

7 Oceans, Jungles, and Gardens World Politics and the Planet

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As a historian attentive to global trends, I have appreciated the opportunity to participate in the workshops leading to this volume on World Politics and Worldviews. The recent decades appear, as in several other fields, to have witnessed an explosion of methods and scope in the study of International Relations. Going well beyond the study of state-to-state and the varieties of cross-national relations, these approaches take on the vital issue of agency, common to all sciences. Do we conceive of agency as human activity, whether individual, collective, or sensory (especially visual media), or should we adopt a more distributed concept of agentive beings, human and nonhuman? Since the latter have significant demonstrated effects on world politics, they are legitimate fields of inquiry. Particularly concerned by the Anthropocene as I am, I explore how worldviews and cosmologies do or do not, can or cannot, help us understand not only the politics of the world, but also of the planet.

The same relational, processual, and widened scope to be found in Kurki, Grove and Allan in the volume has also prompted me to inquire about the relationships between worldviews and cosmologies.¹ Committed philosophically to a processual perspective, I develop a schema of layered and interactive temporalities to grasp the mediations that result in world politics and to probe the possibilities of alternative worldviews and cosmologies. To prefigure the argument: Enlightenment ideas, assumptions, and projects have constituted temporally the most durable *cosmology* underlying world politics over two hundred years. These assumptions and associated historical processes have generated a dynamic, circulatory system of nation-states driven by what I term the epistemic engine of the nation-form. In turn, this engine has had globally transformative consequences, but also generated colossal counterfinalities on the planet. Worldviews derive from the epistemic engine, but also from historical, religious, and personal and collective experiences not reducible to the engine. A principal goal of this chapter is to explore the

¹ See Chapters 3, 4, and 8, respectively.

extent to which, and how, experiential worldviews can penetrate or negotiate the epistemic engine to influence the world order and world politics.

In the Section 7.1 I develop a conceptual framework around the “epistemic engine” which organizes and circulates the cosmological dimensions of Enlightenment modernity, usefully described by Bentley Allan (Chapter 8, this volume). In Section 7.2, I explore how the imperial Chinese world order – functional until at least the late nineteenth century – reveals a different cosmology shaping a different “world” order and politics. I go on to explore the contemporary PRC view of the world order, probing the extent to which its historical experiences can be seen to reshape the hegemonic epistemic engine. In Section 7.3, I draw from a paradigm of “oceanic temporality” to grasp counterfinalities generated by the epistemic engine on the earth and the ocean itself. Can the counterflows of social movements allow us to imagine what Katzenstein calls a post-Enlightenment, hyper-humanist cosmology?

7.1 **The Epistemic Engine and the World Order**

Regarding the ontological and epistemological conditions described by Allan, Newtonian physics furnishes the conception of nature as governed by mathematically apprehended laws.² Based significantly on the Cartesian conception of duality of the mind and the external world, humans are capable of knowing and using these laws. Regarding temporality, the Newtonian view holds an absolute conception of time as linear and irreversible and space as an empty container within which movement occurs. We are reminded of Benedict Anderson’s application of Walter Benjamin’s “empty, homogenous time” to the nation.³ Post-Newtonian cosmogony does not seem to have significantly affected the worldview of global political actors or of mainstream IR scholarship beyond the operative principle of the disenchantment of the world.

The Enlightenment was, like all powerful historical developments, a complex one with important alternative currents – such as Spinoza’s monism or Humean skepticism – that challenged some of the cosmological underpinnings. Moreover, as Katzenstein shows, quantum physics and evolutionary complexity cannot be seen to operate within this paradigm.⁴ Most of all, the bulk of the world’s population can scarcely be said to subscribe to such a disenchanted cosmology. Yet the alternatives have not yet figured as a major force in world politics. For much of the social sciences, and especially for the major actors in world politics, the

² Chapter 8, this volume. ³ Anderson 1991. ⁴ Chapter 1, this volume.

cosmology bequeathed by the Enlightenment remains the hegemonic doxa of our time.

Arguably, the greatest complexity arises when we consider the conception of human destiny. The optimistic view of human progress celebrated by Enlightenment thinkers was subject to a more pessimistic view in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, represented in scholarship – perhaps iconically – by Max Weber’s recognition that science could no longer be universal but would have to yield ground to the determination of ultimate values by forces beyond rationality, by a certain polytheistic re-enchantment. “Fate, and certainly not ‘science,’ holds sway over these gods and their struggles. One can only understand what the godhead is for the one order or for the other, or better, what godhead is in the one or in the other order.”⁵ In other words, rationalization cannot overcome the politicization – beyond individualization – of values.

