “Sovereignty,” 608.

³⁴ Harrington, “The Ends of the World,” 494.

anthropocentrism of sovereignty is logical in light of scientific facts – that there is no evidence that Nature has subjectivity³⁵ – it obscures important notions of how our politico-economic systems relate to space and the environment.

An important argument here is the idea that every human activity throughout history has always been ecological in some way or another. This is most cleverly approached by the geographer David Harvey, who writes that every socio-political project in history is an ecological one and *vice versa*.³⁶ This has profound implications for IR thought, although it is rarely taken into account. Because societies create their own environmental conditions required for their survival, those conditions reflect the dominant social, political, and economic relations of those societies. In a system of capitalist states, it is capitalism and statism that drive the shaping, production, and reproduction of nature by humans. As Christian Parenti puts it, “the capitalist state has always been an inherently environmental entity”.³⁷

Therefore, one important thing is missing from most of our studies of sovereignty and our idea of the Anthropocene as well – the fact that there has never been a collective, abstract Humanity driving both the history of civilization and the destruction of the environment. Thus the singular narrative of the Anthropocene may serve as a decent starting point, but it obscures as much as it clarifies.³⁸ Chandler *et al.*, warn against leaning on the concept too strongly. For them the Anthropocene is useful for emphasizing the unprecedented influence of humanity on the planet, but it still carries the traditional notions of human universalism and exceptionalism. The first one is especially important in this discussion, because the issue of responsibility for the crisis is not as simple as the Anthropocene discourse suggests. The driving force of human history, especially political history, was never the collective humanity, but specific social and geographically defined groups and the models of social relations and modes of production that they have carried with them.³⁹ Because the dominant model of the last five centuries has been capitalism, it should always be present in any discussion we have about our political reality and environmental problems alike. This is why Chandler *et al.*, suggest using the term ‘Capitalocene’ instead of Anthropocene within the modern study of IR. This mostly self-explanatory concept originated with Andreas Malm⁴⁰ and has been promulgated by Jason W. Moore as an entry into the debate on what exactly is

³⁵ Wendt and Duvall, “Sovereignty,” 622.

³⁶ D. Harvey, *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), 174.

³⁷ C. Parenti, “Environment-Making in the Capitalocene: Political Ecology of the State,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. J.W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 166.

³⁸ J.W. Moore, “The Capitalocene Part II: accumulation by appropriation and the centrality of unpaid work/energy,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 2 (2018): 237.

³⁹ Chandler *et al.*, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene,” 199, 200.

⁴⁰ See Malm, *Fossil Capital*.

the character of the twenty-first century ecological crisis, when did this crisis originate, and what forces have been driving it.⁴¹ Because the Capitalocene is simply a different way of thinking about the ecological crisis and not a rival geological definition, it does not invalidate the whole debate on the Anthropocene. It merely serves here as the basis for a different view of history – one where geo-biophysical processes and social and economic history can, or must, be analyzed together. Moreover, it provides a working assumption about the capitalogenic nature of the ecological crisis – an assumption explored not only by Moore and Malm, but also other scholars, mainly those following a Marxist tradition. Through this lens we might notice that the still strong territoriality and anthropocentrism of state sovereignty in every discourse is not accidental and has its reasons.

Sovereignty as an environmental practice

The framing of sovereignty in terms of territory, power, and capital instead of merely territory and power provides an interesting perspective. Traditionally state sovereignty has been thought to have arisen to legitimately enforce internal order and protect against external threats in service to political authority.⁴² However, by using capitalism instead of international law as the main axis of analysis of the history of international politics, we can notice how our notions of sovereignty have related to our modes of production. And those are always highly place-specific. Labor, food, energy, or raw materials are all placed and accessed geographically. They must be located and controlled territorially before they can be put to work. However, capitalism itself is not well equipped to do that.⁴³ It needs the state. Alan Carter describes it in a complex way as the entity that stabilizes the competitive and inegalitarian economic relations which in turn support the nationalistic and militaristic coercive forces empowering the state while damaging the environment through technology.⁴⁴ Thus, the relation of support between capitalism and the modern state is mutual. Immanuel Wallerstein also sees the state as the proxy through which enterprises, both private and state-owned, maximize the conditions for profit-making.⁴⁵ When taking such perspectives into account one can notice that the classical Westphalian concept of state sovereignty only mystifies the reality and morphology of power in the capitalist world order.⁴⁶ The alternative idea is that it was capitalism that created the modern state and this state – which defines

⁴¹ Moore, “The Capitalocene Part II,” 237–239.

