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The State Theory of Grotius

Introduction - On State Theory and Grotius

To write of Grotius's "State Theory" – and its possible relevance for us today – risks compounding a misunderstanding of Grotius with an anachronism.

The charge of misunderstanding Grotius which could be levelled against me, is that to speak of a Grotian State Theory runs against the grain of numerous authorities on Grotius that consistently maintain Grotius did not have a modern state concept of the kind so recognizably found in contemporaries (such as Hobbes) or in influential near-contemporaries (such as Bodin). In one of the more recent versions of this claim, Richard Tuck concludes that Grotius's account of sovereignty in *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* restates a "medieval idea in a modern form" by refusing the conclusion that there must be a singular locus of sovereignty in a polity, distinguishable from the government that actually exercised power on a daily basis.¹ But Tuck is by no means alone, with Brett concluding that "Grotius does not think of 'the state' – for which he has no word anyway ... - as an agent, 'a moral person' as the later tradition would have it ... Grotius's global political world in [*De Jure Belli ac Pacis*] is not primarily one of sovereign states as international actors ..."²

¹ Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy*, (CUP 2016) 85.

² Annabel Brett, "The Space of Politics and the Space of War in Hugo Grotius's *De iure belli ac pacis*" (2016) 1(1) *Global Intellectual History* 33, 44, 51. See also, influentially, Haggenmacher's argument in the chapter entitled « Les belligérants

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My argument in this article (from Part II) is that despite Grotius's many diverging accounts of the place and character of sovereign power within a political order, he nonetheless articulates a distinctively modern theory of state that can take its place alongside Bodin and Hobbes as one of the ways in which early modern civil philosophy sought to solve the problem of the authority and validity of political order. This is interesting, I argue, because Grotius's account of the state draws a picture of the relationship between political and legal ordering, and history, in which the interrelationship of the political and the legal allows a range of adaptive and adaptable state-forms – while still retaining the *capacity* for sovereign agency. In my argument, the architectonic of Grotius's natural legal order provides the exoskeleton³ for a variable and historically-determined carapace of state power and authority that spans a wide-spectrum of modalities of rulership, but remains recognizably modern rather than medieval.

But does anything in the present turn on this claim for the modernity of Grotius's state theory? To answer in the affirmative invites, quite reasonably, the charge of anachronism to which no glib or dogmatic answer should be given. As Andrew Fitzmaurice has argued recently, *making sense* of the meaning of a complex architecture of legal and political concepts in history, requires at least a suspension of our contemporary understandings in order to place that

et le problème de la souveraineté » in Peter Haggemacher, *Grotius et la doctrine de la Guerre Juste*, (Presse Universitaires de France, 1983) 529-547. Koskenniemi similarly notes that “no stable theory of statehood” emerged from Grotius's works: Martti Koskenniemi, “Imagining the Rule of Law: Rereading the Grotian “Tradition”” (2019) 30(1) *European Journal of International Law* 17, 41. Simpson, who challenges the claim that Grotius had no account of the state, also discusses the common view that Grotius's was not a state theorist in any modern sense: Emile Simpson, “States and Patrimonial Kingdoms: Hugo Grotius's Account of Sovereign Entities in the Rights of War and Peace” (2018) 39(1) *Grotiana* 45.

³ Note that Annabel Brett has first used this term and I also find it highly suitable.

Draft - CLP

architecture of concepts within the web of meanings that were available to the author.⁴ Presentism of a vulgar kind, which assumes that meanings of concepts travel frictionlessly across time and contexts, leads not only to misunderstanding “what’s at stake” in a text and “what’s going on” around it, but also to underwriting contemporary ideological claims about the inevitability *or* boundless malleability of the present.⁵ But by the same token, an unyieldingly nominalist approach to the meaning of concepts in the history of legal and political thought dissolves these concepts into their historical contexts, leaving students of this history with the conclusion that “not only are there no stable concepts in history, but also that there are no stable, or recurrent, problems in the history of (political) philosophy either.”⁶ As Straumann argues, such an epistemological commitment is difficult to reconcile with what we can observe *in* history – that the histories of *some* concepts can be written showing long-term conceptual stability *or* change, and that once we attempt such histories – “and this is simply what good historians of ideas such as Skinner have been doing for a long time – we are in a position to argue that some problems are indeed perennial, while others perish and entirely new ones arise. *We are also in a better position to free ourselves from our own context and not remain trapped in our own assumptions.*”⁷ Straumann’s contention is that we can take a “biographical” approach to some families of ideas, understanding certain kinds of concepts as

⁴ Andrew Fitzmaurice, “Context in the History of International Law” (2018) 20(1) *Journal of the History of International Law* 5.

⁵ Lauren Benton, “Beyond Anachronism: Histories of International Law and Global Legal Politics,” (2019) 21 *Journal of the History of International Law* 1, 7.

⁶ Benjamin Straumann, “The Energy of Concepts: The Role of Concepts in Long-Term Intellectual History and Social Reality” [2019] *Journal of the Philosophy of History* (2019) 1, 19.

⁷ *ibid* 20.

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emerging out of “conceptual and empirical problem situations,”⁸ and, for so long as the “problem situation” persists, the content of the concept can indeed be “a determinate idea to which various writers contributed.”⁹ Another implication of Straumann’s productive suggestion is that concepts are not inert epiphenomena of other processes, but themselves carry a kind of energy that is *part* of the ways in which social reality is made and re-made: “once a concept is deployed in argument or conflict – in a ‘problem situation’ ... it may assume considerable traction and thus *kinetic* energy. ... [W]hen a concept goes out of use, say, due to lack of the kind of necessary historical conditions for it to find application – it might be said to have *potential* energy. This does justice to our sense that concepts and arguments, when they are being rediscovered and reapplied, were in a way potentially available ... Given the proper set of historical problems it may find application again, its kinetic energy rising as soon as someone apprehends the concept in question.”¹⁰

To say that the modernity of Grotius’s state theory provides a vantage point from which to think about the nature and idea of the state in the present, would be to suggest that the “problem-situation” in relation to which it sought to provide answers, may contain lessons that can be discerned from within our contemporary “problem-situation.” Part I of this article revisits the “problem-situation” of state theory in our epoch, and elaborates on the notion that state-concepts and state-theories are worthy of specific attention because their *performative* character allows them to have a (potentially) significant role in

⁸ *ibid* 24. Here Straumann is citing philosopher of science Arabatzis, quotation marks omitted.

⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁰ *ibid* 28-29.

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shaping social reality. Parts II to IV of the article develops my argument concerning Grotius's state theory, as foreshadowed above. Part V concludes by reflecting on how Grotius's state theory provides us with insights into aspects of our own reality, that might well, as Straumann says, allow us to free ourselves from our own context and revisit our own assumptions.

Part I – The Problem-Situation of State Theory

As a historically determinate theoretical phenomena, "state theory" refers to a family of mostly German theoretical and political writings from the 19th and 20th centuries: *Staatslehre* or *Staatsrechtslehre* (State Theory or State Law Theory).¹¹ A central problematic of this theoretical constellation was how to characterize the fundamental nature of the state and how to theorize the sources of state power and authority. A closely related question concerned the source of the political order embodied in the state, and whether that order was productive of or parasitic upon legal order.¹² That German legal and political thought was preoccupied with grasping the foundations and essential qualities of state and law at this moment in German history reflects the upheavals experienced by

¹¹ Michael Stolleis, *Public Law in Germany, 1800-1914* (Berghahn Books 2001); Duncan Kelly, *The State of the Political: Conceptions of the State in the Thought of Max Weber, Carl Schmitt and Franz Neumann* (OUP 2003).

¹² Duncan Kelly, "Egon Zweig and the Intellectual History of Constituent Power" in Kelly L Grotke and Markus J Prutsch (eds), *Constitutionalism, Legitimacy, and Power* (CUP, 2014). Kelly notes that it is "a curious but rather well-observed feature of German-speaking intellectual history at the turn of the twentieth century that legal and political questions were thought of as intimately related. Allied to the development of the history of political thought as a particular style of thinking about the nature of the modern state, political thought quickly became a tool to be used in disputes over the interpretation of law and legal history.", (at 332).

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German politics and society from the French Revolution through monarchical restoration, liberal revolt and industrial transformation.¹³

The theoretical answers given to such questions as 'what is the nature of the state?' and 'who is the bearer of the sovereignty of the state?' ranged from an idea of the state as an organism or person (Bluntschli), to Gierke's emphasis on Germanic *Genossenschaft* as the true source of national law's binding qualities, to Stahl's attribution of state personality to the real person of the monarch.¹⁴

The intellectual ferment over state theory was thus a ferment over the intellectual foundations of the modern state and the basis upon which its sovereign power was generated, authorized and wielded. As such, it was intimately connected with arguments about the nature of public law and of public authority as exercised through and under law.¹⁵ Where one stood on such state-theoretical questions carried strong implications for what kind of domestic *and* supra-national legal and political orders were conceivable and considered realizable. To argue about the state and its essential nature (or lack of it) is to make claims about the foundations of its coercive authority; it is also to make an argument about law's authority as it relates to these foundations.¹⁶

¹³ See Duncan Kelly, "Popular Sovereignty as State Theory in the Nineteenth Century," in Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective* (CUP 2016) 270-296; Jo Eric Khushal Murkens, *From Empire to Union: Conceptions of German Constitutional Law since 1871* (OUP 2013), Part I ; Martin Loughlin, *The Foundations of Public Law*, (OUP 2010), Part III.

¹⁴ For an overview of these theories, see Kelly, *The State of the Political* (n11) and also Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *State, Society and Liberty: Essays in Political Theory and Constitutional Law* (JA Underwood tr, Berg 1991), chapters 1-4.

¹⁵ Martin Loughlin, "In Defense of Staatslehre" (2009) 48(1) *Der Staat* 1.

¹⁶ Law's authority might variously be claimed to be derivative of a real political substance found outside the law (as for Gierke and Schmitt), as the *sine qua non* of the state-form standing alongside that political substance (as for Bluntschli

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Stepping back from the precise historical context of *Staatslehre* and its disputations, we might recognize that the types of questions and problem-situations which characterized "state theory" continue to preoccupy us today. There is undoubtedly a pervasive sense that we inhabit, and reflect upon, a world in which state-centred thinking and *Staatlich* concepts have lost purchase, and in which fundamental legal-political categories and vocabularies appear to have been decisively untethered from the concrete historical circumstances that gave birth to them (democracy, the rule of law, constitutionalism, administrative law, solidarity, public authority, to name a few). But despite - or perhaps precisely because of, the ever-louder exhortation to think ourselves "beyond the state," we are also living through a period in which some of the animating questions of state theory are being disinterred, re-examined and renovated. The statist (or, *Staatlich*) presuppositions of our inherited political and legal vocabularies are being subjected to profound scrutiny, whether with a view to demonstrating their severability from plausible theoretical accounts of concepts such as democracy and constitutional order, or, in order to underline the deep conceptual puzzles generated by attempting to coherently articulate a concept like "global law."¹⁷

Another global field of intellectual and practical endeavour has also brought state theory to the fore: state-building. Beginning in the last years of the

and Jellinek) or as simply coextensive with the concept of the state extrinsic of any empirical claims about the substance of the political order (as for Kelsen).

¹⁷ For recent examples: Hans Lindahl, *Faultlines of Globalization: Legal Order and the Politics of A-Legality* (OUP 2013); Hans Lindahl, *Authority and the Globalization of Inclusion and Exclusion* (CUP 2018); Neil Walker, *Intimations of Global Law* (CUP 2015); and Alexander Somek, *The Cosmopolitan Constitution* (OUP 2014).

Draft - CLP

Cold War, international organizations, coalitions of sovereign states and non-government organizations have engaged in lengthy and intensive attempts to re-found durable political orders in the aftermath of civil conflict or foreign intervention, usually under the auspices of United Nations-mandated peace-making and peacekeeping initiatives,¹⁸ and more dramatically after foreign interventions (Kosovo, Iraq, Libya). The result is a new techno-practical discourse of state-ness, in which the state is understood as a technical achievement, amenable to a variety of programs of intentional institutional design, therapeutic political techniques (such as transitional justice) and expert knowledge claims about how to generate 'state strength' and combat 'state weakness.'¹⁹ The relationship between state failure and the threat of transnational non-state terrorism has accelerated and deepened this tendency, with a strong interest in being able to claim to understand the 'drivers' of state-fragility in order better to intervene so as to contain them and the security risks they intimate. This technical-functional terminology of state-ness has started to

¹⁸ For the vast literature see, Roland Paris, *At War's End* (CUP 2004); Simon Chesterman, *You the people: the United Nations, transitional administration, and state-building* (OUP 2004); Gregory Fox, *Humanitarian Occupation* (OUP 2008); Lise Morjé Howard, *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (CUP 2007); Timothy D Sisk and Roland Paris (eds), *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the contradictions of postwar peace operations* (Routledge 2009); Francis Fukuyama, *State-building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Cornell University Press 2004).

¹⁹ See, inter alia, Rand Corporations Guide to State-Building; see also the vast synthesis of these kinds of arguments achieved by the World Bank's *World Development Report of 2011 – Conflict, Security and Development*. For a reading of this discourse, see Nehal Bhuta, *State-Building, Democracy and Politics as Technology* I found this on SSRN but wasn't sure about citing from there; and Nehal Bhuta, 'Governmentalizing Sovereignty: Indexes of State Fragility and the Calculability of Political Order' in Kevin Davis, Angelina Fisher, Benedict Kingsbury and Sally Engle Merry (eds), *Governance by Indicators: Global Power through Quantification and Rankings* (OUP 2012).

Draft - CLP

penetrate the categories of international law governing state sovereignty, with an accelerating willingness to accept the idea that weak states of a certain kind (those 'unable or unwilling' to control non-state terrorist groups on their territory) may be subject to the lawful use of military force against them, through tactics such as drone strikes.²⁰

In both its theoretical and technical registers, our contemporary reflection on the state returns us to such questions as, what is a state? How is a state founded? How does it vindicate its claim rightfully to coerce a population and control the territory? How are political, social and economic power generated and concentrated into an apparatus of government? What is the relationship between legal norms (and normativity generally) and factual power of the kind that the state must both generate and rest upon? ²¹

The activity of answering questions such as these in relation to a phenomena such as "the state" can reasonably be called "theory," but it is a kind of theorizing not easily amenable to clear-cut distinctions between Is and Ought, Fact and Value, or the Descriptive and the Normative. At the time of its emergence as a distinct and distinguishable term towards the end of the 16th

²⁰ See the dispassionate but generally supportive argument of Therese Reinhold, "State Weakness, Irregular Warfare and the Right to Self-Defense Post 9/11" (2011) 105(2) *AJIL* 244. See also Christian J Tams, "The Use of Force against Terrorists" (2009) 20(2) *EJIL* 359; and Paulina Starski, "Right to Self-Defense, Attribution and the Non-State Actor – Birth of the 'Unable or Unwilling' Standard?" (2015) 75 *Heidelberg Journal of International Law* (2015) 75 455.

²¹ Writing in 2018, Quentin Skinner complained that the trend in 20th century Anglophone thought to reduce the concept of the state to that of government and governance ignores its "complex intellectual heritage ... in such a way as to leave ourselves astonishingly little to say about it." Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (CUP 2018) 378.

Draft - CLP

century,²² “the state” was at once a descriptive and prescriptive concept – articulated and argued for in order to re-present a contemporary reality in a way that “help[ed] particular people understand and define, and thus begin to deal with, certain problems.”²³ A state-concept is at once a theory-dependent notion, and a reality-shaping theoretical instrument. In other words, a state-concept has the characteristics of what philosopher John Searle calls “Declarations.”²⁴ A Declaration is a kind of performative speech act which is necessary (if not sufficient) to create social institutions. Declaration-type utterances create and partly constitute reality by representing that reality as existing and fitting the declaration.²⁵ In Searle’s theory of social reality, social kinds such as money, states, corporations or private property, could not exist without performative utterances like declarations; words alone will not bring them into existence, but without language they could not exist and function in the way we observe. Changing the way we conceptualize them (and “declare” them) can also change the way they are, although again this only obtains for Searle where collective intentionality is brought along sufficiently with the new meanings and understandings given to social institutions such as property or money.²⁶ In Searle’s argument, understanding the nature of declaration-type uses of

²² Quentin Skinner, “A Genealogy of the Modern State: British Academy Lecture” (2008) 162 *Proceedings of the British Academy* 325.

²³ Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton University Press 2008), 43-4.

²⁴ John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (OUP 2010), chapter 1.

²⁵ *ibid*, 13, 85.