The philosophical deflation of the optimistic stance reached a peak toward the end of World War I – Weber’s speech “Science as a Vocation” was penned in 1917 – when thinkers around the world railed against the barbarous consequences of modern technological civilization. The roughly simultaneous advent of relativity theory and quantum mechanics also displaced Newtonian science as the reigning paradigm within scientific and philosophical circles. But even as the moral and cosmological foundations of the Newtonian Enlightenment project begins to come apart, conventional knowledge of world leaders and mainstream social sciences continues to function within that paradigm. Just as most of the world continues to follow a cosmology founded on enchantment, so too do world politics and its scholarship follow a paradigm that may be out of synch with further advances in scientific philosophy. At the same time, let us remind ourselves that cosmologies are themselves chartings through unknowable planetary processes.

If we take the Newtonian Enlightenment project to be the cosmology of modernity, I view the world order that derives from – and is legitimated by – such a cosmology to be the evolving Westphalian–Vatellian–UN order as, perhaps, what Carl Schmitt called the European *nomos*.⁶ This world order has been cultivated as a garden, patchily and erratically over the centuries, keeping at bay the ever-encroaching jungle both from within and without. The relationship between Enlightenment cosmology and the world order and world politics is mediated by an epistemic engine.

⁵ Weber 1918: 15; see also Weber 2004: 23 for a different wording of the translation.

⁶ Schmitt 1976.

I draw the category of the episteme from structuralist and post-structuralist ideas, but add the term “engine” to denote its dynamic and circulatory temporality. By circulatory I don’t mean circular, but a process whereby not all aspects of the nation-form are equally adopted but are successively adapted and recirculated. The epistemic engine is structured by conventional economic and political power driven by accumulation strategies and state territorialization following Arrighi’s diagnosis that global capitalism is made possible “by the capture of mobile capital for territorial and population control, and the control of territories and people for the purposes of mobile capital.”⁷ At the same time, the epistemic engine embeds Foucauldian forms of power within knowledge and as knowledge (power/knowledge). Foucault’s notion of the episteme is the “apparatus” or “regime” which governs the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as acceptable knowledge – the conditions of possibility.⁸ We might say that it is this epistemic dimension of modern (secular) cosmology that works to bracket religious and nature-centric views from occupying center-stage in the world order.⁹

How might we grasp the vehicle or vector by which the episteme circulates and functions globally? I suggest that the vector is none other than the nation, or, more precisely, the nation-form.¹⁰ The nation is the epistemic engine that powers the circulation of the cosmology embedded in world-views and generates the legitimacy of the world order. The nation-form embeds the relatively durable ideas of popular sovereignty, militarized territoriality, and Enlightenment progress. Temporally, it is expressed in a linear and teleological history of self-same subject which realizes its glory through struggle and competition. The Subject is exemplified in the Spartan song “We are who you were, we will be who you are.”¹¹ The nation is able thus to reconcile its requirement for a timeless essence (to claim territory and sovereignty) while promising progressive change. As the ur-form of all identity politics, the foundational sense of the Self in nationalism requires a strong sense of the Other, and under certain circumstances, like the present, flares up with extraordinary virulence.

There is an isomorphism, and perhaps homology due to shared ancestry, between this conception of the nation and the individual and methodological individualism discussed by Henry Nau in this volume.¹² While

⁷ Arrighi 1994: 32–33. ⁸ Foucault 1980: 197, 109–15.

⁹ Arguably, we can think of Newtonian cosmology as a worldview that acquires a doxic status – at least in geopolitics – through the dominant institutions of power and knowledge production.

¹⁰ For “nation-form,” see Balibar 1991. ¹¹ Cited in Renan 1990: 19.

¹² See Chapter 6.

Enlightenment liberalism enshrined individualism as a value through notions of equality and inalienable rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” the rights-bearing individual also came to be the model of the subject or agent in society. This individual is abstracted from the processual relationships through which identity evolves. Although Weber sought to distinguish individualism as a value from the abstracted idea of methodological individualism as the model of rational human action, the latter presupposes an ontological and normative individualism as a prerequisite of sociology.¹³

The point I want to make here is not about the rationality of individual action, but the transfer of this mode of individualization to transform a society into the singular collective of the nation. Note that Article III of the French Revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen deposits the ultimate right – of sovereignty – hemming all others, in the Nation. Since then, the rights of “nations” over two and half centuries may well have been asserted more than the rights of individuals. The presumption of so much IR work that world politics is conducted by personified nations reflects this kind of methodologically individuated nationalism and reproduces the engine of the nation-form.