⁴² Agnew, *Globalization*, 9.

⁴³ Moore, “The Capitalocene Part II,” 245.

⁴⁴ A. Carter, “Towards a Green Political Theory,” in *The Politics of Nature: Explorations in Green Political Theory*, eds. A. Dobson and P. Lucardie (London: Routledge, 1993), 45.

⁴⁵ I. Wallerstein, *The politics of the world-economy: The states, the movements, and the civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5.

⁴⁶ J. Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994).

itself by its relation to other states – is simply the most convenient institutional intermediary for establishing the conditions for capital accumulation.⁴⁷ Even though territorial sovereignty (especially over resources) may appear to be inwardly focused against ‘outside’ intervention, it is simply protected and enhanced by global capital in order to create stable legal property regimes.⁴⁸ Thus the modern territorial state system born in the seventeenth century provided the framework for definitions of legal rights of ownership of the land, without which the expansion of capitalism towards further capital accumulation would not have been possible or as easy.⁴⁹ Capital needs a stable, institutionalized access to space, because it equals a stable and secure access to nature.

This is why Parenti describes the state as a relationship with nature. For him every modern socio-economic project exists upon the surface of the earth thanks to the territoriality of state.⁵⁰ It was the state that enabled the territorialization of political authority following the Peace of Westphalia,⁵¹ as well as allowed capitalism to capture the necessary positive externalities and enhance the clustering of external economies within national-state boundaries.⁵² Even now states compete with one another to attract capital to their territories, because they are ultimately the ones that control them and can enable the extraction of their use values. In return, capital strengthens the state’s control apparatus and its political legitimacy. Thus, the apparent unbundling of state territorial sovereignty will not actually happen as long as there is capital searching for new ways of accumulation. According to Kevin R. Cox, capital is the force that necessarily territorializes and centralizes, because production requires not only resources but also fixed infrastructures, like transport networks, industrial estates, worker housing, water and power provision, as well as infrastructure for the social reproduction of the labor power. The sovereign state becomes the unit that intervenes both globally and nationally in response to the bottom-up pressures of capital.⁵³ Nowhere is it more visible than during international environmental negotiations, when governments are pressured by industries which are central to modern capitalism. Under fossil capitalism capital is most easily accumulated in the energy, transportation, and manufacturing sectors of national economies.⁵⁴ Those are the ones that utilize

⁴⁷ Wallerstein, *The politics*, 29, 30.

⁴⁸ J. Emel, M.T. Huber and M.H. Makene, “Extracting sovereignty: Capital, territory, and gold mining in Tanzania,” *Political Geography* 30, no. 2 (2011): 70–79.

⁴⁹ Agnew, *Globalization*, 106.

⁵⁰ Parenti, “Environment-Making,” 166.

⁵¹ D. Croxton, “The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Origins of Sovereignty,” *The International History Review* 21, no. 3 (1999): 569–591.

⁵² Agnew, *Globalization*, 37.

⁵³ K.R. Cox, “Territory, Scale, and Why Capitalism Matters,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1, no. 1 (2013): 46–61.

⁵⁴ See Malm, *Fossil*.

what Matto Mildenberger calls 'double representation' – the excessive political pressure exerted by carbon polluters during any domestic or international climate policy negotiations, which transcends any party lines and political interests.⁵⁵ The relation is therefore twofold: not only does the state provide economic entities with legal rights of ownership and conditions for capital accumulation, but it also empowers them to stymie efforts to curtail their privilege to extract use value from nature and labor. This is why even when landmark 'green' bills are passed by the governments of core countries, they still contain provisions that show the influence of carbon-intensive industries which receive some form of compensation in order to uphold their capital accumulating conditions.⁵⁶