²⁶ *ibid*, chapter 2, chapter 5, chapter 7. For Searle, collective intentionality underlies all social facts. A social fact is any fact that contains a collective intentionality about its meaning and extension. For Searle the existence of some kind of collective intentionality (which can have diverse levels of complexity) is a boundary condition for a human society of two or more people: see chapter 2.

Draft - CLP

language allows us to understand the nature and importance of concepts in creating non-conceptual or extra-conceptual social realities – “In these cases [such as money or property], we use the semantics of language to create a power that goes beyond semantics ... Thus money, government, and private property [for example] are created by semantics but in every case the powers go beyond semantics. Meanings are used to create powers that go beyond meaning.”²⁷

The idea that state-concepts and state-theories are performative captures a dynamic in the history of political thought about the state that is described well by Geuss:

In interesting cases, like ‘the state,’ introducing the ‘concept’ requires one to get people not merely to use a certain word, but also to entertain a certain kind of theory, which has a strong ‘normative’ component. You don’t ‘have’ the concept of the state unless you **have have** the idea of a freestanding form of *authority*. ... Characteristically, the concept ‘the state’ is introduced *together with* a theory about the nature and source of the authority which the abstract entity so named is supposed to have. In the early modern period this was usually some version of the social contract theory...

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When they were introduced, concepts like ‘the state’ did not exactly mirror any fully pre-existing reality, because using these concepts represented as much an aspiration as a description. It is also the case that merely *using* the concepts did not *by itself*, without the assistance of real social forces that actually act in history, bring any state into existence; neither concepts nor theories realize themselves. Nevertheless inventing this new concept, in this case by transforming the meaning of existing terms such as *status/estat/stato*, could be an important contribution to clarifying an obscure situation and to guiding action directed at institutional change. ...²⁸

²⁷ *ibid* 113.

²⁸ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (n23) 44-6.

Draft - CLP

Geuss observes that one of the consequences of a (successful) conceptual innovation such as “the state” is that “when such innovations work, they imprint themselves upon the world ... Conceptual innovation ... is a complicated process in which descriptive, analytic, normative, and aspirational elements are intricately intertwined. ... Conceptual innovations often ‘stick,’ escape our control and become part of reality itself. [Once invented,] the idea of the ‘state’ can come into contact with real social forces with unforeseeable results. The ‘tool’ develops a life of its own, and can become an inextricable part of the fabric of life itself.”²⁹

Theoretical claims about what the state is, how it is formed, stabilized, and justified, do not only describe, they also (where successful) generate schema of interpretation that orient action, spur attempts to realize certain designs, and underwrite certain kinds of abstentions or interventions.³⁰ To theorize the state at certain junctures and in the crucible of certain great epochal shifts, is to engage in an effort to interpret *and* change the world by endeavouring to shift the schemata of intelligibility and reference that orient thought, judgment and action. Foucault captures pellucidly this movement between the “conceptual” and the “real” in the European state theories of the early 17th century:

It would be absurd to say that the set of institutions we call the state date from this period of 1580 to 1650 ... After all, big armies had already emerged ... Taxation was established before this, and justice even earlier. ... But what is important ... and what is at any rate a

²⁹ *ibid* 47-9.

³⁰ Unsurprisingly, Skinner maintains a similar view about how theorization is - in the right context - a form of action: “Our concepts form part of what we bring to the world in our efforts to make sense of it. The shifting conceptualizations to which this process gives rise constitute the very stuff of ideological debate”: “Retrospect: Studying Rhetoric and Conceptual Change,” in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 1, Regarding Method* (CUP 2002)176-7.

Draft - CLP

real, specific, and incompressible historical phenomenon is the moment this something, the state, really *entered into reflected practice*.³¹

...

What is a king? What is a sovereign? What is a magistrate? What is a constituted body?

What is a law? What is a territory? ... All these things began to be thought of as elements of the state. The state is therefore a schema of intelligibility for a whole set of already established institutions, a whole set of given realities ... *The state is therefore the principle of intelligibility of what is, but equally of what must be; one understands what the state is in order to be more successful in making it exist in reality*.³²

A model or theory posits a world, in order to gain purchase upon a reality that (at least in the first instance) confronts it. The action of theorizing takes an ambiguous and obscure reality and endeavours to articulate it as a connected order of facts, concepts and so forth. Articulation implies description but exceeds it, bringing new properties into being by composing elements and stabilizing compositions and relations between composites.³³ If the composition “catches on” and becomes assimilated into thought, argument or as a rule informing practice and judgment, the theoretical action (conceptual innovation, in Geuss's terms) has described reality but also transformed it. The path to such a “catching on” may be surprising and indirect, and will always be the result of the human and technological mediators acting in contexts. For example, conceiving of human agency as a rational faculty equivalent to a relationship of dominium

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (Michel Senellart ed, Graham Burchell tr, Palgrave Macmillan 2007) 247.

³² *ibid* 286-7.

³³ Emmanuel Didier, "Do Statistics Perform the Economy?" in Donald Mackenzie et al, *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics* (Princeton University Press 2007); and Foucault (n31) 305-6.

Draft - CLP

over property - as the late Scholastics did - was not an ex nihilo theoretical innovation.³⁴ But it was an arduous recomposition of Thomist and Dominican thought that paved the way for a transformational new theory of state power - a theoretical innovation indispensable (as we shall see) to Grotius's state theory and to the architecture of legal order (natural and civil) more generally. Such a theory of human agency became the presupposition for a theory of public power and of legal obligation, that was concretely enacted and contested through real actions - as assertions of authority, defenses of right, and above all through violence and coercion within and between human communities.

It is important to note here that to contend that state theories are performative does not imply that theories are magical words, acting on reality merely by articulating it. Neither concepts nor theories realize themselves, no matter how brilliant and comprehensive.³⁵ Rather it is to maintain that under contingent but determinate historical conditions which we can at least partially grasp, (some) state concepts and state theories become constitutive of how we enact the state and, in the last instance, how we (attempt to) create, authorize, maintain and reinforce (or disqualify) political orders. To reiterate Foucault's

³⁴ See, with the most subtlety, Annabel Brett, *Changes of State* (Princeton University Press 2011), chapter 2.

³⁵ Skinner observes that Hobbes' theoretical genius was to provide clear and decisive arguments for overturning previous state theories which conceived of the state as *either* inhering in the body of the people or in the person of the monarch, and proposing instead the state as an artificial person and *persona ficta* that stood distinct from the actual multitude and the person of the ruler. But this impact had "little immediate impact on English political debate" (348), being adopted more quickly in Germany by Pufendorf and in Switzerland by Vattel before being embraced in English political thought in the mid-18th century: Skinner, *A Genealogy of the Modern State* (n22) 348-354.

Draft - CLP

summation in his lectures on *Security, Territory, Population*, “one understands what the state is in order to be more successful in making it exist in reality.”

Part II - Natural Law, Civil Philosophy and the State

Grotius life and work traversed a fifty-year period during which order - natural and civil, moral and political - was both an urgent practical problem and a profound intellectual challenge. At the heart of the intellectual problem was precisely the relationship between a natural order of reason, liberty and right, and a civil order of human artifice that supervenes natural liberty and authorizes coercion in the name of civil power and authority.

It is trite, but worth repeating, that the three-hundred year gestation and birth of the modern state form (c 1300 - c 1600) had as both pre-cursor and by-product, the destruction of the medieval political and legal order. More immediately, the urgent crises confronting European political actors and European political thought in the 17th century were crises of political and social order and of political and social authority, haunted by severe crises in the inherited frameworks for knowledge and judgement. From our sociologically disenchanted present, the extraordinary consecutive impacts of renaissance, reformation, counter-reformation and the ensuing 100 years of religious and civil war, on the horizon of late medieval thought and action can only be partially

Draft - CLP

grasped. Late medieval Europe was of course far from static, and indeed had already been deeply punctuated since 1100 by the periodic and bitter conflicts that raged between Emperor and Papacy, and between universal authorities and the emerging territorially organized kingdoms and city-states.³⁶ The recovery and revival of Roman law as an instrument of rule and means of centralizing authority against the vestigial particularities of feudal order, the flourishing of urban commercial centres and expansion of trade, and innovation in military organization from the 14th century, all generated sources of destabilization and new modes of social and political organization.³⁷ Nonetheless, despite considerable conflict and disputation, late medieval society, “still thought of itself as one society ... [This sense of unity] eludes precise and satisfactory statement ... but ... a belief in the actual unity of Christendom, however variously felt and expressed, was a fundamental condition of all medieval political thought and activity.”³⁸ Mattingly points out that while the *res publica Christiana* never amounted to a functioning legal or political administration, it achieved “something like a common body of law”³⁹ through the long and far-from coordinated labor of jurists trained in the universities of Paris, Bologna, Orleans or Naples, and working assiduously in the service of the Church, the Empire, or

³⁶ Joesph Canning, *Ideas of Power in the Late Middle Ages, 1296-1417* (CUP 2011); Cecil N Sidney Woolf, *Bartolus of Sassoferrato: His Position in the History of Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1913), chapter 2. This edition has no recorded publisher according to DiscoverEd although CUP have a version published in 2012.

³⁷ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (LA Manyon tr, Routledge 1989); Harald Kleinschmidt, *Understanding the Middle Ages: the transformation of ideas and attitudes in the Medieval world* (Boydell Press 2000); James Henderson Burns (ed), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* (CUP 2008).

³⁸ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Cape 1955) 16.

³⁹ *ibid* 18. See also Joesph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 350-1400* (Routledge 1996) 65-66, 114-118.

Draft - CLP

one of the nascent territorial Kingdoms. Canon law, civil law, and custom, but above all a common legalism born of a society "by nature universalist and founded on spiritual things,"⁴⁰ led "men to think of themselves as living in one society under the rule of a common law."⁴¹ The public law of Christendom may have been interminably contested in its sources and interpretation, with the canonist maintaining that *jus natural* and *jus gentium* derived from moral rules implanted by God in the hearts of mankind, and the civilian looking to those Roman law rules considered reflective of the common reason and common consent of a universal human community of nations. But the divisions belied the extent to which the high Middle Ages witnessed the emergence of a deep and rich common language of political thought occurring through the medium of legal science - a *jus commune*: "civilians and canonists built up a rational differentiated jurisprudence which constituted a characteristic way of looking at the world, ... a 'true philosophy' (*vera philosophia*) whose priests they were."⁴²

It is commonly remarked that the medieval view of law presupposed an ontological derivation of valid legal obligation from a divinely established order of being: "central to the mentality of the medieval layman was the identification of existing positive law with the divine order."⁴³ The legacy of Thomist thought's attempted synthesis of revelation (scripture), reason (Aristotelian philosophy)

⁴⁰ Bloch (n37) 80.

⁴¹ Mattingly (n38) 23.

⁴² Canning *A History of Medieval Political Thought* (n39) 114. Peter Stein, *Roman Law in European History* (CUP 1999) 65-66, describing how "Roman civil law became, together with canon law and theology, part of a common Christian learned culture shared by those who occupy positions of authority."

⁴³ Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria* (Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton trs, University of Pennsylvania Press 1992) 117.

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and legal rules (civilian and canon law), was to validate human reason as a means of identifying and deriving binding obligation. Reason partook in the order of being and thus provided an innate, God-given means of understanding the consecrated order maintained by eternal and divine law. Natural law could be rationally reconstructed through the medium of reason, but the ground of its validity was not its rationality, rather its status as a partial emanation of the divine order.⁴⁴ Law commands rightly because it is a measure of reason, and reason commands rightly because it is a measure of a natural order that binds us objectively as derived immediately from divine and eternal order.⁴⁵ Law is in reason alone, as Aquinas would put it, but in the medieval order reason 'cannot be its own light; in order to perform its work it needs a higher source of illumination ... "Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis."' ⁴⁶

The political order and its law were bound to the eternal order by natural law; civil authority was a derivative of the authority of natural law, discerned by reason. As one might imagine, great uncertainty remained as to what natural law required, leaving much room to argue about the extent and nature of duties of obedience and sources of right. Local customary law, canon law, civil law and feudal contracts could each, in the right hands and under the right conditions, vie

⁴⁴ Merio Scattola, "Models in the History of Natural Law" (2001) XXVIII *Ius Commune - Zeitschrift für Europäische Rechtsgeschichte* 91, 108; Aquinas, ST, 1.2, q.90.1: "Law is a certain rule and measure ... First, as in that which measures and rules, and since this is a characteristic of reason, in this way law is in reason alone ... Reason has its power of moving from the will ... but in order that the will has the reason of law in those things that it commands, it is necessary that it be informed by some reason."

⁴⁵ *ibid* 114-8.

⁴⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, (Yale University Press 1946) 95. There seem to be two editions of this – the 1961 edition seems to be just a reprint but I'm flagging it in case the page numbers are not the same and you used the 1961 version.

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to be an emanation of some natural legal obligation - or, indeed, be demoted as mere human artifice subject to a higher law. Hence, the presumptive completeness and objectivity of the orders of divine, eternal and natural law, were not falsified by the fact of human conflict over their meaning - the finitude of human understanding implied that only partial knowledge of the totality was concretely possible and disagreement inevitable.⁴⁷ Indeed, by extension, no human political order could ever be absolute, as there persisted alongside and above the laws of a political community an 'independent set of rules, eternal and independent of the will of the king, and [which] can be used as a standard to measure the rightness of justice of a government.'⁴⁸ Law issued from the will of the ruler, but where the will of the ruler did not comport with reason, it was not law but sin and might *in extremis* be disobeyed.⁴⁹ The 'lawful state' of the medieval political order did not readily admit open revolt against a ruler;⁵⁰ after all, the status quo - to the extent that it was an order at all - demanded obedience as reflecting the eternal authority of a higher order of law, and divine law prohibited disobedience and sedition. But the possibility of resistance in the

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 107: 'Medieval philosophy could easily account for all the inherent and necessary defects of the social order ... The *corpus morale et politicum* was at the same time a *corpus mysticum*. In spite of the differences and opposition between its parts there was, as Thomas Aquinas said, an *ordinatio ad unum* and the different and conflicting forces were directed to a common end. This *principum unitatis* was never forgotten. The totality of mankind appeared as a single state founded and monarchically governed by God himself and every partial unity, ecclesiastic or secular, derived its right from this primeval unity.'

⁴⁸ Scattola (n44) 110; Cassirer (n46): 'It follows that no political power can ever be absolute. It is always bound to the laws of justice. These laws are irrevocable and inviolable because they express the divine order itself, the will of the supreme law giver.', (at 104).

⁴⁹ Carl J Friedrich, *The Philosophy of Law in Historical Perspective*, (University of Chicago Press 1958) 42ff.

⁵⁰ Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought* (n39) 130.

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name of a superior order of right could not be excluded, and indeed was intermittently confirmed as a caution to rulers.⁵¹

It is at the denouement of the century-long collapse of this lawful ontology of political order and civil obligation, that we ought to situate Grotius's account of natural law and his theory of the state. A recognizably modern theory of sovereignty - sovereign power as *summa imperium* and *plenitudo potestatis* and markedly distinguished by *non-dependence* (perfection, self-sufficiency) on the authority of universal powers - begins to emerge, although even in Bodin the strong legacy of the medieval 'lawful' state theory is visible through his cautious attitude towards the maintenance of fundamental norms of the ancient constitution.⁵² With the advent of the reformation, the germ of resistance theory inhering in the Thomistic system of thought flowered into bitter religious civil wars in France, the Low Countries and the Holy Roman Empire and communal confessional violence, with rights of resistance invoked by both confessions to oppose rulers whose sectarian affiliation was understood to threaten the very salvation of the communities they ruled.⁵³ Rivalries between territorial rulers supplemented and fuelled confessional conflict and enlarged the conflict across

⁵¹ See for example John of Salisbury, *Politicratus*, (Cary J Nederman (ed tr), CUP 1990).

⁵² See Daniel Lee, "Office is a Thing Borrowed", (2013) 41(3), *Political Theory* 409.

⁵³ As Mortimer and Robertson write, "all the churches – Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic – were agreed that those who opposed them were guilty of 'heresy', of persistent error ... [T]he consequence of heresy was damnation." Sarah Mortimer and John Robertson, "Nature, Revelation, History: Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy C.1600-1750" in Sarah Mortimer and John Robertson (eds), *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy, 1600-1750* (Brill 2012) 10-11.