The epistemic engine, grounded in the cosmological dualism between subject (human) and object (nonhuman/nature), is propelled by the goal of conquering nature. Historically described as “progress,” the goal is to be achieved within the nation largely in competition with other nations over the control of global resources. The engine references both the material and the epistemic. It absorbs and reproduces Enlightenment axioms; it thus allows the unlimited consumption of energy and nature while discharging its exhaust on environment and society. Note that the history of twentieth-century socialism reveals that it was not only capitalism but the Enlightenment idea of the progressive mastery of nature that drives increasing control over nature.

The circulation of the nation-form is equally propelled by notions of competitive efficiency – in the manner of contemporary corporate firms – learning, copying, adapting, and stealing from nations that are more successful in the productivity of its population and in garnering global resources. The history of the twentieth century in Asia is one of the overhaul of older empires and polities to build nations because it seemed to them to be the only means of resisting imperialist competition and domination. They could only lick ’em by joining them. In the process, the epistemic engine has generated a runaway global technosphere with cascading consequences and counterfinalities described herein.

¹³ Weiss 2015: 228.

Nations are also interdependent for economic and other purposes, and rules are created to save them from mutual destruction (as almost happened during the two world wars). The Westphalian–Vatellian system, the League of Nations, and the United Nations have been tasked with maintaining those rules and protocols. This nation-state system that frames the world order sustains the nation-form, which is a condition of political participation. Of course, the interests of individual and groups of powerful nations can and do supersede those rules.

While the nation-form perhaps dates to the French and American revolutions, it also has European roots in what Carl Schmitt called the “*nomos*”: a long-durée historical conception of the spatial, political, and juridical principles and rules of a political community governing land appropriation (including by conquest), division, and distribution.¹⁴ The *nomos* was adapted from Greek and Christian conceptions, but its global significance arose from its refiguration as a project of order and domination after the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia.

For Schmitt, the *nomos* refers to the interstate system organized in Europe, which served at once as the anchor of and the blueprint for modern international law. By bracketing certain spaces of war and domination between these powers, it sought to regulate relations among the European states. It represented the means to contain this violence from becoming anarchic, as, for instance, through the Treaty of Tordesillas.¹⁵ As a doctrine that only applied to European lands, the *nomos* also enabled these states to dominate, occupy, and ravage the people, the resources, and the open seas beyond the European *nomos*. Schmitt remained avowedly Eurocentric in *Nomos of the Earth*, published in 1950, mourning the loss of its European character as it was being overtaken by America and the United Nations.¹⁶

The nation-form of the epistemic engine drives the world order as it recruits and organizes the different forces and factors making the modern world. Its leaders and representatives pursue their goals through modes of knowledge whose conditions of possibility are governed by the ontology and epistemology of the Enlightenment and, more particularly, the Newtonian worldview. What is the relationship between other worldviews and the epistemic engine? Katzenstein draws on Dilthey to describe a worldview as a combination of ideas, values, faith, dispositions, morals, and, not least, historical and lived experience.¹⁷ In this volume, Tim Byrnes and Michael Barnett make a strong case for showing how religious worldviews shape world politics.¹⁸ Worldviews are clearly also of great

¹⁴ Schmitt 1976: ch 4. ¹⁵ Reilly 2009: 174–75.

¹⁶ Schmitt 1976: 51–52, 87–88. Blanco and Valle 2014: 7–8. ¹⁷ Chapter 1, this volume.

¹⁸ Chapter 9 and Chapter 5 in this volume, respectively.

significance to human concerns and political priorities and are not reducible to other imperatives. I argue that since the epistemological engine is hegemonic (not totalistic) and simultaneously drives the episteme and the levers of the global political economy (such as the IMF, the WHO, the WTO, the US military, and financial corporations), worldviews tend to be expressed in world politics in negotiation with or through the filter of the hegemonic engine.