In this perspective states are no more than coordinating devices to connect and integrate networks of power of the dominant economic entities into discrete territories.⁵⁷ It is also the world economy that regulates the extent of each state's sovereignty – by determining exchange and interest rates, by imposing structural adjustment programs and so on.⁵⁸ Empires and capitalists have always needed the territoriality upheld by political and epistemic power of the state. This is what Parenti calls 'geopower' – the "technologies of power that make territory and the biosphere accessible, legible, knowable, and utilizable".⁵⁹ Geopower has many forms, one of which is described by Moore as 'geo-managerialism'. It is a set of managerial procedures and imperatives – including identification, maximization, and restructuring of labor and knowledge – which are utilized by states in order to identify the productive potential of the part of nature (including the human population) they control and make it directly useful to capital, while reproducing the conditions of its accumulation.⁶⁰ One of the most important implications from this is that the state uses not only its political and legal power but also science and technology to shape its citizens view of nature as something to be appropriated on the basis of territorial entitlement. The argument of sovereignty, among many others, is then abused by the power of the fossil capitalism's dominant economic interests when they stymie environmental reform efforts.

⁵⁵ See M. Mildenberger, *Carbon Captured: How Business and Labor Control Climate Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 39–64.

⁵⁶ The best example is the US climate bill from 2022 which contains a provision that the US government will need to open access to millions of acres of public waters to oil and gas companies before any investment can be made in green energy infrastructure. See K. Aronoff, "Congress is about to pass a historic climate bill. So why are oil companies pleased?," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/aug/09/congress-climate-bill-oil-companies>.

⁵⁷ Agnew, *Globalization*, 131.

⁵⁸ Agnew, *Mastering Space*, 5.

⁵⁹ Parenti, "Environment-Making," 171.

⁶⁰ Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II," 245, 246.

The idea and discourse of sovereignty are therefore one of the major ways in which the dominant system of power and capital can create, uphold, and defend its own model of environmental management and resource allocation.⁶¹ Even the anthropocentrism of sovereignty is necessary for capitalism, because it blurs the responsibility for environmental degradation, moving it from specific economic entities to state populations as a whole, while at the same time strengthening the notion of a specific part of the Earth as ‘belonging’ and subservient to a population.⁶² In conclusion, capitalism has become the structure of relations that provides necessary conditions for regionalizing and identifying state territories and asserting their power over the land and by extension over nature as a whole. This perspective is different than a purely geopolitical one, in which only (a handful of) states are responsible for the geopolitical discourse that describes world order.⁶³ The geo-managerial perspective under Capitalocene reveals a different, more obscure force that shapes the discourse on states, sovereignty, rivalry etc. Thus the so-called ‘return of geopolitics’ and the strengthening of discourses centered around sovereignty is not antithetical to global capitalism, but rather is the emanation of its efforts to reproduce conditions necessary for its existence. This is because state sovereignty has three aspects. As an idea it obviously serves as the foundation for maintaining national identity and provides the feeling of security of having basic resources required for a society’s survival – even if those resources end up as means for capital accumulation rather than for subsistence activities. As an institution it provides the legal framework for controlling a chunk of space and those resources and the populations that provide labor. As an environmental practice, state sovereignty determines how those resources and labor are claimed and for what purpose.

Conclusions

The critique of sovereignty presented here is aimed to support the notion by Chandler *et al.*, that the Capitalocene, not just the Anthropocene, is what presents one of the major challenges to IR.⁶⁴ Despite some hopes that in a proper ecological society the issues of politics including sovereignty, territoriality, and interstate competition will sort themselves out, history has rarely worked that way.⁶⁵ The problem of state sovereignty as a major obstacle to tackling global existential threats is both political and intellectual. Burke *et al.*, came up with ideas for

⁶¹ See Harvey, “Justice,” 174.

⁶² This is the exact same process that is visible on the global scale and noticed by Moore, who emphasizes that the universalization of humanity removes the responsibility for degradation from a small group that is actually responsible. See J.W. Moore, “Confronting the Popular Anthropocene: Toward an Ecology of Hope,” *New Geographies* 9 (2017): 194–199.

⁶³ See Agnew, *Mastering Space*, 46–77.

⁶⁴ Chandler *et al.*, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene,” 203.