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Northern Europe and into Italy.⁵⁴ While the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) is commonly identified as the window of epochal transition, medieval Europe's sense of unity had been gravely and irrevocably damaged by a confessionalization that began in 1521 and only intensified after the 1555 Peace of Augsburg.⁵⁵

The beginnings of the uncoupling of theology from political thought had preceded the reformation by perhaps half a century,⁵⁶ but it is within the same two decades as Luther's apocryphal nailing of his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenburg, that the first use of reason of state (*ragione degli Stati*) appears in Guicciardini's *Del reggimento di Firenze* to describe the distinctive expedient measures (*poco cristiana e poco umana*) that may be validly and prudently relied upon to preserve a political regime against its enemies; Machiavelli's *The Prince* was of course already in circulation, with its advice to Princes on the arts and techniques by which they can maintain their *stato*.⁵⁷ Political order was no longer - as it so clearly was in Dante's *De Monarchia* (whether as prophecy or epilogue) - a partial expression of an eternal order of being, an *ordinatio ad unum* with a common presupposition of faith and authority. Bishops, princes, electors and even Kings (Henry IV) changed

⁵⁴ Ronald G Asch, *The Thirty Years War: the Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618-1648* (St Martin's Press 1997), chapter 1.

⁵⁵ See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: the hidden agenda of modernity* (Free Press 1990); Wolfgang Reinhard, "Reformation, Counter-reformation and the Early Modern State: A Reassessment" (1989) 75(3) *The Catholic Historical Review* 383.

⁵⁶ Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State: The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics 1250-1600* (CUP 1992).

⁵⁷ *Stato* here means the power structure of a political order or a dominant regime: Nicolai Rubinstein, "Notes on the Word *Stato* in Florence before Machiavelli," in Giovanni Ciappelli (ed), *Studies in Italian History in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 2004).

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confessions, and were deposed or killed as heretics and traitors; the status quo had become so disordered and violently conflicted, any assumption of its necessary derivation from a transcendent unity of justice could hardly be sustained. Various attempts to revive the ideal of universal monarchy as an actually-existing unified order of justice and law (such as Botero's *Ragione di Stato* or Campanella's *Aformisi Politici*) were short-lived, declining rapidly after the final defeat of Spanish ambitions to maintain its rule in the Low Countries in 1609.

The sources of power and authority in a political order could no longer be uncontroversially extra-mundane, and certainly not naturally ordered in any ontological way.⁵⁸ Rather, in a discernably modern way, the foundation of political order becomes widely theorized as in some manner immanent to the specific human society generating that order, and equally immanent and this-worldly are the ends of such order: security, civil peace, prosperity. Of course, the exact mechanism of the immanent generation of order varied widely across streams of political thought, and in its most sophisticated forms (such as the mid-sixteenth century Dominican and Jesuit thought), the foundation of civil order began in a theory of human agency that took divinely-given natural law and legalistically conceived natural right, as the modular building blocks for the awesome edifice of sovereign power.⁵⁹ But the relationship between the order of nature and natural law, and the political and legal order of the human civitas, could no longer be the straightforwardly hierarchical one conceived of by high

⁵⁸ S Mortimer chapter in Koskenniemi ed.

⁵⁹ Brett, *Changes of State* (n34) 62: the construction of human beings as free coincides with the construction of the subject of law. Government by law works by commanding choice, and it demands a subject capable of choice.

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medieval Thomism; consistent with the dissolution of a strong and substantive homology of order between the divine, natural and human, the function of nature and natural law as a warrant for the authority of civil order becomes a problem to be solved rather than a solution to the problem of authority.⁶⁰ As Brett summarizes:

Common to all the different types of what is considered 'civil philosophy' in this period ... [is the key question of] how to construct a unity out of the natural plurality and diversity of individuals [and protect it from dissolution.] ... Nature and natural law, seen as a set of substantive rules of action which form an unchanging baseline of moral rectitude, generate precisely the threat to the legal autonomy or integrity of the city that civil philosophy strove to avoid.⁶¹

Brett points out that in two of Grotius's key texts that address the nature of civil power, *unity* and its constitution is a crucial preoccupation.⁶² The classical idea

⁶⁰ In his chapter on the Jesuits in *Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius*, Figgis credits them with upholding the unity of Christendom intellectually and spiritually by, on the one hand, accepting that the ends of civil authority are this-worldly, while on the other hand arguing that *because* civil power is justifiable on the basis of "peace and riches," it cannot in the last resort be worthy of unlimited reverence. The office of the Church guaranteed higher, other-worldly interests through its indirect powers. The relations between the two societies, civil and ecclesiastical – the Church being the more perfect of the two in the Jesuit argument – is articulated and enveloped *in law*, which is the true bearer of the unity of the societies: "with state and church recognized as independent societies, with the definitely declared recognition of national freedom, ... some theory of the relations between these bodies was a necessity ... The Jesuits and other Spanish philosophers prepared the way for this ... They did this by frank recognition of the separateness of States, combined with their belief in the law natural as the basis and real authority of all laws, and with their inheritance of the amalgam or Civil and Canon Law as a body of ideal rules ... It contemplates the universe as subject to the reign of jurisprudence ... This was the atmosphere in which International Law grew up and without which it was impossible that it should have grown up." John Neville Figgis, *Studies of political thought from Gerson to Grotius, 1414-1625* (CUP 1916) 118-119, 124.

⁶¹ Annabel Brett, "Natural Right and Civil Community: The Civil Philosophy of Hugo Grotius" (2002) 45(1) *The Historical Journal* 31, 32-33.

⁶² *ibid*, passim.

Draft - CLP

of unity as the *sine qua non* of the *polis* or *civitas qua* authoritative order, underwrote the high medieval Church's hierocratic claim of *plenitudo potestatis* and its status as *corpus mysticum* and *universitas* with supreme jurisdiction.⁶³ As many have observed,⁶⁴ this powerful image of supremacy-in-unity, with its account of "the absolute and universal jurisdiction of the supreme authority,"⁶⁵ was foundational to theories of the self-sufficiency of civil power from the later Middle Ages. Woolf remarks that while the "theory of the State as a secular and non-universal institution was never achieved in the Middle Ages [...], [t]he Middle Ages laid the foundation of the theory ..."⁶⁶ It was the fundamental schism of the Reformation that accelerated the realization of the theory because, "as a result of the Reformation, the spiritual unity of Christendom was no longer an axiom of political thought."⁶⁷ Unity as the *archê* of authority required a revised foundation, to be reassembled from "certain new-old ideas" that "now allied themselves with political needs and ... active forces..."⁶⁸ At the heart of different contemporary visions of political and legal life was the problem of the

⁶³ Michael J Wilks, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages: the papal monarchy with Augustinus Triumphus and the publicists* (CUP 1963), chapter 1. "The juridical person of the Roman *respublica* becomes the mystical person of the Christian society ... There was a legal fiction which distinguished the body taken as single corporate whole from the members individually ... Its basis was a unity of purpose, the actual individuals comprising the corporation playing only a secondary role to the body itself" (at 24). See also Figgis, *Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius* (n60) 8.

⁶⁴ Wilks (n63) 113-117; Ernst H Kantorowicz, *The Kings Two Bodies: a study in mediaeval political theology* (Princeton University Press 1997) 267-272.

⁶⁵ Figgis (n60) 8.

⁶⁶ Woolf, *Bartolus of Sassoferrato* (n36) 368.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* Figgis (n60) elaborates: "So long as the Holy Roman Empire remained even an ideal, a really modern theory of politics could not be generally effective ... Christendom, the union of various flocks under one shepherd with divine claims, divine origin, and divine sovereignty, had to be transformed into Europe, the habitat of competing sects and compact nations ..." (21).

⁶⁸ Figgis (n60) 9.

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foundation of an ordering unity, in the face of sectarian conflict over religious truth and parallel political and military conflicts contesting the reach of Imperial authority.

Part III – Grotius’s Revolt : The Force of Law between History and Reason

One important current of thought among various attempts to recast the foundations of legal and political order was strongly influenced by scepticism and Tacitism. In Tuck’s influential account of the “new humanism”, the “disillusionment with the strife and bloodshed of Reformation and religious wars”⁶⁹ was reflected in the emergence of theories of state-craft that emphasized the importance of force and the disciplining of populations to create a *political* unity under the command of a Prince knowledgeable in the effective use of coercion and the manipulation of interests: “The prince’s power was to rest on a realistic assessment of the nature of coercion and on a combination of arms and money ... [A]t all levels of late sixteenth century society, men were disillusioned with the claims and counter-claims of the dogmatists ...”⁷⁰ Paolo Sarpi, Servite monk, critic of Papal power and adviser to the Senate of Venice from 1606 to 1623, lamented the rise of Catholic and Protestant regicidal theories when he wrote that “I cannot help getting angry when this new doctrine, which, against all human and divine laws, asserts that a prince can be killed with the pretext of religion.”⁷¹ Sarpi’s intellectual biographer observes that Sarpi’s critique of religious jurisdiction and his absolutist view of monarchical sovereignty, were

⁶⁹ Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government 1572–1651* (CUP 1993) 61.

⁷⁰ *ibid* 64.

⁷¹ Sarpi to Lechassier, 8 June 1610, quoted in Jaska Kainulainen, *Paolo Sarpi: A Servant of God and State* (Brill 2014) 223.

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part of an important current of thinking that expressed “an anxious longing for peace and tranquillity” in the aftermath of the wars and conquests of the sixteenth century.⁷² There was a preoccupation with re-establishing a foundation for a political system that could guarantee stability and tranquillity, in the face of what many contemporary observers – under the influence of a scientific revolution that rejected Aristotelianism in natural philosophy and sympathized with Epicurean ideas of the inconstancy of all nature (including human will) – concluded to be the ceaseless motion of the universe. This scepticism and pessimism concerning humans’ capacity to form effective political unities through their own reasoning, was certainly congenial to a strain of absolutism that believed it was only “the sovereign ruler, invested with absolute power who, while representing God on earth, provided an element of order amid chaos.”⁷³ Such neo-Tacitean or “Neo-Stoic”⁷⁴ currents of thoughts emphasized obedience to higher authority, the need for discipline (especially in the formation of national armies, and in statesman and servants of the state), and an inner

⁷² Kainulainen *ibid* 4.

⁷³ *ibid* 56.

⁷⁴ See Gerhard Oestreich, “Political Neostoicism” in G Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State* (Brigitta Oestreich and H G Koenigsberger (eds), David McLintock (tr) Cambridge 1982) 57 – 75. Oestreich contends that for Neostoics such as Lipsius, the “publica mala ... were the European civil wars ... There were two main political answers to the problems of the age: one aimed, since Machiavelli, at the acquisition of power, military and otherwise, and ... the other sought the creation of institutional and military power to restore order and impose stability ... At the same time political order became the embodiment of moral values in the *vis temperata*” (70, 73). The propriety of describing some of these theories as Stoic is contested by contemporary historians of thought (Straumann, Brooke), who tend to emphasize the Ciceronian heritage of the early modern Stoic revival.

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constancy achieved through an acceptance of the fate that God reserves for each human.⁷⁵

In Tuck's reconstruction of Neo-Stoic thought in late 16th century western Europe, scepticism concerning the reliability of human judgment and human reasoning led to quietism in respect of effective authority and positive laws.⁷⁶ Sarpi, Lipsius and Montaigne encouraged a detached acquiescence in the existing laws and customs of one's own country, because human self-deception meant that claims of natural law or higher truths were unreliable. Positive laws founded on effective authority were the foundation of this-worldly justice, because "Justice exists among those who have agreed to live with certain laws and not take offence."⁷⁷ Sarpi, presaging a point that would be made also by Hobbes, rejected the notion that positive law was to be obeyed "not in virtue of law, but only in virtue of reason and convenience" and maintained rather that "[a]ll things commanded by human laws are such that before [viz. prior to – NB] the law there was no obligation by reason to act in one way rather than the other; but once the law is made the obligation comes by virtue of it and *not of reason*. Every civil law is of this kind."⁷⁸ The existence of natural law is not denied per se, but the unreliability of individual human judgment of right and wrong required a constant ruling will with the necessary habitus of good judgment and virtue.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Tuck summarizes the place of fate in the work of Lipsius and Montaigne – whom Tuck considers exemplary of this current of neo-Tacitean and Neostoic political thought – as follows: "the sheer intractability of external events [such as religious civil wars] means that men are usually necessitated to act in certain ways – the necessitation coming from unalterable fate and the need to protect oneself." *Philosophy and Government* (n69) 53-54.

⁷⁶ Tuck *Philosophy and Government* (n69) 49-50.

⁷⁷ Sarpi, *Pensieri* no.261, quoted in Kainulainen (n71) 247.

⁷⁸ Sarpi, *Scritti Scelti*, quoted in Kainulainen (n71) 248 (emphasis added).

⁷⁹ See Tuck, *Philosophy and Government* (n69) 54-56.

Draft - CLP

Higher law and justice might exist, but human positive law of the civil power needs be obeyed to avoid the ills of disobedience and disorder; the *summum bonum* of order is preserved by authoritative decision concerning the common good, to which individual interests are subordinated. The prince's rulership at once *enabled* him to see beyond individual interests to the common interest, and was at the same time *evidence* of his consecrated authority to decide what the common good required.⁸⁰ *Honestum*, common good, order, were to be identified with the pursuit of "good" reason of state – the *interests* of the unifying will of the prince who acted with temperance and constancy to preserve the state against internal and external disorder and strife, and not merely in order protect his own power. The priority of a political unity founded in public law, over any necessary religious unity founded in theological truth, was a cognate doctrine of the French *Politiques* who set the interests of the unity of the state, as common good directly mandated by divine right, above the widely held belief in the need for the unity of religious creed.⁸¹

The tension between *honestum* and *utile* – between morality or justice, and interest – in the maintenance of political order parallels the distinction between "good" and "bad" reason of state. At the stake, ultimately, is what is to be understood as validating the exercise and maintenance of authority, and the extent of (and motivating reasons for) obedience due to civil power. The implication of a theory such as Sarpi's concerning the binding force of positive

⁸⁰ "Quello che a private parerà male, al principe, che vede la ragione di tutto il governo, lo conosce bene necessario." Micanzio, *Annotazioni e pensieri*, no. 50, 786-7, quoted in Kainulainen (n71) 251.

⁸¹ As Figgis (n60) remarks, "we cannot overestimate the change in men's minds required to produce the ideal of heterogeneity in religion in one state." (17).

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law and necessity of obedience to custom, was that the facticity of effective power was its own legitimation (albeit mandated by God), and that historically-constituted authority should be licensed to do what is necessary to preserve itself. *Honestum* and *utile* become difficult to differentiate, because on this account what serves the interests of the maintenance of order is also that which is necessary for the common good:

But the care of the common good, this God has entrusted only to the prince together with the majesty (*con la Maestà*); wherefore it pertains to him [the prince] exclusively to prescribe the ways in which to conserve and maintain this good, whether with impositions, with war, with laws or other means ...⁸²

The justness of positive law, its *epikeia*, derived from its origin not in divine or natural law, but rather in the this-worldly supremacy of the princely office as the viewpoint from which what is truly necessary to the common good can be discerned.

For Grotius, this sceptical position and its implications posed a range of difficulties, as Straumann has carefully elaborated. Scepticism's emphasis on the *epikeia* of existing civil law and custom did not seem to provide much warrant for determining the justness of relations as *between* princes or other kinds of civil powers. One implication of such a deference to positive laws in the specific context of Grotius's apology for Dutch colonial expansion in to the East Indies, would have been the colourable soundness of the Spanish and Portuguese assertion of exclusive control over trade and shipping in the region. These claims

⁸² Sarpi, quoted in Kailunainen (n71) 233-4 (Italian original at note 152).

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were based on a European state practice that “consisted of a division of the waters among the main seafaring powers ... [T]he Iberian trade monopoly, based on papal donation, discovery, and possession, remained and was of a fully customary nature.”⁸³ The vindication of the Dutch East India Company’s persistent challenge to this trade monopoly, which resulted in the naval conflict that led to the seizure of the Portuguese carrick the *Santa Caterina* and sale of its cargo in Amsterdam,⁸⁴ required a different theory of the sources of law on the high seas, where the *Santa Catarina* was seized: “a radically new doctrine that lent legal norms taken from antiquity relevance to the practice of the early seventeenth century. ... Grotius’ doctrine of legal sources formally declared ‘nature’ to be the source of the law relevant to the oceans ...”⁸⁵

The broader problem of the foundation of all legal and political orders, including empires, could not be divorced from the particular questions of the justice of the seizure of the *Santa Catarina*. Straumann, partially refuting Tuck’s reading of Grotius in *Philosophy and Government*, argues that the centrality that Grotius accorded to Carneades’ scepticism about whether or not the justice of human laws could be criticised from some superior vantage point of natural

⁸³ Benjamin Straumann, *Roman Law in the State of Nature: The Classical Foundations of Hugo Grotius’s Natural Law* (Belinda Cooper (tr) CUP 2015) 28-29.