There has been a proliferation of nonstate actors on the global stage and media in the last few decades. The recent movement of young people, frequently below the age threshold of citizenship, protesting the inactivity of world leaders regarding climate change, may well represent such an intervention based on their collective experiences and expectations. To be sure, they too have to rely on the stage of world politics underwritten by the epistemic engine to have their voices heard. I think here of the young Greta Thunberg, whose career trajectory we might follow. In the last section of the chapter I will assess the possible pathways whereby social movements, old and new, seek to forge a practical vision for a new order.

To date, no nation has been able to challenge or function successfully outside the prescriptive nation-form, which involves among its central features territoriality, the self–other binary, progress, competition, and the pursuit of increasing control over natural forces. The Panchashila movement of the decolonizing nations presented a brief flash of alternative visions of a new order, but rapidly gave way to territorial and identitarian competition. To be sure, its religious and historical experience and vision has made the Islamic Republic of Iran an outlier in the Enlightenment-based epistemic engine, but Iran conforms to the principal precepts of the territorial identitarian state, including a competitive modernization agenda. The same could be said of Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps the imperial Chinese world order, which emerged from a different cosmology and functioned in a radically different way from the Newtonian world of politics, represented the most powerful alternative since the rise of the Western order. I now turn to it and its successor state, the People's Republic of China.

7.2 The World Orders of Imperial and Contemporary China

The world order of late imperial China (circa tenth–nineteenth centuries) was another kind of garden that it is difficult to characterize, in significant part because our terminology is suffused by the contemporary assumptions of international relations. This order represented a complex set of Chinese imperial tribute practices which I treat as a Wittgensteinian “language game” that is distinguished from the idea of a system which

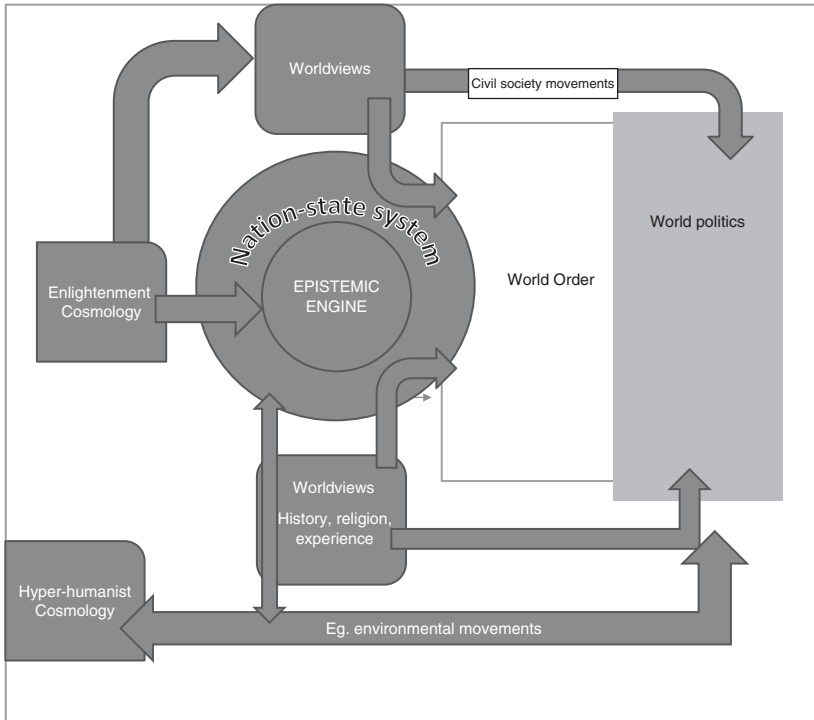


Figure 7.1 Conceptual map of cosmologies, worldviews and world politics

presupposes rules, abstract principles, and essences.¹⁹ Language games are not well-bounded systems constituted by a single principle or doctrine – say, of sovereignty or the nation-form – but open-ended. Norms, rituals, and codes (which are learned) are provisional, capacious, and flexible.

The Qing imperial order was not one of theoretically equal states, but a paternalistic, hierarchical order, principally based on tribute. The Westphalian system was formulated theoretically on equality and noninterference between *recognized* states; in practice, these states were highly intrusive in each other's affairs, territorially competitive, and globally expansive. Through Schmitt's *Nomos*, we see that with the discovery of the Americas, the jurisdiction of European international law produced an extra-European frontier which became the outside – a space of exception for their European masters. Imperial Chinese rulers were largely

¹⁹ Wittgenstein 2009: §6, 23, 65 and passim; Biletzki and Matar 2020.

uninterested in ruling or controlling spaces beyond the imperial frontiers, whether for accumulation, conversion, or political power.