⁶⁵ Laferrière and Stoett, 157.

groundbreaking reforms, which would raise significant political and legal complexities.⁶⁶ However, their proposals still do not challenge the concept of anthropocentric and territorial sovereignty. A perspective in which state sovereignty is a fundamental tool of capitalist division, control and appropriation of the Earth is absent from their otherwise groundbreaking *Manifesto*. This is why the conclusions of Chandler *et al.*, – that what we need is not new authoritarian institutions and regimes but bottoms-up solutions that put nature before capital – seem more on point when taking into account the problematic nature of sovereignty under capitalism. So rather than focusing on a new global security governance that actually entrenches the current fundamental issues,⁶⁷ we might be better off focusing on how capitalism influences state behavior and geopolitical discourse in order to overcome those pressures.

The discourse of separate and often rivalrous states, founded on the concept of territorial sovereignty and exclusive jurisdiction, may prove effective when faced with challenges to political identity, but definitely fails against trans-territorial and global threats.⁶⁸ This is because it translates into entitlement of states to pursue their environmental and developmental policies within their own territories as they see fit. And because this state-centric discourse is still the dominant one, the global environmental crisis and the advances in international environmental politics merely reconfigure a fluid notion of sovereignty, but never challenge it outright.⁶⁹ All of these reconfigurations serve not to overcome sovereignty but protect the forces that use it in order to control, extract, and accumulate. Just like the state itself, sovereignty is neither an ally nor an enemy of transformation towards sustainability, even though the idea of territorial exclusivity appears to make it mutually exclusive with any kind of ecological holism. Rather than endlessly debating over whether sovereign states are here forever or are about to disappear in a global cosmopolis,⁷⁰ we could be better off trying to understand the forces that underlie the problem in order to challenge them.⁷¹ Focusing on sovereignty as an environmental practice in relation to capital may be a starting point for further discussion and a way to circumvent the traditional constraints of mainstream IR theory and political theory in general. Any kind of intellectual

⁶⁶ Burke *et al.*, “Planet Politics,” 516, 517.

⁶⁷ Chandler *et al.*, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene,” 202; J. Baskin, *The Ideology of the Anthropocene?*, Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute (MSSI) Research Paper 3 (Victoria: University of Melbourne, MSSI, 2014), 15.

⁶⁸ Dalby, “Unsustainable Borders,” 29.

⁶⁹ Litfin, “Sovereignty,” 168, 169.

⁷⁰ R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 14.

⁷¹ P. Wapner, “Reorienting state sovereignty: rights and responsibilities in the environmental age,” in *The greening of sovereignty in world politics*, ed. K. Litfin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 276.

endeavor aimed at shifting the international society towards a sustainable one should not disregard sovereignty or hope that its erosion will be a natural by-product of socio-economic changes. It is a tool that has no inherent moral value and its *raison d'être* depends on the forces allowed to control its discourse. So if the institution is here to stay for at least another few decades, we should rather focus on trying to redefine it.⁷² By looking through the lens of the Capitalocene we can see that state sovereignty is not only a political idea and an institution, but also an environmental practice instrumental for capitalism to carry out its prerogative of capital accumulation by way of the geo-managerial state. And if it is here to stay, we may then try to steer it away from capital accumulation and towards sustainability. A different kind of state sovereignty is imaginable – one that not only fulfills the populations' needs of identity and security, but also becomes the environmental practice of a sustainable state, where the well-being of nature trumps the needs of capital. A sustainable world does not have to be a difficult to imagine state-less cosmopolis but can become a system of responsible entities that serve as guardians rather than managers of the part of nature ceded to them.

The questions raised here are too complex and nuanced to receive satisfactory answers within the scope of a single article. Moreover, depending on the reader's own ontological and theoretical perspective, even more questions appear: Is sovereignty or territoriality the fundamental problem? Or is it a matter of their conceptualization and institutionalization? Can the limited success of some market-based solutions provide a pathway towards reigning in more of capitalism's destructive momentum? Certainly history gives us examples that allow one to be both an optimist and a pessimist when it comes to letting a system of sovereign territorial states solve any global problem, irrespective of their economic system. The author's hope is that all the above questions will be further explored and the draft of a new perspective presented here will serve as an intellectual inspiration for heterodox approaches which contest ideas and concepts that the mainstream of political science takes for granted.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

⁷² Latour, "Onus Orbis Terrarum," 320.