⁸⁴ The value of the sale was “three million guilders, a value equivalent to just less than annual revenue of the English government at the time and more than double the capital of the English East India Company.” David Armitage, “Introduction,” Hugo Grotius, *The Free Sea* [1604] (Richard Hakluyt (tr) Liberty Fund 2004), xii. Borschberg describes vividly the extent to which the seizure of the *Santa Catarina* was part of a longer attempt by the newly independent Dutch republic to wrest control of East Asian trade from the Spanish and Portuguese: Peter Borschberg, “The Seizure of the *Santa Catarina* Revisited: The Portuguese Empire in Asia, VOC Politics and the Origins of the Dutch-Johor Alliance,” (2002) 33 *Journal of South East Asian Studies* 31.

⁸⁵ Straumann, *Roman Law in the State of Nature* (n83) 29.

Draft - CLP

legality, derived not from a direct confrontation with the views of contemporary sceptics (Sarpi, Lipsius, Montaigne, Charron) but from the fundamental underlying problematic highlighted by scepticism:⁸⁶ if all law is based only on this-worldly convention and interests, no civil power or empire rested on anything except force and contingent history – calling into question at once the historical justness of Rome’s empire *and* the contemporary rightfulness of Dutch military force in the East Indies.

But also at stake in any question of the foundations of legal and political order, was the legitimacy of the Dutch republic’s claim to exclusive public power and territorial independence in Europe vis-à-vis its historical overlords, the united imperial crowns of Spain and Portugal. The 30- year conflict was punctuated by sectarian strife, political assassination and grave disorders occasioned by foreign invasion, attempted reconquest and efforts at forcible repression of religious non-conformity. The revolt against Spain gave rise to a variety of political and legal justifications for its legitimacy, but by 1580 the account which was most well-established emphasised a constitutionalist and legalist rationale: that the Emperor’s conduct had violated the specific historical contracts of rulership between the Dutch Estates (the towns, cities and other corporate orders that represented the people of the Provinces) and the Imperial crown, giving rise to a constitutional right of resistance culminating in the abjuration of the Emperor’s rulership by the States General, on the grounds essentially of a breach of contract.⁸⁷ The reproach against the King of Spain was

⁸⁶ *ibid* 97: “Carneadean debate, in short, was very much a topos of sixteenth century natural law writing.”

⁸⁷ Martin van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt, 1550-1590* (CUP 1992) 160-162.

Draft - CLP

that he had “violated his oath, assaulted their [the Hollanders’] liberty and had sought to subject them to a barbarous tyranny, to ruin and to wreck them.”⁸⁸

This legalist and jurisprudential rationale – which Grotius wholeheartedly reprised in his own official history of the Dutch revolt⁸⁹ - emphasised the historical legitimacy of the ancient constitution of Dutch political order, with its liberties, privileges, representative institutions and corporatist bodies. A defence of the foundations of the new Dutch state required a defence of the legal validity of historical contracts of rulership, privileges and liberties, rather than more extensive monarchomachic theories of popular sovereignty or natural rights of resistance.⁹⁰ Indeed, van Gelderen observes that while “both the Monarchomach and the Dutch justification of resistance were essentially legalistic in character,” in the Netherlands,

the political justification of the Revolt was largely built on an appeal to, and interpretation of, indigenous Dutch constitutional charters, themselves the outcome of struggles for power between towns, provinces and lords. Dutch constitutional traditions, exemplified by the great charters of the late medieval period, were the principal point of reference for the justifications of the Revolt and the articulation of the ideology of

⁸⁸ Offer of sovereignty by the States of Holland to the Duke of Anjou, May 1576, quoted in van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt* (n87) 166 at note 1, reference omitted. Tellingly, one tract defending the revolt complained that the Spanish Crown aimed to abrogate the ancient constitution of the Low Countries, which had never been conquered by Rome, and instead sought to govern them ‘with new laws’ like ‘the kingdom of Sicily and Naples, which have been acquired by conquest.’ *A Defence and true declaration of the things done lately in the lowe Countrey* (1571) quoted in van Gelderen (n87) 123.

⁸⁹ Hugo Grotius, *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic: with the notes by Petrus Scriverius* (Jan Hendrik Waszink (ed, tr) first published 1610, Van Gorcum 2000).

⁹⁰ Van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt* (n87) 273-276.

Draft - CLP

the Dutch political order as based on liberty, constitutional charters, representative institutions and popular sovereignty.⁹¹

At the same time, the validity of this historical constitutional framework as a basis for the complete independence of the Dutch from the Empire, required some foundation exceeding the authority of ancient constitutionalism and its late medieval commitment to respect for privileges and liberties. For the same medievalism that underwrote the authority of custom and ancient liberty, also emphasized that in the end all authority must derive from the will of a superior⁹² – and here, the Emperor was undoubtedly the legal superior (and in this sense, sovereign) as Lord of the Netherlands. In Grotius's 1610 account, a positive contract containing a concrete set of *historical* legal obligations and particularistic corporate privileges and liberties,⁹³ grounded and enlivened the Dutch claim to become a republic without any superior because it rested on a *natural* legal order that both gave it binding force *and* provided *ex delictu* remedies for its breach. According to Grotius, the original natural liberty and independence of the Batavian peoples, whose exclusive dominium over the territories of Holland derived from original possession under natural law⁹⁴ and which was never ceded or relinquished due to cession or subjection, was preserved in positive law through conditions attached to the governmental

⁹¹ *ibid* 273 – 4.

⁹² Joseph Canning, *The Political Thought of Baldus de Ubaldis* (CUP 1987); Canning, *Ideas of Power in the Late Middle Ages* (n36), chapter 5. Dieter Grimm, *Sovereignty: the origin and future of a political and legal concept* (Belinda Cooper (tr) Columbia University Press 2015) 14-16.

⁹³ Grotius, *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic* (n89) [Pinpoint reference](#).

⁹⁴ *ibid* 57.

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power of the Hapsburg and Burgundian Dukes.⁹⁵ The attempt by Philip II to exceed these conditions led to his deposition “from the principate because of his violations of the law regarding the extent of this power.”⁹⁶ The underlying and unbroken non-dependence of the Dutch political order was an unextinguished legal status ratified by natural law; the positive legal framework of the ancient constitution reflected this distribution of power, and left (on Grotius’s argument) “the highest power (*summum imperium*) in the Councils of the Dutch States.”⁹⁷ This highest power *reassumed* its governance functions once the Prince was deposed. The Prince may have been Emperor in Spain and Portugal, but was only ever as a matter of historical fact, the Count of Holland *in* Holland, enmeshed in the agreements and positive laws that made up the Dutch political and legal order.⁹⁸ All of this historical circumstance is given legal force by natural law, which establishes the essential sovereignty (*summum imperium*) of Dutch councils and can find (in Grotius’s eyes at least) no factual foundation for the legal relinquishment of this *summum imperium* in favour of another (the Hapsburgs or Burgundians).

The function of natural law in Grotius’s argument concerning the Dutch revolt is noteworthy here, and I will argue further below that it is consistent with the place of natural law in the state theory as found in later works. Sovereignty, understood by Grotius as *summum imperium* and a plenary power over a

⁹⁵ *ibid* 69, 72-77, 87. You included information in the reference here (Waszink ed and trans, 2000) which you did not the first time you cited the Batavian Republic at n89. I have worked on the assumption that all of your references to the Baravian Republic are from this Waszink 2000 edition.

⁹⁶ *ibid* 105.

⁹⁷ *ibid* 63.

⁹⁸ *ibid* 91, 93.

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territory unbound by positive law,⁹⁹ is a concrete unity of authority generated in and through human wills *in* history:¹⁰⁰ the history of the Dutch led to a concentration of supreme power within the Councils of the towns and regions, which appointed a “princeps” to exercise governing power while continuing to “contain” sovereignty “within their own community.”¹⁰¹ The historically-specific mode of this unity is not itself a natural legal institution, but is given legal force by natural law – not unlike private property in Grotius’s later account.¹⁰² Once instituted, the legal rights and duties of sovereignty can be modified or distributed through positive law by acts of will – promises, cessions, relinquishments, and these acts in turn are enforceable through the structuring principles of the natural legal order (enforceable perfect rights such as contract and delict). Natural law gives legal validity to the facticity of sovereign power by recognizing certain statuses as generative of legal force, thus requiring other legally-cognizable reasons for displacing or substituting this status; history may generate such reasons, or it may not.¹⁰³

Van Gelderen notes that, by 1580, the legacy bequeathed by three decades of conflict and disorder in the Netherlands included a preoccupation with the need to overcome strife and division in order to strengthen the new republic. The disobedience and faction unleashed by the conflict with the Spanish was bitterly criticized by writers as damaging the welfare of the country and

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 85, 91 – where the non-sovereign status of the Count of Holland (the Hapsburg Emperor) is maintained by Grotius because his “power is limited by positive law.”

¹⁰⁰ The nature and “location” of this unity is something that has greatly exercised different readers of Grotius. I will discuss this issue in detail in Part IV, below.

¹⁰¹ Grotius, *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic* (n89) 87.

¹⁰² Hugo Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace (1738)*, Book I, 154, 184.

¹⁰³ See further below, part IV for further discussion.

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impeding the exercise of the civic virtue need to rebuild the state. While early decades of the revolt had seen a flowering of resistance theories influenced by diverse sources, including “French Monarcomachs, ... Spanish neo-Thomists and some Italian authors,”¹⁰⁴ from the 1580s an air of pessimism and desperation “was taking root in some Dutch circles.”¹⁰⁵ The resulting criticism of resistance theories – exemplified by Lipsius’s work and evident in the discussion of Sarpi above – emphasized the necessity of strong leadership by a virtuous prince in order to restore justice, concord and fortitude in pursuit of the common good (as determined by the prince and his judgment). It would be an exaggeration to align Grotius’s thinking too closely with these Lipsian currents,¹⁰⁶ and his discussion of the Dutch constitution in *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic* is notable for its praise for the virtues of a mixed constitution which combines the strengths of the authority of one prince with the constraints imposed by laws and by the power of representative bodies and estates. At the same time, Grotius painstakingly avoids any reliance on upon Monarchomachic resistance theories and their strong universalist theory of popular sovereignty as the source of all kingship and rulership.¹⁰⁷ A casuistry of history remains essential to the logic of these arguments: Grotius accepts both monarchy (kingdom) and popular sovereignty as pure types of *summa imperia* – of stateness with sovereign power – and contends that each has its strengths and flaws.¹⁰⁸ Praising the Dutch

¹⁰⁴ Van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt* (n87) 163.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid* 179.

¹⁰⁶ See the critique of Tuck and Oestreich in Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton University Press 2012), chapters 1-2.

¹⁰⁷ See Daniel Lee, *Popular Sovereignty in Early Modern Constitutional Thought* (OUP 2016), chapter 4 for this feature of monarchomachic thought.

¹⁰⁸ Grotius, *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic* (n89) 54-55.

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constitution and its aptness for the Dutch people and their history, need not “detract [from] those who use another ... For it must be acknowledged that there is not one form which fits all people.”¹⁰⁹

It is perhaps this refusal of a reductive or monistic account of the institutional architecture of civil power, that has led to the persistent charge that Grotius’s account of civil power, and of the juridical possibilities of organizing sovereignty, are late medieval. For example, Richard Tuck’s key criticism of Grotius’s account of sovereignty as medieval rests on the claim that Grotius – unlike Bodin – fails to lay the ground for a distinction between sovereign power and government, between “sovereign legislator and government.”¹¹⁰ Tuck’s account of sovereign power as the essence of modern stateness, identifies modern sovereignty with organ sovereignty – the idea that sovereign power, to be properly sovereign, had to be unified in one organ or place that stood behind or above the day-to-day or commissioned administration of laws by magistrates and offices.¹¹¹ He understands Bodin, and later, Hobbes, to have pioneered the analytical clarification of this reality of modern statehood, with others such as Grotius having in some sense been unable or unwilling to follow through on the logic of sovereignty, resulting in both confusion and bizarre conclusions such as the idea that a German prince (the Holy Roman Emperor) remained King of the

¹⁰⁹ *ibid* 113.

¹¹⁰ Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign* (n1) 85.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, chapter 1. On organ sovereignty see Jean L Cohen, *Globalization and Sovereignty: Rethinking Legality, Legitimacy, and Constitutionalism* (CUP 2012) 27.

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Romans, and that the Pope could exercise sovereign power if the throne was vacant.¹¹²

I contend in the next part of the paper, however, that Grotius's account maintains the core of the modern idea of statehood: that the state is not merely a hierarchy of instances of legally limited powers (as the feudal concept might have it),¹¹³ but is a comprehensive relationship of supremacy and subordination between a ruler and individual subject (even if rulership is exercised by a body of the people as *civitas*), where rulership (whatever its organs) entails a *status* of supremacy over positive law and non-dependence on any superior power.¹¹⁴ This supremacy – a defining idea of modern statehood – is not so much constrained by natural law as embedded in, and validated by, a natural legal carapace which enables a casuistic oscillation between the positive-legal and the natural-legal, between history and reason, that is a kind of generative grammar for political order, authorizing what could be described as a variable geometry of order that can accommodate a spectrum of historically-constituted relations of freedom and unfreedom as nonetheless lawful and capable of being public

¹¹² Tuck quotes Grotius's conclusion from Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102), Book II, chapter 9.

¹¹³ Lee, *Popular Sovereignty* (n107), Introduction. Grimm, *Sovereignty* (n92) 14-15.

¹¹⁴ Heller is his 1927 book captured the essence of the modern state concept succinctly by contrasting it the Middle Ages: "We call sovereign those decision making units that are subject to no effective universal decision making units ... [The sovereignty of today's states] must be considered as an historical category. The Middle Ages had nothing resembling the modern state – *a monist association of territorial authority that brings order and subordinates every decisive entity on its territory into a central decision-making unit.*" (Hermann Heller, *Sovereignty: A Contribution to the Theory of Public and International Law* [1927] 85). I couldn't find publication details for the original 1927 edition. Otherwise the 2019 details are: Hermann Heller, *Sovereignty: A Contribution to the Theory of Public and International Law* (David Dyzenhaus (ed), Belinda Cooper (tr), OUP 2019).

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powers with sovereign rights. I conclude by suggesting that it is precisely Grotius's historicist non-reduction of sovereign power and unity to any one organ, person or collective subject, that allows us to revisit him as particularly interesting for a range of contemporary questions concerning stateness and sovereignty.

Part IV – Between Kings and Peoples – A Historicist State Theory

a. A Moral Thing

In an important recent paper,¹¹⁵ Annabel Brett has recalled the importance of casuistic reasoning in Grotius's treatment of *materia moralis*. Sovereignty, says Grotius in the Rights of War and Peace,¹¹⁶ is a “moral thing” and should be reasoned about accordingly. A moral thing or moral entity, as Brett points out, was to be understood in distinction to the natural:

Natural things are necessitated, as ice necessarily melts in the sun ...

Moral things are a function of the human will ... Moral necessity is generated by the ‘end,’ the final cause, which does not operate physically but morally in making something the only *morally* possible choice for the will ... Moral entities also include laws, rights, powers, offices, statuses, prices and signs ...¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Annabel Brett, “The Subject of Sovereignty: Law, Politics and Moral Reasoning In Hugo Grotius” 2019 *Modern Intellectual History* www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-intellectual-history/article/subject-of-sovereignty-law-politics-and-moral-reasoning-in-hugo-grotius/506475F1B9EDD3CB4C39AA7E46E0263E accessed 8 April 2020.

¹¹⁶ [Eg p.283/vol 1.](#)

¹¹⁷ Brett, “The Subject of Sovereignty” (n115) 6-7.

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Brett observes that Grotius adopted a distinction in contemporary Aristotelian moral science in differentiating between the methods of reasoning apposite to moral things and those apposite to natural things: “*naturalia* can be made into a science (ars) because they are certain and invariable. The implicit contrast is with *moralia*, those imprecise and circumstantially variable phenomena ...”¹¹⁸ Civil power is a moral faculty (IBP I.3.6.1) and thus to be analysed with methods appropriate to moral entities, which Brett shows to be “resolutive” or empirical and a posteriori, moving from effects and phenomena to first principles. In resolutive reasoning, which is appropriate to political phenomena that create moral necessities (as well as positive legal phenomena that stem from human will), the effective reality of arrangements as manifested and exemplified in various historical arrangements of civil power and sovereignty, must be taken into account in determining the possible “locations” and modalities of relationship that can nonetheless be understood as evincing sovereign power.