In the imperial Chinese rhetoric, tribute, paid by states and communities peripheral to China, was an expression of the subordination of these groups to the imperial state. In return, the emperor bestowed gifts – including the all-important license to trade – upon the tribute bearers. In practice, it represented a wider web that did not involve merely the relationship between China and the tribute bearer, but a host of “several other lesser or satellite tribute relationships not directly concerning China and forming a considerably more complex system of reciprocal relationships.”²⁰ Through most of the second millennium, trade became the most prominent feature of the tribute system.

Different games do not have the common essence of “games” but are recognizable by *family resemblances* of overlapping codes and practices. Thus, for instance, when the Qing emperors performed the roles of both the Bodhisattva Manjusri as well as the patron who descends to meet his spiritual mentor, the Dalai Lama, half-way, the Tibetans and Qing were engaged in overlapping language games (the ambiguity of which would become problematic in a different epistemic context of sovereign states). All this is, of course, different from his role as the Son of Heaven or having treaties signed on his behalf (such as the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, which approached the principle of Westphalian sovereignty). We may think of the East Asian tribute order as a complex language game which incorporated various modes of ritual and other performative procedures with diverse and changing roles for the players. For instance, the Chinese Song dynasty (tenth–twelfth centuries) also had to deliver large values of tribute to the Khitan (Liao) and the Tanggut (Xi Xia), although it profited more from its trade surpluses with these states.²¹

Military violence was not absent. Most famously, the Ming naval expeditions led by Admiral Zheng He in the first third of the fifteenth century, forced tribute, captured slaves and even a king in Sri Lanka in a bid to demonstrate the power of the Chinese emperor. However, such military authority over the sea route was not maintained beyond a brief window in the fifteenth century. Nor did China control the land routes over Central Asia. Rather, one might say that Chinese military power outside the empire was mostly an equilibrating operation. Expeditions were undertaken as punitive measures against bordering states, including Korea, or tribes who often harassed and threatened the empire at its periphery. For example, during the eighteenth century, the Burmese Konbaung state conducted raids along the southwestern frontier. This

²⁰ Hamashita 1994: 92. ²¹ Shiba 1983: 98.

prompted several punitive military expeditions, with mixed results. Military campaigns were expensive and were designed principally to stabilize the tribute order and manage the bordering states, rather than for colonial and territorial expansion beyond the empire.²²

The contemporary Chinese state operates under the obviously very different conditions of capitalism, nationalism, and statism. At the same time, its own historical narrative and rhetoric has been deeply mindful of the violence and plunder wreaked by imperialist nation-states. In recent years, it has also glorified its historical relations with neighboring states and kingdoms as an alternative order, conducted harmoniously under the ideals of *tianxia* (all under heaven) and *wangdao* (the kingly way). This rhetoric of harmony or “win–win” has been extended to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) publicized with much fanfare as the revival of the landed and maritime Silk Roads connecting China with the world. To what extent does the historical experience and rhetoric of China – its worldview – challenge the world order undergirded by the epistemic engine? Does it merely replace or supplement one great power with another?

The most publicized scholarly position on the relevance of *tianxia*, related to the tribute order, to the contemporary world order has been developed by the philosopher Zhao Tingyang. Historically, he argues the *tianxia* worldview emerged in the transition from the Shang to the Zhou at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. A limited power that succeeded a much larger empire, the Zhou devised the worldview to control the larger entity by making global politics a priority over the local. As such, it was a strategic act that eventuated in a long peace governed by a global worldview harmonizing differences in the world.²³

The contemporary extension of the *tianxia* model would involve a “world institution” controlling a larger territory and military force than that controlled by the autonomous substates. These substates will be independent in most respects, except in their legitimacy and obligations for which they depend on the recognition of the world institution. Rather than being based on force and self-interest, the cultural empire would use ritual as a means to limit the self and its interests. *Tianxia* is a hierarchical worldview which prioritizes order over freedom, elite governance over democracy, and the superior political institution over the lower levels.²⁴

The anthropologist Wang Mingming presents us with a different view of *tianxia*, which he argues cannot be grasped in a singular manner. He differentiates the historical role of *tianxia* before and after the first