An important implication of highlighting this feature of Grotius’s method is to be able see his refusal to define sovereign power as a particular *kind* of power, and his description of different possible *locations* for the proper subject of sovereignty, as a coherent approach to the characterization of sovereign power as a “moral thing” backstopped by natural legal principles which govern its formation, cognizability, extension, transfer and demise. Brett points out,

Grotius was able to construct an interface between moral and legal science that allowed for a complex back-and-forth between the two kinds of reasoning ... [T]he ‘resolutive’ approach that characterizes moral

¹¹⁸ *ibid* 11.

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reasoning allowed him to take the effective reality of a political situation into account whilst still claiming to offer a legal rather than a political analysis.

... Grotius [did not see] the 'universal' element of law-making as any more a sovereign activity than the 'particular' activities of deliberation or judgment. *Sovereign* power is just this tripartite civil power with *summitas* – highest-ness, subjection to none, layered on top (*addita summitate*).¹¹⁹

b. Unity through Command and Subjection

So what, then, is the nature of this moral thing, sovereign power, for Grotius? And in what sense is this a recognizable state theory? Grotius does not use the term sovereignty or *souveraineté*, although the term would have been available to him through the work of Bodin – with which he was clearly very familiar. But Grotius does use another term, also found in Bodin, to identify the essence of sovereign power: *summum imperium*.¹²⁰ In Bodin's *Methodus*, *summum imperium* is defined not by incidents of power (specific rights such as deliberation and judgement, which can have different holders), but rather by a particular *type of rule*: a common rule that is final, public and supreme over other limited authorities, such as the authority of a father over a family.¹²¹ An important corollary of *summum imperium* as common rule is *common subjection*,

¹¹⁹ *ibid* 16 (footnote omitted).

¹²⁰ See Jean Bodin, *Method for Easy Comprehension of History* (Beatrice Reynolds (trs), Octagon Books 1945) 156, where "*summum imperium*" is rendered as sovereignty in English, and used interchangeably in the translation with supreme government, supreme authority and supreme power.

¹²¹ *ibid* 157-158.

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which in Bodin is the essence of the relationship of citizenship (*cive*).¹²² *Supremacy* and *subordination* are two sides of the same coin of *summum imperium*, which unites more limited associations (villages, camps, and cities, in a city-state; peoples, in an empire) through its power of command.¹²³

A critical feature of Grotius's discussion of *summum imperium*, or "the sovereignty," is its emphasis on this dyadic structure of supremacy and subordination as a necessary feature of sovereign power. As Brett points out, sovereign power in Grotius is a unity which obliges and coerces,¹²⁴ and has no will *superior to it* that may *subject it's will to another's*.¹²⁵ "The sovereignty" is a unity – a "moral thing" – that is in some sense an expression, manifestation or emanation of a real human community (whether a *civitas*, *respublica*, *regnum* or empire) characterized decisively by a *unity of wills* such that, at a minimum, a *general will* can be substituted for the particular will of an individual within that community. Unlike the family, human communities with sovereign power are artificial,¹²⁶ not natural, but natural law validates their juridical features because the creation and maintenance of civil power enables humans to live cooperatively in society at a larger scale, and thus flourish to a greater extent:

"[T]he lesser social units began to gather individuals together into one locality, ... in order to fortify that universal society by a more dependable

¹²² *ibid* 158, 164, 166, 172

¹²³ *ibid* 168. "Then an alliance of diverse city-states, exchanges of goods, common rights, laws and religions do not make the same state, but union under the same authority does."

¹²⁴ Brett, *Resolving Sovereignty*, 18.

¹²⁵ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102), Book I, 259.

¹²⁶ "Human society does indeed have its origins in nature, but civil society as such is derived from deliberate design", Hugo Grotius, *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (1604) 137. I wasn't sure which edition you were using – the page pinpoints do not seem to line up with the pages of the 1950 Oxford version.

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means of protection, and at the same time, with the purpose of bringing together under a more convenient arrangement the numerous different products of many persons' labour which are required for the uses of human life ...

... Accordingly, this smaller unit, formed by a general agreement for the sake of the common good – in other words, this considerable group sufficing for self-protection through mutual aid, and for equal acquisition of the necessities of life – is called a [respublica]; and the individuals making up the commonwealth are called [cives] ... According to Cicero, Jupiter himself sanctioned the following precept, or law: All things salutary to the commonwealth are to be regarded as legitimate and just.”¹²⁷

This power to oblige and coerce for the common good and in the interests of the commonwealth is understood by Grotius as enacted through the substitution of particular wills and interests, by a supreme will which, *ex hypothesi*, manifests a general interest as it is an emanation of a unity. A unity is an identity, but also a set of juridical equivalences,¹²⁸ that permits or requires the substitution or replacement of one thing by another, and this is the juridical logic of sovereign command:

“in questions involving a comparison between the good of single individuals and the good of all (both of which can correctly be described as ‘one’s own,’ since the term ‘all’ does in fact refer to a species of unit),

¹²⁷ *ibid*, chapter 2, 36.

¹²⁸ *ibid*, Prolegomena, 28. “For just as in nature, so also in every society, that is good which is reduced in the greatest possible degree to unity; and unity connotes primarily identity, but also in a secondary sense, equivalence.”

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the more general concept should take precedence on the ground that it includes the good of individuals as well. In other words the cargo cannot be saved unless the ship is preserved. ...

... Moreover, since it is the will involved that constitutes the measure of a good, ... it follows that the will of the whole group prevails in regard to the common good, and even in regard to the will of individuals, in so far as the latter is subordinate to the former.¹²⁹

The foundation of this subordination of individual wills to the will of the whole is consent (explicit) or acquiescence (tacit), with a resulting unity of wills that is generative of the force of law that may bind any particular will.¹³⁰ This jurisgenerative or jurispathic quality of a concrete human community is a marker of its of “highest-ness” or “subjection to none” – also referred to by Grotius as its “self-sufficient”¹³¹ or *sui juris*¹³² character. There is an interesting homothetic property of human wills on this account: the *sui juris* nature of the individual will is precisely what allows its scalable aggregation to a unity of wills, which attains an *sui juris* agency of its own: “one of the attributes of free will is the power to accommodate one’s own will to that of another.”¹³³

The idea of the commonwealth as an artificial unity of wills that, internally, exercises a power of general command, and therefore can be perceived from without as a “whole entity”¹³⁴ (rather than a mere collection of individual wills) is critical to Grotius explanation of why the power to wage

¹²⁹ *ibid*, chapter 2, 38-39.

¹³⁰ *Ibid* 36, 40, 43.

¹³¹ *ibid* 47, 97; refer also to IBP passages.

¹³²

¹³³ *ibid* 40.

¹³⁴ *ibid* 97.

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public war resides (as a matter of jus gentium and jus natural) in the respublica.¹³⁵ The “publicness” of the Dutch States General – and thus their right to use force (through the VOC) to wage public war against the Portuguese in the East Indies – was explained by Grotius by the States General’s *capacity to command the allegiance and obedience* of inhabitants of Dutch territories (including the VOC):

“For all persons within the territory in question have pledged allegiance by oath to that assembly [the States General], or else tacitly given adequate assurance, by making themselves part of the political community governed by the latter, of their intention to live in accordance with the customs of this community and to obey the magistrates recognized by it Moreover, the States General should be obeyed by its subjects not only because the rule of this assembly is at present the accepted form of government, but also because its sovereignty is supported by common law. For the Dutch, and those who have formed a federation with the Dutch, owe no allegiance nowadays to any prince whatsoever.”¹³⁶

In both *De Jure Praedae* and *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*, Grotius emphasizes the necessary relationship between *summum imperium* and subjecthood. In *De Jure Praedae*, he would lean heavily upon this relationship of supremacy and subordination in order to explicate the nature of public powers, and why wars *between* public powers could be just for subjects on both sides of the conflict. He

¹³⁵ *ibid* 96.

¹³⁶ *ibid* 409, 411.

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explains that the power to wage war resides primarily in the *respublica*, which must be understood as something *sufficiens sibi et totum aliquod per se*.¹³⁷ A few lines later he reiterates that the power to wage war has always been rightfully exercised by *omnibus populus, qui sui fuerunt juris* and *inter duas liberas civitates*. “Peoples [populus] who lived *sui juris*” and “free peoples [liberas civitates]” were thus examples or instances of entities which are “self-sufficient for themselves and a whole be.” As we have seen above, these defining qualities of public power (and thus to hold a *jus ad bellum*) are expressions of a unity of wills the essence of which is that an individual will is subject to a superior will that is, axiomatically, general rather than particular, and which has no superior to itself. To be *sufficiens sibi et totum aliquod per se*, is to bear the power and authority to unite particular human wills into a kind of group agency, which then stands apart from the mere aggregate of individual wills and has the capacity to act (and compel) *sui juris* vis-à-vis its constituent wills, and vis-à-vis other wills without it.¹³⁸

In his explanation of why the subjects of two public powers at war may regard the war as just on both sides Grotius provides further clues to his understanding of the nature of sovereign power and the status of *summum imperium*. A “subject”, Grotius tells us in *De Jure Praedae*, are those who serve another as an instrument, and whose deeds are performed subject to the

¹³⁷ Hugo Grotius, *De jure praedae commentarius* (1604, HG Hamaker (ed) Martinus Nijhoff 1863) 63.

¹³⁸ This group agency can be delegated to offices such as magistrates, who may, under specific constitutional arrangements, be “entrusted with a mandate for the waging of war.” Grotius, *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (n126) 97. I reference the original citation apart from footnotes where you specifically refer to Hamaker.

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commands of others.¹³⁹ Slaves, and members of households under a *pater familias*, are examples of subjects. In *De Jure Belli*, Grotius maintains this characterization, noting that “even the Stoics acknowledge there is a kind of Servitude in Subjection” (Bk 1, 285) and that “in the Holy Writ the subjects of Kings are called their servants.” Thus, “subjects subordinate to a given state [*subditis sub republica*] or magistrate occupy a position analogous to that occupied by children and slaves [*idem in filiis et servis*], who are subject respectively to the solemn *patria potestas* and to the power of the masters [*qui in sacris paternis aut dominica sunt potestate*].”¹⁴⁰ For this reason, a subject waging war commanded by a lawful superior will (the *respublica* or a constituted magistrate to whom authority to declare war has been delegated) must, subject to one proviso, obey such a command because “we have laid down the rule to the effect that ‘The authorities must be obeyed’ ...”¹⁴¹ Grotius, in referring to the rule established earlier in the text, Grotius returns the reader precisely to his demonstration in Chapter 2 that “the will of the whole” in the *respublica* becomes a command for the individual. For subjects, this superior will’s law or command is “justice itself,” and the subject does not act unjustly *even if* the effect of the command “constitutes a wrong in relation to the party against whom the war is directed.”¹⁴² Grotius here introduces a dualism of justice, as between the perspective of the subject subordinate to the will of the bearer of sovereign power – for whom the command of *respublica* is justice itself, – and the

¹³⁹ *ibid* 94, 95.

¹⁴⁰ Grotius, Hamaker, *De jure praedae commentaries* (n137) 80; Grotius *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (n126) 120.

¹⁴¹ Grotius *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (n126) 118; Grotius, Hamaker, *De jure praedae commentaries* (n137) 78.

¹⁴² Grotius *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (n126) 122.

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perspective of the *other* public power against whom war is possibly waged unjustly; injustice between public powers *inter se*, does not necessarily amount to an injustice by subjects of those powers who are bound to them in relations of obedience.

A striking implication of this argument is that the this-worldly obligation of obedience to the civil power is strongly conditioning – if not decisive – in the subject’s own judgment as to the justness of a prescribed course of action. The substitution of the judgment of the public power on questions of justice for the conscience of the individual – and the concomitant privatization of morality and ethics relative to positive public justice – is one of the defining features of the modern state concept in both its liberal and non-liberal forms.¹⁴³ The key limitation which Grotius introduces on this conditioning presumption of the justness of the war commanded by the sovereign, is also telling in its modesty: a subject must obey *unless* his reason is “opposed thereto after weighing the probabilities.”¹⁴⁴ Where the subject’s “reason rebels” after the weighing the probabilities of obeying the command to go to war, she or he may be blameworthy if she or he does wage war. But Grotius makes it clear that the test of whether reason is opposed “after the weighing of probabilities” is a high one indeed: the judgment of the factual preconditions for the right to wage war is rarely conclusive, but rests on preliminary assumptions. Magistrates and constituted authorities

¹⁴³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society* (MIT Press 1988); Hans Kelsen, *General Theory of Law and State* (Anders Wedberg (tr) Harvard University Press 1945); Max Weber, *Economy and Society: A new translation* (Keith Tribe (ed, tr), Harvard University Press 2019).

¹⁴⁴ Grotius *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (n126) 120, 121.

have the support of the weightiest preliminary assumptions, partly because of the oath they customarily take, partly because of the general consent expressed by the state and the testimonial of confidence given by the citizens ... [A]nyone holding a different opinion in regard to these officials would not only be charging the magistrates themselves with treachery but would also condemn a vast multitude of persons on a charge of folly ... Furthermore, if anyone who practises a particular profession or art is properly regarded as expert and painstaking in his special field, why, pray, should not magistrates be considered to have judged wisely (inasmuch as they are the Priests of Justice) concerning the cause of a war? ... And when the magistrates hold that things justifying entry into war have befallen the citizens, why should not faith be placed in those authorities, as in persons who speak *the truth*? Yet again, why should it not be right to believe that the laws of an inferior order are in agreement with the higher laws, and that the commands of the magistrate are identical with the commands of God, whenever no obstacle exists to preclude such a belief?¹⁴⁵

Notwithstanding the caveat, *dum ratio probabilis subditorum non repugnet*, to be subject to a superior sovereign will here entail a substitution of individual judgement concerning the justness of war, with the sovereign (or its agent's) judgement, and a high level of deference to that reasoning (essentially a form of reason of state) by the subject. Judgments of public justice by the holder of the *summum imperium*, and the legal obligations that go with them, are

¹⁴⁵ *ibid* 120.

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accorded strong presumptions of rightfulness and indeed Grotius proposes no actual example in which a subject's *ratio probabilis* might lead to a justified repudiation of the order to wage war. Not only is the place of natural reason profoundly constrained within the civil state, and thus the *epikeia* of "domestic" positive law and command is underlined, the argument seems to oblige a posture of very considerable "order bias" in the attitude of subjects towards sovereign decision. This "order bias" (or, bias towards the existing effective order) is a point of convergence with the conclusions of sceptical thinkers such as Lipsius¹⁴⁶ and Sarpi, who raised strong doubts about the reliability of natural reason in individuals unless it was bounded by an authoritative order that could restrain the *publica mala* of strife and civil war. Grotius echoes these doubts in one of his several refutations of the claim that the Governed can be legally superior to the Governor because "all Government was ordained for the Sake of the Governed." We will consider Grotius's rejection of the necessity of popular sovereignty further below, but relevant to the point here is that one of his arguments against any necessary priority of the judgment of the Subject over the Sovereign, is an argument that emphasizes the practical need for an instance of final decision in civil order:

I do not deny but that the Good of the Subject is the direct End proposed in the Establishment of most Civil Governments; and it is true ... that Kings were constituted to administer Justice to the People. But it does not

¹⁴⁶ On the biographical connection between Lipsius and Grotius, see Jan Waszink, "Lipsius and Grotius: Tacitism" (2013) 39(2) *History of European Ideas* 151: "Grotius's father was a former pupil and close personal friend of Lipsius," and when in 1594 Grotius entered Leiden University (where Lipsius had taught until 1591), he became "a star pupil of Josephus Justus Scaliger (Lipsius's successor)." (153, 155).

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therefore follow ... that the People are superior to the King. ... [I]n Civil Government, because *there must be some dernier Resort*, it must be fixed either in one Person, or in an Assembly; whose Faults, *because they have no superior Judge*, GOD declares, that he takes Cognizance of ... [my emphasis].¹⁴⁷

A few pages later, when discussing the monarchomachic theory that there is a reciprocal dependence between King and People, “so that ... the People ought to obey the King whilst he makes a good Use of his Power; but likewise, when he abuses it, he becomes in Turn dependent on the People”, Grotius again betrays his concerns about the disorder that can arise if sovereign judgements could be constantly doubted and second-guessed by non-sovereign agents:

But the Goodness or Badness of an Action, especially in Civil Concerns, which are liable to frequent and intricate Discussions, *are not fit to distinguish those Limits* [of who bears sovereign power]; from whence would necessarily follow the utmost Confusion; because under Pretence that an Action appeared Good or Bad, the King and People would each, by Vertue of their Power, assume to themselves Cognizance of one and the same Thing; which Disorder, no Nation (as I know of) ever yet thought to introduce.¹⁴⁸

A defining element of *summum imperium* – which like all moral Things must be reasoned about through consideration of its ends and its effects – is thus its characteristic of being a final and supreme instance of decision, *from the standpoint of its subjects*, concerning the Goodness or Badness of an Action (or

¹⁴⁷ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 274.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid* 277.

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use of public power, one could add). This supremacy relative to the judgment of individual or collective subjects is also *logically entailed* by Grotius definition of 'subject' as one whose particular will is subordinate to a general will that defines the general interest.

In his extensive rejection of the claim of a general right of resistance, Grotius makes clear his "order-thinking" in this respect: the "order of government"¹⁴⁹ requires a relationship of supremacy and subordination that is a necessary consequence of the ends of civil government. Civil society, "being instituted for Preservation of Peace" gives rise to a "superior right in the [civitas] over us and ours so far is necessary for that End." The aptness of this consequentialist logic flows of course from the moral nature of the Thing called civil power and *summum imperium*, as we have seen. But Grotius explicates this rational necessity through arguments that for their emphasis on the dyadic quality of supremacy and subordination. A "promiscuous right" to disobey a sovereign would defeat the ends of civil power and *summum imperium* by destroying the unity, and thus agency, of the civitas and rendering it a mere "multitude without union" (*dissociata multitudo*) or a "Mob where all are speakers, and no hearers" (*Confusa turba, nemo ubi audit neminem*).¹⁵⁰ The authority and dignity of a sovereign, be it a King or a civitas, is maintained by an order of laws and penalties; permissive disobedience to laws and penalties would destroy that authority and dignity,¹⁵¹ and thus defeat the ends of civil peace. In this order, like in any Order, there must "something that is First" (*ordinem non dari nisi cum*

¹⁴⁹ *ibid* 347.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid* 339.

¹⁵¹ *ibid* 342.

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relatione ad aliquid primum), and this in turn logically implies “subordination.”¹⁵² In his account of the nature of supremacy and subordination that characterizes the relationship of *summum imperium* to its subjects within a Civil government, Grotius’s arguments lead to conclusions that are not far removed from those of Bodin or indeed Hobbes.

c. *The creation of Summum Imperium.*

Grotius’s account of the origins of sovereign power are complex. As van Nifterik has recently pointed out, the contractualist account given in *De Jure Praedae*¹⁵³ does not exhaust Grotius’s thinking on the matter.¹⁵⁴ The right to govern others (the right over another) is one of two basic definitions of right contained in the early pages of *De Jure Belli*,¹⁵⁵ and examples given are that of a Father over his Children, or a Lord over his Slave. Both childhood and slavery are legal statuses validated by natural law, which entail forms of subjection to the will of another who holds the right to govern.¹⁵⁶ The relationship of supremacy and subordination is in some sense the essence of these statuses and the key to their natural legal modalities as necessary forms of authoritative ordering: submission by a servant to his master is “necessary, and Useful to Mankind”¹⁵⁷ and the same principle is the foundation for the duties of children to obey their parents, and the duty of subjects to rulers.¹⁵⁸ This right over others arises also in any human

¹⁵² *ibid* 354, italics in translation.

¹⁵³ Grotius *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (n126) 137.

¹⁵⁴ Gustaaf van Nifterik, “A Reply to Grotius’s Critics. On Constitutional Law” (2018) 39(1) *Grotiana* 77; [van Nifterik, forthcoming](#).

¹⁵⁵ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102), Book I, 138.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, [Book II.5, p.](#)

¹⁵⁷ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 348.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*.

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community that forms a society, according to Grotius; it is a *logical* moral necessity, flowing from the purpose of the emergence of such a collectivity. A *civitas* is one means of forming such a perfect society, which engenders this ‘power to oblige’ itself and its members. A “society” thus formed “constitutes a people”¹⁵⁹ and has a “power to oblige itself, either by itself or by its major part”.¹⁶⁰ This power is coeval with, and comes into existence upon, the formation of that unity which is the Body of the People:¹⁶¹

Now this Spirit or Constitution in the People, is a full and Compleat Association for a political life; *and the first and Immediate Effect of it is the Sovereign Power, the Bond that holds the [respublica] together, the Breath of Life* For these artificial Bodies are like the natural. The natural Body continues to be still the same, tho’ its Particles are perpetually upon an insensible flux and change, whilst the same form remains.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 668. From the text it seems that these quotations are from *Rights of War and Peace* but if not will need to be changed.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid 812.

¹⁶¹ Van Nifterik’s summation is very helpful on this point: “Men, as social and rational beings, organise themselves into a people, a *consociatio* or *societas*. The association is held together by the power to direct and govern them, the first product of ‘the full and perfect union of civic life,’ which is the result of ‘the spirit or essential character’ of the people. And just as every other *societas*, also the state is created on account of something that the participants want to achieve together and in cooperation. The goal of the civil association, i.e. the state or *civilis societas*, is to promote public peace and order. To be able to do so, the association needs a certain say in, and power over the acts of its members. This is precisely what the associated men tried to establish; a unity held together by some common power to achieve some common goal. No magic, but the creation of a moral or artificial body, a body that exists in and by the natural law; a person *ficta* in medieval jurisprudence, a *Rechtsperson* in German. It is natural law that provides the artificial body with the (legal) means to promote its own wellbeing and achieve its goal.” Van Nifterik, “A Reply to Grotius’s Critics” (n154) 81 (in line references omitted).

¹⁶² Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 666-67.

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Brett points out that this account of sovereign power is indebted to scholastic thought, which understood political power over a community as co-original with the emergence of the community itself: “an all-embracing power for the preservation and well-being [of the community] ... [that] originates at the moment in the community as a whole. In order to be exercised effectively, however, it needs to be transferred ... to a ruler or rulers”¹⁶³ who are concrete agents of the collective power engendered by the community.

Importantly for our purposes, the generation of that form of integrative social energy and authority through the emergence of a human collectivity – what Grotius calls the “Spirit or Constitution” that is part of the formation of the Body of the People – is not identical with the specific agency of rulership or even with the Form of the organization of rulership. The Spirit or Constitution is that which seems to define the limits of existence of the artificial body as an integrated unity; it need not be exclusive to one territorial centre, or even one singular type of concrete historical existence, but can change over time and develop and adapt itself *in history*, surviving even displacement en masse:

So Aristotle, comparing a River to the People, said the River retains the same Name, tho’ some Water is always coming and some going. Nor does the bare Name only remain, but also that Disposition ... The Habit of the Body that keeps its Parts together ... As long as that Society which constitutes a People, and binds them together, still subsists.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Brett, “The Subject of Sovereignty” (n115) 19. Indeed, it is clearly evident in Vitoria’s relection on Civil Power at page xy: Francisco de Vitoria, *Political Writings* (Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance (eds), CUP 1991).

¹⁶⁴ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 667-68).

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The limit case of the extinction of a People – and thus of the condition of possibility of sovereign power – is reached “when the Body of the People is destroyed, or when the Form or Spirit (which I mentioned) is intirely gone.”¹⁶⁵ The Body of the people is destroyed when “all its Members ... are at once destroyed; or when its Frame and Constitution is dissolved and broken.”¹⁶⁶ The destruction of the Body of the People is thus either physical extinction en masse (for example, by volcanic eruption) or a complete fragmentation and dissipation of the unity of persons (“the frame and constitution of the body”) making up the Body of the people, by their own decision, by disease, or by force.¹⁶⁷ The destruction of the “Form or Spirit” of the People takes place when the unity-maintaining structure of public right for those people is so eviscerated that, “tho’ they retain their personal Liberty, they are utterly deprived of the Right of Sovereignty ...” and become a “dependent multitude” – a collection of individual wills no longer capable of generating the unifying agency of a sovereign (general) will because of the destruction of all will-forming institutions.¹⁶⁸ By contrast, a People may retain their “People-ness” (and thus their sovereign power-generative potential) even if they “only leave the Place [in which they lived as a people], either of their own Accord, through Famine, or any other Misfortune, or by Compulsion ... if the Form, I mentioned, continue, they do not cease to be a People, much less if only the Walls of the City be thrown down.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ *ibid* 669.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid* 670.

¹⁶⁸ “So Livy tells us, that the Romans were willing that Capua should be inhabited as a Town, but that there should be no Corporation, no Senate, no Common Council, no Magistrates, no Jurisdiction, but a dependent Multitude, and that a Governor should be sent from Rome to dispense Justice among them.”

¹⁶⁹ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 671.

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A corollary of this internal relationship between “people-ness,” its physical existence and “togetherness” (Frame/Constitution), and its common purpose of public peace and order, instituted through organs of public right, is that a wide range of human collectivities can also become Peoples with sovereign power-generative potential, and remain so even if they commit “some Acts of Injustice, even by public Deliberation ... A sick Body is yet a Body. And a State [*civitas*], however distempered, is still a State [*civitas*], as long as it has Laws and Judgments, and other Means necessary for Natives, and Strangers, to preserve, or recover their just Rights”.¹⁷⁰ Thus, a People which commits robbery outside its bounds, and which is “abounding in Robbers” is “yet a Nation [*latrociniiis foecunda gens, sed gens tamen*].”¹⁷¹ Grotius goes on to explain, by way of example, that “Robbers and Pirates,” although initially united for common criminal purpose (“confederated only to a Mischief”/*sceleris causa coeunt*), could over time “become a Civil Society. ... [citing St Augustine] *If this Mischief by a great concourse of desperate Men should grow so great, that they should seize on certain Places, settle themselves in them, take Cities, and subdue Nations, it then assumes the Title of a Kingdom.*”¹⁷² Human communities, however predatory their origins, can form into a Peoples with sovereign power, even if they govern poorly or viciously. The origins of a civil government in a common criminal purpose, such as Band of Robbers, does not disqualify it from becoming a public power with sovereign rights, provided the human collectivity develops a common purpose beyond that of doing “Mischief,” and creates (as implied by the approving

¹⁷⁰ *ibid* 1249.

¹⁷¹ *ibid* 1251.

¹⁷² *ibid*.

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quotation from St Augustine) a mode of rulership over places and persons that is not exclusively a criminal enterprise.

The unity of wills that is productive of sovereign power can, in Grotius's account, also be produced through the submission of multiple wills to one will, rather than exclusively through the formation of a human collectivity joining together for a common purpose of civil peace. This "top-down" unity of wills he refers to as "despotic Power"¹⁷³, in comparison to "civil government" generated through a *societas* or *consociatio*. Under despotic government, People are no longer a *civitas* or *respublica*, but a "multitude of slaves," and Sovereign power and all the rights it entails, are exercised in the interests of the Governor. While this may be a form of Government that Grotius considers suboptimal, it is nonetheless a lawful mode of existence of Sovereign Power – one in which the King is at once the Head and the Body of the People, uniting both aspects of sovereignty qua integrative force and sovereignty qua rightful coercion. It is a mode which occurs *in history*, through the Conquest of one People, or of a territory inhabited by a disunited multitude (perhaps a former People that has lost its "frame and constitution"), by another Sovereign. In such a circumstance, the Governor's (whether a King or another People such as the Romans) will is the unity that is the *sine qua non* for the sovereign power, and it achieves this through the particular conditions under which conquest is effected:

"Sometimes the Situation of Publick Affairs is such, that the [*civitas*] seems to be undone without remedy, unless the People submit to the absolute Government of a single Person... But now as Property, or Rights

¹⁷³ *ibid* 1377.

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of Goods of an enemy may be acquired by a lawful War ... so may also Civil Dominion, or an absolute Right to command and govern the Enemy.”¹⁷⁴

In some circumstances the conqueror may leave the *jus civitates* in place, or annul it completely and thus destroy the Form or Spirit of the People, depriving them of civil government.¹⁷⁵ But despite having turned a People into a “multitude of slaves,” sovereign power and sovereign right persist in the Governor. The absorption of sovereign power and acquisition of sovereign right through conquest constitutes, for Grotius, a clear counter-example to the monarchomachic claim that there is always “a reciprocal dependence between the King and People”.¹⁷⁶ While the “generality of Kings enjoy the sovereign power by a usufructuary right”,¹⁷⁷ some Kings can hold sovereign power “by a Full Right of Property”¹⁷⁸ because they have “acquired the sovereignty by Conquest, or those to whom a people, in order to prevent greater Mischief, have submitted without Conditions”.¹⁷⁹ What seems to maintain the integrative force

¹⁷⁴ Grotius *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (n126) 264-265. Similarly, a few pages (262) earlier Grotius writes: “There may be many Causes why a People should renounce all Sovereignty in themselves, and yield it to another: As when they are upon the Brink of Ruin, and they can find no other Means to save themselves; or being in great Want, they cannot otherwise be supported.”

¹⁷⁵ [Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* \(n102\) 1379-80](#). As before I am assuming that where no further info is given the in text brackets refer to Rights of War and Peace.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid* 276.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid* 279.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid* 280.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*. As Barducci shows in his fascinating study of the reception of Grotius’s work during the English Civil War, *both* monarchists and anti-monarchists relied upon Grotius to maintain the legality of obliging obedience to a government that had achieved power through victory (conquest) in a (civil) war. Quoting *De Iure Belli ad Pacis*, Republican Marchamont Nedham justified the absolute legal authority of the Rump Parliament on the grounds that it had the right ‘to use all means for securing what they have gotten, and to exercise a right of dominion over the *conquer’d party* [and] non submission to government justly deprives

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of sovereign power here is, not dissimilar to Hobbes, submission to a unifying will out of a fear of some worse alternative to despotic rule, such as disorder or civil war.¹⁸⁰

d. The organization of sovereign power

Grasping sovereign power as the natural-legal emanation of the unity of wills that is produced *historically* – either “from below” through the formation of human collectivities with civil peace as their objective, or “from above” through submission to a conqueror or to a singular despotic will as an alternative to disorder¹⁸¹ - allows us a vantage point on series of paired contrasting terms that Grotius utilizes in his account of sovereignty: between the Common and Proper subject of sovereignty; between the Thing Itself (Sovereignty) and the Manner of Holding it, and; between sovereign power (the Sovereignty) and the Rights of Sovereignty. The first of each of these terms in this triptych, corresponds to that generative social force which originates in the unity of wills – “the Bond that holds the [*respublica*] together, the Breath of Life which so many thousands breathe” (*vinculum per quod respublica cohaeret, spiritus vitalis quem tot millia*

men of the benefits of its protection.” Marco Barducci, *Hugo Grotius and the Century of Revolution 1613-1718 : transnational reception in English political thought* (OUP 2017) 39. Another influential propagandist of the Rump, Anthony Ascham, used “Grotius to accommodate a community-centred view of government to the absolute sovereignty of Parliament, and to justify the request of submission to the latter in terms of full proprietary rights derived from conquest.” (at 39).

¹⁸⁰ Indeed, Grotius is sanguine about the results of such submission: “The examples of other Nations, who for many ages, lived happily under an arbitrary government, may have influenced some. The Cities under *Eumenes* says *Livy*, would have changed their condition with any free state whatever.” (Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 264).

¹⁸¹ Thereby also creating civil peace, albeit under arbitrary or despotic government.

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trahunt.).¹⁸² This “moral thing” as we have seen, is cognizable in natural law and is attributed important legal qualities (eg. personhood) and rights (foremost among them being the right to rule, the right to judge and punish and the right of war).

The second of each of these pairs reflects Grotius’s consistent juristic treatment of sovereignty as *always also necessarily a legal* phenomenon with variable legal forms and modes of effectivity, which emerge as a result of the particular historical conditions under which sovereign power *qua* cohering social force comes into being and is organized into an effective system of rule over a territory and its inhabitants. It begins with the basic premise that, like any Thing, corporeal or incorporeal, in Roman law, law recognizes the distinction between the Thing itself (*Aliud esse de re quaere*) and the Mode of Holding it (*aliud de modo habendi*). The underlying *res* of sovereign power must be organized within extant natural legal relationships before it can be an active and effective mode of rule; as we have seen, sovereignty is not *ab origine* in the *dominium* of the People, but is a potentia co-original with their emergence. This is the sense in which the People are the “common subject” of sovereignty, as Brett has recently shown clearly.¹⁸³ Sovereign power becomes a mode of rulership once “the manner of holding” it is resolved, and the “Proper” subject of sovereignty is identified as the holder of the *Rights* of sovereignty. Moving within the Roman legal modalities of rights in and over things, Grotius identifies three possible legal relationships that could characterize the Proper subject’s “Manner of Holding” sovereign power: “these [incorporeal Things (*incorporalibus*), such

¹⁸² Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 666.