²² Zhou 2011: 172. ²³ Zhao 2009: 6–8. ²⁴ Zhao 2009: 11–18.

unification of China by the Qin in 221 BCE. In the classical pre-Qin period, *tianxia* represented a religious cosmology without strict demarcation of the human, natural, and divine order. *Tianxia* encompassed the different kingdoms or *guo* according to a theory of concentric circles around a cosmic-moral core of closeness to a transcendent Heaven. The Zhou emperor himself, as the Son of Heaven, was subordinated to Heaven in the name of *tianxia*, and order was sustained by a reciprocity of ritualized relationships within this concentric world.²⁵

After the imperial unification, Wang argues that *tianxia* cosmology became subordinated to the centralized imperial state (*guo*), and the earlier distinction between the Zhou state and the realm of *tianxia* began to disappear as *tianxia* became effectively a project of imperial order and control. Imperial *tianxia* was also creatively deployed to create a Sino-centric order of hierarchy in the empire and superiority to manage foreign tributaries and vassals, as described earlier. Access to the transcendent power of Heaven became increasingly monopolized by the imperial center through its elaborate and synchronized system of official sacrifices and rituals in authorized ceremonial centers through the world. The concept of “all under Heaven” now became manifested in the idealized perfect union between Heaven and Earth by the central role of the Son of Heaven in it.²⁶

While Zhao acknowledges that the post-Qin ideal of *tianxia* is transformed, his conception still offers a top-down method of political ordering as the essence of the *tianxia* system. Zhao believes that political leadership must emanate at the highest level – the *tianxia* political institution – which must then be “transposed” to the lower levels (how the top controls the bottom is not clear) and not vice versa. This is a thus a descending order from “all under heaven” to nation-states to families. At the same time as political order or control descends, an ethical order ascends from families to states to *tianxia*. Thus, this results in a relationship of mutual justification, but would presumably also act as the system of mutual checks.²⁷

I do not find this model to be a suitable alternative. Do we not presuppose a highly idealized conception of humanity and a literalist reading of rhetoric if we think that ritual-familial order alone will restrain the politically superior to act benevolently? If it did work well in the Zhou, we will need to consider a multiplicity of factors, including kinship ties, a differentiated control of resources, and a complex balance of power. With regard to the contemporary utilization of *tianxia*, it seems rather odd to be applying an ancient system quite so mechanically to an entirely

²⁵ Wang 2012: 343–47. ²⁶ Wang 2012: 351–54. ²⁷ Zhao 2006: 33.

changed world. Moreover, since the political system is not based upon democratically elected leaders, we don't know how world government will be constituted. Yet, it may not be unreasonable to see in it strong elements of a future Chinese-dominated world order.

The other, more recent historical past is the modern Chinese revolutionary experience. The communist revolution in China produced a mighty party-state and a revolutionary sense of purpose and agency that not only defied the world order but also broke away early from Soviet dependence and became a nuclear power by 1964. The People's Republic of China was not represented in the United Nations until 1971. But even as its worldview challenged the world order of capitalist states, it remained a child of Enlightenment modernity and was bound in myriad ways to the epistemic engine of the nation-form. Particularly evident, these bonds were the imperative to conquer nature for human ends and, more complexly, the self-other form of national identity.

Communist ideology and Maoist thought were committed to the liberation of the world, but the ideology of class conflict and the imperatives of state power (particularly in a hostile world) converted class identity into a nationalist one. To be sure, the Maoist revolution always had a strong nationalist component, but in this worldview the nation was seen as a necessary step toward a nationless and classless communist utopia. During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese nation came to be seen as the only revolutionary proletarian nation (barring Albania) confronted by bourgeois and revisionist nations around the world. Class and nation became one. Today, of course, as communist ideology has ebbed in China, nationalism has become the overwhelming form of identity expression in China.

Let us consider the rise of China, a nonliberal, authoritarian state power, to superpower status in the world order. I do not believe that China will necessarily erode the cosmological foundations of Enlightenment modernity. Enlightenment thought has always contained a significant strain of nondemocratic thought. Rooted in rationality, science, the ideal of progress, natural law, human rights, and humanitarianism, the Enlightenment was characterized just as much by what one author calls "proto-totalitarian" ideas of politics and governance as by what we would today call liberalism and individual rights. The possibility of rationally channeling and even coercing humans to follow scientific laws of behavior (eg. Rousseau's *morale sensitive*) encouraged many continental Enlightenment thinkers to support enlightened despotism.²⁸ The

²⁸ Crocker 1985: 225.

ideas of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Voltaire, as well as John Adams and James Madison, also shaped the Enlightenment project.