¹⁸³ Brett, “The Subject of Sovereignty” (n115) xx.

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as sovereign power] some have by a full Right of Property (*jure pleno proprietatis*), some by a usufructuary right (*jure usufructuario*) and others by temporary right (*jure temporario*)."¹⁸⁴ "Free peoples" (*populi liberi*, viz. one which has never been subject to conquest) and "a King that is really so" (*regis qui vere rex sit*) are equally capable *in law* of holding the rights of sovereignty by the full right of property (ie. as full dominium); whether and how they do so, depends on the historical circumstances under which the free people or king came to acquire these rights – whether by conquest (or never having been conquered), cession, or agreement (tacit or explicit). "Real" sovereignty is always organized through legal arrangements reflecting the actual historical conditions of the establishment of the modality of rulership for that people and territory; it need not "revert" to one source or be necessarily concentrated in one subject perpetually.

Grotius's rejection of any monistic "subject," "location" or "manner of holding" sovereign power is what has led most frequently to claims concerning the 'non-modern' or inchoate character of his state theory. For example, Gierke characterizes Grotius's approach as a failed attempt to reconcile two competing accounts of sovereignty – Ruler Sovereignty versus Popular Sovereignty – available to him from 16th century controversies concerning the true foundation and nature of sovereign power. Gierke complains that, with his dual subject theory and his elaborate examples of the many different possible relationships between them, Grotius "fails to attain a true conception of the single personality of the State ... Refusing to recognize a real sovereignty of the People as always

¹⁸⁴ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 279.

Draft - CLP

and everywhere present ... he was condemned to see his doctrine of the State inevitably dwindling into an empty shadow.”¹⁸⁵ This, it seems to me, is also the essence of Tuck’s claim for the modernity of Bodin and Hobbes, as against the “neo-medievalism” of Grotius. But Gierke’s reading is more careful when he notes in frustration that further evidence of Grotius lack of a real theory of the state is found in Grotius’s constant demonstration of the contingency of so much of the legal organization and allocation of the rights of sovereignty: “whether any of these possibilities [of the legal organization of the rights of sovereignty] is actually realized *is made to depend entirely on the way in which the fortunes of the original sovereignty of the People have been affected by the accident of a particular method of acquiring Ruling power.*”¹⁸⁶ This objection would possibly be sound if we equate a “real” theory of state sovereignty with a Bodinian or Rousseauian account, monistic and organ-sovereignist. The complaint misses its mark, however, if we see Grotius as having understood – and pointedly criticized – such an account as mistaking the difference between what is legally necessary in the creation and organization sovereign power, and what is simply preferable from the point of view convenience; in that case, it is not that Grotius failed to choose between popular sovereignty and ruler sovereignty as the “true” nature of the state, but that he believed such a choice was unnecessary to give an account of the essence of sovereign power and sovereign right.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Otto von Gierke, *Natural law and the theory of society 1500 to 1800* (Ernest Barker (tr, ed), with a lecture on The ideas of natural law and humanity, by Ernst Troeltsch, CUP 1934) 55-56.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid* 57.

¹⁸⁷ Interestingly Charles Merriam, writing in 1900, and perhaps in light of the American federal experience, has no qualms about understanding Grotius’s theory as “close to the idea of State sovereignty” because “one may say,

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Grotius expressly distinguishes his method from Bodin's by differentiating the "Art of Politicks" from "the invariable rules of Justice."¹⁸⁸ The former, he argues, give rules about what may be profitable or advantageous, and should not be confused with the latter, which aim to determine what natural law permits and requires. "Good Policy" may be consistent with what law permits, but is a different kind of reasoning that should not be confused with juridical possibility. The juridical question in relation to the organization of sovereignty is not whether "by the ideas that such or such a person may form of what is best [least inconvenient], but by the will of him that conferred that Right."¹⁸⁹ An artificial Thing created through human wills, such as sovereign power, can be seen simultaneously in the perspective of "*juris atque imperii*" (rights and sovereignty) by the Jurisconsultus, and at the same time in the perspective of relations between governor and governed (*relatio partium inter se earum quae regunt, & quae reguntur*) by the Politicus.¹⁹⁰ In Grotius's inquiry into the nature of *summum imperium*, and the modes of creating and organizing it, answering the juristic question revolves around discerning the true legal nature of the Right evinced in the governing arrangements of historically exemplary political communities – the Romans, the Ancient Greeks, the Persians, the Ancient Israelites etc. The real mode of existence of a given political community at a

consequently, that the State as a whole [referring to the body politic or civitas] is sovereign, or that the special organ, the Government, is sovereign." Charles E Merriam, *History of the Theory of Sovereignty Since Rousseau* (Columbia University Press 1900, reprinted Bartouche Books 2001) 11.

¹⁸⁸ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 131.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid* 307.

¹⁹⁰ *ibid*, Book II, Cap. 9.8.2 (1650 ed, Google Books, 207 I was not able to identify which version this referred to) Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace* (Richard Tuck (ed, tr), Liberty Fund 2005 672.

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particular point in its history – and thus the possibilities of political organization to be inferred as available in the natural legal order - is to be understood not by theories of the *best* political form or formal legal claims and titles (“the Shew of outward Things”) but by an inquiry into the real legal nature of powers authorized and exercised,¹⁹¹ and by whom: “For the Nature of moral Things is known by their Operations, wherefore those Powers, which have the same Effects, should be called by the same Name.”¹⁹² In another implicit criticism of Bodin for his failure to differentiate Politics and Jurisprudence as methods, Grotius maintains that the Roman Dictator – a magistrate with plenary but temporary sovereign powers – was properly understood as Sovereign for so long as he held the commission. Bodin had denied the sovereign nature of the Dictator because the Dictator’s commission was limited in time, and not perpetual as Bodin considered essential to sovereign power. But Grotius insisted that real legal substance of the power wielded by the Dictator was equal to that of a sovereign, because “during the whole Time of his Office, [he] exercised all the Acts of civil Government with as much Authority as the most absolute King; and nothing he had done could be annulled by any other Power. *And the Continuance of a Thing alters not the Nature of it.*”¹⁹³

Grotius riposte to Bodin, that what is *necessary* for Moral Things such as the juridical nature of sovereign power is to not be confused with what may be

¹⁹¹ Or, as Brett puts it “Grotius was able to craft a kind of jurisprudence that could accommodate the reality of power in a political community without collapsing into reason of state ...We might call it a kind of realist jurisprudence. ... On my [Brett’s] account, it is precisely his conception of “morals” that allows him this position.” Brett, “The Subject of Sovereignty” (n115) 22.

¹⁹² Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102), Book I, Cap. 3.11.

¹⁹³ *ibid*, Book I, 283-284.

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good policy or desirable in the organization of such a power, is crucial to his fundamental distinction between “the Thing itself and the Manner of enjoying it,”¹⁹⁴ and his equally significant distinction between the “sovereign power itself” and the “Right[s] of sovereignty.”¹⁹⁵ Grotius might well (but never did) concede that the indivisibility of sovereign power in one organ, People or Ruler (viz. the unification of the Thing itself and the Manner of holding it) was good policy or reduces certain inconveniences, but he would maintain that this should not be confused with whether such monism is *necessary* in natural law. For him, such a monistic approach is not required by the laws that govern artificial Things, and indeed what such laws show is a great deal of historical variability and flexibility between the *generation* of sovereign power (“the sovereignty” or “sovereignty itself” or “the Thing itself”), and its *legal and political organization* (“the Right of Sovereignty”) in any given historical polity. This crucial move in Grotius’s state theory is in many ways the key to its coherence, and to making sense of its various dialectical rejections of other contemporary theories and claims about the nature of sovereignty, civil power and the ‘state’.

The consequence of this set of distinctions, between the common and proper subject of sovereignty, between the Thing itself and the manner of holding it, and between sovereign power and the Rights of sovereignty, is a powerful legal-analytical matrix through which to categorize, and grasp the legal consequences of, a large variety of historical possibilities in the modes of

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*, Book I, 279.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid* **Pinpoint IBP several passages.**

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rulership and their constitutional structure.¹⁹⁶ Both Kings and People, as pure types of rulership, can in theory within this framework, hold sovereign power as a full right of property (*pleno proprietatis*). As we have seen, a king might acquire such patrimonial rights over a territory and human collectivity through conquest, or through a moment in which a People alienates all power to him completely and for all time in order to protect themselves from worse outcomes; but equally, a free People, through its organs of rulership, come to acquire over *other* peoples a right of sovereignty in a similar manner.¹⁹⁷ Holding the rights of sovereignty in such a patrimonial mode amounts, as we have seen above, to arbitrary or despotic government, in which the Governor (whether a King or a People) governs to their own benefit rather than the benefit of the Governed.¹⁹⁸ Where the rights of sovereignty are held in the Full right of property over a place and its inhabitants, these rights can be alienated to another King or People without consulting the inhabitants, and also passed on by succession without their consent (279-280). But as noted above, Grotius believes that most kings at the time he wrote held sovereign power not by full right of property (and thus, were not “Kings properly so-called), but by “an usufructuary right” (280, 296). As Nifterik points out, a usufructuary right here is not a *precarious* or *temporary* right.¹⁹⁹ The key difference between a right *pleno proprietatis* and a right

¹⁹⁶ As Brett puts it at p23 of “The Subject of Sovereignty”, “running sovereignty through the matrix of rights in this way gave Grotius huge analytic power in addressing the contemporary state of Europe, because the extreme contingency inherent in ‘perfect’ rights allowed for its complicated history.” Brett, “The Subject of Sovereignty” (n115).

¹⁹⁷ “There were also some People that have other people under them, who are no less subject to them than if they were under Kings.” Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 265.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid* 273, 1377-78.

¹⁹⁹ Nifterik, *forthcoming*.

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usufructuario is in its alienability: a Thing held by usufructuary right cannot be transferred solely by the will of the user, even if the use rights are otherwise as absolute as an owner. Thus, Grotius maintains that a King who holds sovereign power in the manner of a usufruct, might well rule absolutely but cannot pass his kingship through succession (see, eg, discussion at 296-300) and cannot alienate parts of the public domain without the consent of the People.

Grotius's analytic also allows him to accommodate scenarios in which diverse Peoples have the same Head (ruler/proper subject of sovereignty), who may exercise different bundles of the Rights of Sovereignty vis-à-vis each Peoples,²⁰⁰ depending on how those Peoples came to be integrated into that relationship of rulership. Some, being conquered, could be subjects of the sovereignty held *pleno proprietatis* by the ruler, even as that ruler holds only *jure usufructuario vis-à-vis* another peoples.²⁰¹ Moreover, depending on how history unfolds, legal rights may change their complexion if new factual realities are jurisgenerative and give rise to rights cognizable in natural law:

What is originally invalid, can never be made valid by a retroactive Effect; yet does it admit of this Exception, unless some new Cause, capable of itself to create a Right, shall intervene. Thus, the true and undoubted Sovereign

²⁰⁰ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 260-261.

²⁰¹ As Simpson, in "States and Patrimonial Kingdoms" (n2), has pointed out, this flexibility is highly serviceable to creating and maintaining differentiated legal frameworks for colonization and empire. This is correct, but it seems to me that Grotius's first concern here is giving an account of how an Emperor (Philip II of Spain and Portugal) can be emperor and sovereign *pleno proprietatis* over some parts of his empire, but merely a usufructuary or temporary prince in another, such as in the Netherlands, where Grotius's claim was that Philip II held the status of Prince only subject to stringent conditions. See above, pp. 24-36. not clear if this refers to Simpson article which starts at p45 of journal or something else above?

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of any People may lose the Sovereignty, and become dependent on the people; and on the contrary, he who was only Chief of the State, may become King or true Sovereign; and that Supreme Power which was lodged before entirely either in People or the Prince, maybe divided between them.²⁰²

The specific constitutional arrangements in the organization and distribution of sovereign rights can therefore be highly variable, and precise *juridical answers* to how the rights of sovereignty are held in a particular place and time require an inquiry into the circumstances of the creation of those arrangements and whether promises or conditions were attached to the holder of sovereign rights, such that the exercise of those rights became void or countermandable under *natural law* in the event of a breach of those conditions. Hence, Grotius finds no contradiction between the idea of sovereign power as founded in a unity of wills with no superior (in the sense of a generative force inherent in a community answering to no other), and the possibility of a dividing and tailoring of the rights of sovereignty (*viz.* the manner of holding) among different proper subjects. :

... Where such Promises are made, Sovereignty is thereby somewhat confined, whether the Obligation only concerns the Exercise of the Power, or falls directly on the Power itself. In the former Case, whatever is done contrary to Promise, is unjust; because, as we shall shew elsewhere, every true Promise gives a Right to him to whom it is made. In the latter, the Act is unjust, and void at the same Time through the Defect of Power. It does not however follow from thence, that

²⁰² Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 500.

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the Prince who makes such Promises, depends on a Superior; for the Act is not made void in this Case, by a superior Authority, but by Right itself.²⁰³

... Though the sovereign Power be but one, and of itself undivided, consisting of those Parts above mentioned, with the Addition of Supremacy, that is *accountable to none*, yet it sometimes happens, that it is divided, either into *subjective Parts*, as they are called, or *potential*; (*that is, either amongst several Persons, who possess it jointly; or into several Parts, whereof one is in the Hands of one Person, and another in the Hands of another*). ... So also it may happen, that the People in chusing a King, may reserve certain Acts of Sovereignty to themselves, and confer others on the King absolutely and without Restriction. This however does not take place, (as I have shewed already) as often as the King is obliged by some Promise; but only then, when either the Partition is expressly made, (of which also we have treated above) or when the People being (as yet) free, shall require certain Things of the King, whom they are chusing, by way of a perpetual Ordinance; or if any Thing be added, whereby it is implied, that the King may be compelled or punished. For every Ordinance flows from a Superior, at least in Regard to what is ordered. And Compulsion is not always indeed an Act of a Superior, for naturally every Man has Power to compel his Debtor; but it is repugnant to the State of an Inferior; therefore from Compulsion there at least follows an Equality, and consequently a Division of the sovereign Power.

Many alledge here a great Number of Inconveniencies, to which the [respublica] is exposed by this Partition of Sovereignty, which makes of it as it were a Body

²⁰³ *ibid* 301.

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with two Heads; but in the Matter of civil Government, it is impossible to provide against all Inconveniencies; and we must judge of a Right, not by the Ideas that such or such a Person may form of what is best, but by the Will of him, that conferred that Right; as we have already observed.²⁰⁴

As this lengthy passage shows clearly, a great deal of work is ultimately done by the distinctions between sovereign power and rights of sovereignty, and between the Thing itself and the Manner of holding it. It accommodates a wide spectrum of forms of rulership, with varying degrees of civil freedom and unfreedom; it demands a deeply historical understanding of what natural right authorizes in terms of ruling arrangements in particular polities, and ultimately makes all questions of a right of resistance *specifically historical* questions of whether a given power has been exercised on terms that breach the conditions under which it was given, and also whether there might be some other constituted power or organ of rulership that could lawfully – under natural law – hold the right to enforce this condition.²⁰⁵ The “real” place of sovereign power, and who or what might wield that power against constituted authorities, can be determined only by an historical inquiry rather than through axiomatic or universalistic claims about who or what is necessarily sovereign. Grotius’s

²⁰⁴ *ibid* 305-307.

²⁰⁵ Van Nifterik, “A Reply to Grotius’s Critics.” (n154) 85. See in particular Book I, Chapter IV of Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102), where Grotius – writing it seems to me in respect of various kinds of usufructuary Kings – sets several kinds of transgression which could give rise to the natural right of resistance, including, “If a King should have but one Part of the sovereign Power, and the Senate or People the other, if such a King shall invade that Part which is not his own, he may justly be resisted, because he is not Sovereign in that Respect ... Since whoever has a Share of the Sovereignty must have at the same Time a Right to defend it.”

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historical-legal casuistry concerning the organization of sovereign power in the state can be understood as a decisive intervention in – and critical deflation of – the bitter legal and political controversy concerning which person or *corpus* was the true and proper *dominus* of a place and its inhabitants. As Lee (2016) has shown vividly, at stake in this dispute was which agent - Kings or Peoples - could claim that public powers were “proper” and “exclusive” to themselves, even if these powers were delegated to other agents to exercise. Lee notes that, in the context of the wars of religion and the fracturing of European political orders that unfolds over the 17th century, both royalist Humanists and anti-royalist Monarchomachs shared a concern with identifying where true dominium lay, and thus who might be claimed to rightfully authorize and decide the powers and jurisdiction of constituted offices.²⁰⁶ Grotius’s theory denies the necessity of any such categorical and essential allocation of the final place of sovereign power, and permits Kings or Peoples to claim this legal authority, depending on history. Thus he strenuously rejects the view of those “who will have the Supreme Power to be always, and without exception, in the People; so that they may restrain or punish their Kings, as often as they abuse their Power.”²⁰⁷ Likewise, there is there is no essential or necessary relationship of superiority between the constituting Power and the constituted²⁰⁸ – this depends entirely on

²⁰⁶ Royalists such as Dumoulin sought to show that Kings were “a kind of *dominus* with a *plenissima iurisdictio* over the kingdom” (Lee, *Popular Sovereignty* (n107) 115) while the Monarchomachs – also “direct heirs of the humanist analysis of jurisdictional authority” (at 157) – maintained that “all public powers of the realm, even those of the monarch ... are always ‘proper’ and ‘exclusive’ to the people as a whole, just as if they are, corporately, a *dominus*.” (at 156-7).

²⁰⁷ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 261.

²⁰⁸ *ibid* 272.

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the terms under which a People may have authorized the rulership of the King. It may not even be claimed, according to Grotius, that all Government is Ordained for the sake of the Governed, for some kinds of rule benefit the Governor (such as Kingdoms acquired by conquest);²⁰⁹ once again, it depends on the specific circumstances under which the modality of ruling has been created over a given place and its inhabitants.

V. Conclusion – Modern or Post-Modern Sovereignty?

I have argued in the foregoing sections that Grotius's state theory has a coherent structure that is recognizably modern, not medieval. Whether the form of government is monarchical, aristocratic, democratic,²¹⁰ a political order with *summum imperium* is a "perpetual and eternal" society (*consociatio*) which is not subject to the will of another human or legal person. Internally, it is characterized by a comprehensive order of supremacy and subordination, such that to be a civil order with sovereign power, there must be an agency of rulership which has the capacity to substitute a decision as to the general will or interest, in place of the decision or judgment of the individual will of any subject; civil order necessitates and authorizes *subjection*, and the unity of wills that characterizes it is not a unity of actual reasoning by individual subjects but a

²⁰⁹ *ibid* 273. See also Grotius's rejection of the theory of mutual dependence of Kings and Subjects, discussed above at note 147.

²¹⁰ *ibid* 671-672.

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unity attained through the finality of an instance of decision²¹¹ – even if different kinds of final decision may be *distributed* across different agencies of rulership.

Summum imperium, as an artificial unity of wills, has two aspects or moments: it is a kind of generative social force that arises from the fact of human collectivities formed for a common purpose of civil peace and flourishing (an end mandated and consecrated by natural law), *and*; it is a governing power of rightful coercion that is recognized by the natural legal order, and which is amenable to a range of durable or temporary forms of legal and political organization, reflecting the historical circumstances of the creation and maintenance of political order for a given people at a given time. The range of possible modalities for organizing the system of legal and political rule in actually-existing political orders is, therefore, very broad: between two pure types, “Kings properly so called” and “Free Peoples,” there are many variations (cognizable as sovereign to natural law) that can be discerned through the study of exemplary historical communities.²¹² While the concentration of sovereign power and sovereign right into one place or agent might be convenient or “Good Policy,” there is no *moral necessity* for such a concentration in the nature of sovereignty itself; it is a question of examining the specific historical conditions under which this legal and political organization of sovereignty has been created and sustained, and ultimately whether, as a matter of real functioning, these

²¹¹ See, eg, Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* (n102) 503: “To judge absolutely without Appeal is a circumstance inconsistent with the condition of a subject and therefore can belong only to the sovereignty, or some of its Parts; nor can it be gained but by virtue of a natural right, to which sovereignty is subject.”

²¹² The use of exemplary history is of course one of Grotius’s consistent methods for the discernment of the rules of natural law in general – see *Rights of War and Peace* 123-124.

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arrangements continue to be able to produce and maintain the legal and political unity which is the condition of possibility of the sovereign political order. This unity is not, demonstrably, the unity of power and authority in *one* organ or agent of rule (although it *might* be), but rather a complex composite unity of law, concrete political existence, and history. This unity is not necessarily maintained through some essential and timeless unity of the People as a substance, or through the establishment of a singular agent and organ of a perpetual sovereign power. Rather, it is a unity of “spirit” that persists even as functions and powers can be divided and distributed legally and constitutionally. The constitutional “order” of Grotius can inhere under certain circumstances in the life and ways of a concrete people, their institutional traditions and their territory. But in other places and times, this unity can be in the form of a powerful monarchy, or in the body of the people. All can be modes of unity that maintain a *summum imperium* cognizable to natural law. An exemplar of this, it would seem, is the Dutch Republic itself, as Grotius recounts in *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic*:

A state continues to exist most of all because it *has* existed ... *Prince* and *States* do not mean the same thing everywhere... In some place sovereignty is held by one, and advice given by many; and in some places the laws are subordinate to the prince, and in others the prince to the laws ...

A constitution does not immediately become a different one if the names and functions of the magistrates change, as long as *the main force of the government and the supreme power and the mind ... moves and binds the whole* remains the same.²¹³

For very true is the saying of the ancients, that a state is preserved in tact, as long as there is strong unanimity within it, but it will fall apart, when this harmony is broken.²¹⁴

²¹³ Grotius, *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic* (n89) 5-6.

²¹⁴ *ibid* 95.

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The “unanimity” and “harmony” of the legal and political order inheres in the composite relationships of laws, institutions and people.

Skinner has recently argued that perhaps the most “medieval” aspect of Grotius’s state theory is his dependence on an essentially Bartolist conception of the body of the People.²¹⁵ The Bartolist theory of the city states (*civitates*), as a species of *universitates*, accorded them a separate representative personality and recognized some of them (famously) as *sibi princeps* with *merum imperium*.²¹⁶ But Skinner points out that this Bartolist theory did not have a distinct theory of the *persona civitatis*, the person of the state, but rather of the *persona populi* (the corporate person of the People).²¹⁷ As such it fell back on to an idea of the people as a pre-existing unity, a unified and corporate group somehow capable of “such a unitary legal act as contracting and hence consenting to government.”²¹⁸ It is precisely this idea of a pre-formed corporate whole - “free and natural communities in which the *universitas* or body of the people possessed sovereign power”²¹⁹ – that is placed in doubt by the sectarian and anti-monarchical civil wars of 17th century Europe, and which leads Hobbes to conclude that there is simply no such thing as the body of the people as a pre-given unity.²²⁰

As is well-known, Grotius’s concept of the state of nature retains not only a thick juridical structure, but is also one in which human sociability and our inclination towards this-worldly flourishing leads us form human collectivities

²¹⁵ Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes* (n21), chapter 2.

²¹⁶ Woolf, *Bartolus of Sassoferato* (n36), chapter 2.3; Canning, *Ideas of Power in the Late Middle Ages* (n36), chapter 1 and 5; Canning, *The Political Thought of Baldus de Ubaldis* (n92); Lee, *Popular Sovereignty* (n107), [chapter on Bartolus](#).

²¹⁷ Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes* (n21) 41.

²¹⁸ *ibid* 200.

²¹⁹ *ibid* 211.

²²⁰ *ibid* 211.

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on a larger and larger scale.²²¹ One terminus ad quem of such a development is the *civitas*, which could be at the scale of a city-state (Athens, Sparta, Venice), or a much more extensive territorial formation such as the Roman Republic or the Batavian Republic. In such political orders, which are exemplary ones for Grotius, the Body of the People is a free community capable of forming the unified will necessary to alienate the right to rule, with or without conditions and partitions, to an agent of rulership; in this sense, Skinner seems to me to be correct in that there is in Grotius a kind of *historical archetype* of the Body of the People which is the common subject of sovereignty.²²² But as we have seen in the foregoing discussion, Grotius's account of the origin of sovereign power and of its organization into a structure of rulership, is by no means limited to circumstances where there is a strongly unified Body of the People capable expressing its will *uno actu*. The "people-ness" of a People is in some ways co-extensive with its legal and political organization (found not only in its Spirit but also in its "frame and constitution," and in its organs of public right). In this sense, the unity of the People capable of engendering *summum imperium* is not presupposed, but rather is a potential within human collectivities (even those initially founded for a criminal purpose, as we saw above) that come to live together for the purposes of civil peace and prosperity; that potential could be realized through the emergence of a Free People *sui juris* (such as the Batavians),

²²¹ See generally Straumann, *Roman Law in the State of Nature* (n83), chapters 4 and 6.

²²² As Figgis observed in 1905, it is also true in some elementary sense that Grotius is Bartolist: "Grotius and Gentilis and Bodin do not merely quote Bartolus, but are what they are largely because of him." John Neville Figgis, "Bartolus and the Development of European Political Ideas," (1905) 19 *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 147, 147.

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or through the submission to a singular arbitrary will who rules for his own benefit but protects the members of that collectivity from worse alternatives. Unity in this sense can emerge “from above” and be motivated by fear of something worse. While the categories of Kings and Free Peoples, as pure types of sovereign political order, are resolutely Bartolist, Grotius’s historico-juridical treatment of sovereign power and its organization leaves us with an open-textured account of human communities as amenable to different kinds of unification, before and after the genesis of sovereign power. There is a kind of dialectical back and forth between a factual and a juridical unity.

It is in this sense that we can agree with Tuck when he concludes that for Grotius, “a people as a sovereign entity ... has in general no capacity to exercise sovereign power ... and the analysis of politics – as he had argued in 1602 – had to concentrate on the actual sources of power and law in the society, as they were experienced by citizens in their daily lives.”²²³ The people are not a demiurge of sovereign decision, even if in some fundamental sense sovereign power is an outgrowth of a concrete human collectivity. But on my reading of Grotius, there is nothing essentially medieval about this; rather, it reflects a different strand of modern thinking about the state, law and sovereign power – a distinctive way of trying to address the “problem-situation” of modern statehood, namely the factual and normative foundations of its supremacy and comprehensive authority over a territory and its inhabitants. Grotius’s casuistry of history, reason and law, is a self-conscious alternative to Bodin’s account. Bodin (and his admirer Richard Tuck) attribute to sovereign power a perpetual

²²³ Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign* (n1) 85.

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monistic substance, a quality which makes it quasi-transcendental but which can never really account for its concrete emergence and maintenance: it becomes an axiom of thought,²²⁴ a fictitious presupposition which arguably leads to one of the key conceptual cul de sacs of modern state theory: the problem of who or what is the real source of this perpetual and undiminished sovereign power. Grotius's casuistic and partitioned account of sovereign power – distinguishing between the thing and the manner of holding it – defers the problem of singular organs of perpetual power to a historical background condition which largely *stays in the background* while the continuity and juridical unity of that specific human community is not irrevocably shattered. In this way, Grotius's approach is not only modern but perhaps even startlingly post-modern – prefiguring the increasing in interest in “post-sovereign” polity-making that has been a salient feature of the last thirty years of constitutional reform and renovation, especially in territories riven by deep conflict or transitioning from dictatorship.²²⁵

As an account of the foundations of the legal and political order of the state, organ sovereignty (and its monistic corollary) is as performative as any other state theory in the sense described at the beginning of this paper – it not only stakes a claim to describe the nature of such power, but also intimates routes towards its realization, “*in order to be more successful in making it exist in reality.*”²²⁶ For this reason, modern state theory has almost always had a

²²⁴ Emblematic of Vaihinger's “as if” thinking – see Hans Vaihinger, *The philosophy of “As if” : a system of the theoretical, practical and religious fictions of mankind* (Charles Kay Ogden (tr), Kegan Paul, Trench, Tubner and Co 1924) 33-54.

²²⁵ See Andrew Arato, *Post Sovereign Constitution Making: Learning and Legitimacy* (OUP 2016).

²²⁶ Foucault (n31).

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technical or instrumental aspect concerned with *making and preserving* the state²²⁷ before or in the wake of changes of state brought about by civil conflict, war, grave political turmoil or reconstruction. But as a practical and theoretical matter, identifying sovereign power with a single individual or group agent (such as the unitary Sovereign People) which wills and decides, and thus is always necessarily outside or beyond all legal organization, encounters well-known difficulties. Arendt famously argued that the pure popular sovereign as order-giving power and authority, attempted to place the figure of the People in the empty conceptual seat of the sacerdotal king.²²⁸ But stripped of the inherited authority of positive and customary law, attempts to refound and maintain a political order through any given organ claiming to represent the People, proved both short-lived (“built on sand” in Arendt’s words) and susceptible to radical extra-legal violence.²²⁹ But an alternative emplacement of the People as a final instance of plebiscitary approbation or disapprobation, as in Carl Schmitt’s theory, leaves the people formless and amorphous.²³⁰ Such a people, while notionally capable of a final yes/no decision on the form and substance of political order, “cannot advise, deliberate, discuss, rule, administer, norm ... or even choose the questions for organized referenda to which a yes/no answer can indeed be given.”²³¹

²²⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship. From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle* (1921, Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (trs), Polity Press 2014), chapter 1, xx. **This seems to be the main current edition.**

²²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Faber and Faber 1963) 200ff.

²²⁹ *ibid.*

²³⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory* (Jeffrey Seitzer (ed, tr), Duke University Press 2008) xx.

²³¹ Arato, *Post Sovereign Constitution Making* (n225) 25.

Draft - CLP

These antinomies of the People as singular organ of sovereign power are summarized powerfully by Arato:

As an actor, the people are fictional, unless they are defined in legal terms as the collectivity of citizens or the electorate in which case they become an entity produced by law, rather than the ultimate source of law. The theory of imputation, according to which the unified as a collective origin can be ascribed to constitutions as long as they make the claim of acting *as* or in the name of *the* people ... is also a myth, a liberal myth. ... [It] is difficult to admit, at least normatively, the need for mythical group constructs ... Yet exactly such lack of sociological identity characterized the concept of the people, from the very moment of the invention of popular sovereignty.²³²

Arato goes on to observe that late 19th and 20th century state theorists such as Carré de Malberg and legal theorists such as Hauriou, challenged the classical theory that could only conceive sovereign power as embodied and united in a “fully identifiable person, institution or group actually capable of decisions.”²³³ The real presence of a unitary people was not found in any singular topos within or without legal and political institutions of government, but remained as a “negative principle of legitimacy, referring to a whole that cannot be embodied in a part, and can be represented only through plurality and division, leaving the power of the king an empty place.”²³⁴ Hauriou in particular sought to capture the legal and political reality of modern national sovereignty by arguing for its double nature: sovereign power rested *within* the legal organs of binding coercion *and also* rested *upon* the pre-existing social order’s orderliness; that social order in turn relied upon the medium of law to stabilize itself and to act

²³² Andrew Arato, *The Adventures of Constituent Power: Beyond Revolutions?* (CUP 2017) 29.

²³³ *ibid* 25.

²³⁴ *ibid* 80.

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on, against or with the juridical order.²³⁵ The unity characteristic of state sovereignty is found in the articulated relationship between these factual and the normative-legal dimensions.

Grotius's state theory, as I have interpreted and reconstructed it, sidesteps the many pitfalls of organ sovereignty: he sees such a monistic reduction of sovereign power as possible but not necessary to its nature as a moral thing. The possibilities for the organization of rule are discerned in and through history; the natural legal order provides the carapace for the juridical validity of these diverse modes of organizing effective sovereign power, and generates an architecture of sovereign right that is amenable to partitioned exercises of sovereignty through diverse organs. The potential for conflict and contradiction is managed casuistically and juridically, but the final source of unity is not reduced to one agent or actor, but resides within and between the the composite equilibrium ("harmony") of a concrete historical human collectivity and its legal and political institutions of rulership. The result is thus highly pluralistic as well as historicist in its approach to understanding how sovereignty "really" works in a given place and time. Sovereign power "in itself" is produced by the People, but it is a kind of social force that is stabilized and given form (perfected) through its legal and political organization, the latter being a reflection of historical contingencies. Once organized into modalities of rulership, the *summum imperium* of the specific human community generates natural legal rights and duties, both internally and externally. "Peoples" are neither merely legal fictions, but nor are they protean demiurges of legal and

²³⁵ See The Notion of an Objective Juridical Order, and the Theory of the Institution.

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political order waiting to be awakened from their slumber. They are a complex unity that is composed of legal, factual and ideal dimensions. In an era of vocal and proliferating claims to know or express the intentions and desires of the real People, and where to find them, Grotius's pluralistic and historicist account is a relevant propaedeutic to breaking the hold that one imaginary of sovereign power has over us.