Many Chinese thinkers look to this tradition, and particularly to the more recent ideas of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, to trace their affiliation with a nonliberal Enlightenment project.²⁹ Chinese thinkers are also attracted to Joseph Nye's idea of soft power or a "win-win" strategy of engaging the world. These ideas would be quite compatible with Zhao's proposed blueprint of *tianxia*, and one could conceive of a Chinese world order that was formed from a mix of authoritarian Enlightenment rationality with an affective – if not quite fictive kinship – model of hierarchical loyalty and reciprocity. We do not have space here to explore such a strategic mission, but I will undertake a brief analysis of BRI, which may be viewed as a practical expression of the worldview of the Chinese state possibly informed by its historical experiences.³⁰

As is well known, BRI represents a massive expansion of Chinese economic investments in infrastructure partnerships, including high-speed railroads, telecommunications, new ports, energy cooperation, and, indeed, the technosphere. Chinese investments abroad – whether state-owned or private – have been driven by the search for outlets for excess capital, labor, and older, especially coal-mining, technology within China. The investments also tend to be extractive and energy hungry. Many countries engage with the BRI because they require capital for infrastructure development not easily available to them. Moreover, they can also partake of advanced digital technologies such as 5G, Beidou, the Chinese geophysical positioning system, and other technology connected with the Digital Silk Road that is accompanying infrastructure building.

The BRI is publicized as inspired by principles of harmony and authority that are noncontentious and not liberal. Chinese state policies follow the Panchashila principles of noninterference in the internal matters of sovereign states. Hence, in its dealings with governments in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, it responds to the kind of regime that is operative. Where civil society groups are well developed, the Chinese representatives *can* be responsive to demands made by them. Where civil society is weak, Chinese investors are willing to deal with governments regardless of issues of transparency and corruption. A Chinese rhetoric of affective, historical relations and loyalty – including some instances of debt forgiveness – are very much in evidence in these relationships.

While there are functions and dimensions of the BRI that are useful and palatable to the countries engaged with the projects, BRI projects and contracts are not subject to the protocols and procedures of Western

²⁹ Marchal et al. 2017. ³⁰ For a fuller analysis, see Duara 2019.

principles of international commercial contract and legal regimes. BRI policies privilege development and order at the expense of transparency and the rights of people. “Asian-style mediation” and customized arbitration mechanisms are preferred. This modality, given the vast scale of BRI projects (more than 300 billion US dollars already invested) and the complexities of Chinese decision-makers, goals, and interests, has generated tensions and problems not only in host societies but also for the Chinese side in the contemporary world. I identify three sets of issues that represent fields of power and contestation.

The first of these is debt. African countries’ debt to Chinese loans and investments is more than \$140 billion, and a similar amount is owed by Latin American and Caribbean countries. The debt of Asian countries is probably higher still; Sri Lanka’s inability to repay China the high costs of constructing the Hambantota port has led to the leasing of the port to a Chinese company for 99 years. While many Chinese investments are productive, the Center for Global Development’s report concluded that eight countries are at risk of debt distress on the basis of available data on debt-to-GDP ratios.³¹ Although debtor countries certainly suffer, the creditor countries also bear considerable pressure from resistance and instabilities in the debtor countries and pressure from international agencies.³² More recently, China has had to redraft many BRI contracts under terms less favorable to it, and will presumably confront more severe problems due to the current COVID-19 crisis.

The second is the problem of environmental degradation and distress. Between 2014 and 2017, six Chinese banks participated in US\$143 billion worth of syndicated loans to the BRI region’s energy and transportation sectors. Almost three-quarters of the total volume of this finance went to the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries.³³ While China has recently emerged as a leader in the production of renewable energy, and still more recently in environmental conservation, it is doing so by outsourcing its natural resource requirements. Civil society movements in many parts of the globe are responding by applying pressure on their governments and the projects.

Finally, there is the matter of “digital power.” Artificial Intelligence, 5G networks of intermechanical communication and action, sophisticated geo-satellite navigation equipment, and new ways of combining surveillance technology with social credit systems are part of this digital power. To be sure, all major powers are developing digital technology for military purposes. However, China is a global leader in civil surveillance

³¹ Hurley et al. 2018; Takata 2019. ³² Ghoshal and Miller 2019.

³³ Zhou et al. 2018: 12–13.

and has been selling its pioneering technology to authoritarian regimes abroad, who will seek to use it to deter popular movements against unpopular projects.³⁴

What does this highly provisional assessment of the BRI tell us about China as the most prominent global power with an alternative, nonliberal worldview? First, by provisioning development finance to countries disregarded by the West, it demonstrates anti-imperialist solidarity. Just as important is the rhetoric of Silk Road historical and affective ties. However, I believe that, as a capitalist and firmly nationalist power, it is deeply implicated in the epistemic engine and invested in the nation-state system. As such, it also faces challenges from the nationalisms of states and/or their populations. But the dimension that could most destabilize the global order is the state's capacity of digital power to surveil, disrupt, and hijack civil society. This has profound consequences not only for the world order, but also on the channels through which civil society seeks to bring about a more just worldview based on an alternative cosmology. In my view, while a Chinese world order could mitigate some and exacerbate other features of the Enlightenment, it appears to be too highly invested in the epistemic engine to be able to develop a more capacious alternative order.

We do not know what channels another worldview might give us to address our deepest problems, but the channel of social activism – with all its faults – is one we know. At same time, the present epistemic engine – whether liberal or not – is ill-equipped to address the crisis of the Anthropocene – the greatest challenge human society has known.

7.3 Oceanic Temporality and Alternative Worldviews

Enlightenment cosmology may have nurtured orderly gardens so humans may develop their potential ultimately, even universally. But the epistemological engine that conditions this order fueled by strategies of accumulation, appropriation, and creative destruction has produced counterfinalities – and not only through fossil-fuel consumption – of an order that human society as a whole has perhaps not witnessed before. According to some, it has led to an autonomous global “technosphere” comprised of human and technological systems, including infrastructure, transportation, communications, power production, financial networks, and bureaucracies, to name a few.³⁵ The epistemic engine drives this accelerating technosphere at a pace where it is not human agency that serves as a brake, but rather pandemics such the current COVID-19

³⁴ Polyakova et al. 2019. ³⁵ Haff 2019.

outbreak, and, more certainly, the climate crisis that is ravaging the planet.

If the prevalent cosmology has played a major role in this global crisis, it is not the metaphor of the jungle but that of the ocean that is more compelling. The raging oceans today incarnate the unknowable planetary processes that challenge our cosmology. We can say that this unknowability is swelled by cascading counterfinalities of our interventions. Jean-Paul Sartre described counterfinalities thus: “*in and through* labour Nature becomes both a new source of tools and a new threat. In being realized, human ends define a field of counter-finality around themselves.”³⁶ We have possibly tamed the jungle sufficiently, so that it appears in pockets, patches, and periodic conflagrations. Not so the ocean, which through ocean-atmospheric activity has the capacity to destroy the conditions of life as we know it.

Elsewhere I have tried to show that oceanic and ocean-atmospheric flows and circulations represent a paradigm for natural and even historical processes. For most of human history, conceptions of time were continuous with natural flows or, at least, did not severely disrupt the designs of natural flows. At a fundamental level the historical process engaging humans is also natural. Intertemporal connections and communication among humans both resemble and are indissolubly linked with other beings – organic and inorganic.³⁷

Biological organisms are constantly registering and responding to environmental changes. The Star Moss Cam is a sensor technology that does not merely sense mosses over time but observes how the moss itself is a sensor that is detecting and responding to changes in the environment – to which humans have contributed.³⁸ More directly, Timothy LeCain describes how ecologically careful breeding of silkworms in Japan and cattle in Montana as coevolution between creature and human over generations were destroyed by arsenic released from modern copper mining in both areas.³⁹ Intentional processes generate other processes. Some die away or confluence with other generative processes, others produce deadly counterfinalities.

Communities more directly dependent on nature developed cosmologies that were more attuned to natural patterns even in large-scale empires such as the pre-modern Chinese or Indian polities. Gargantuan projects of imperial ambition such as the Great Wall of China still followed natural contours seeking to demarcate the steppe from the sown. To be sure, these ideals could not prevent their violations, but without the ideal we can scarcely hope to be sustainable. Communities that lived and

³⁶ Sartre 1976: 164. ³⁷ Duara 2021. ³⁸ Gabrys 2016: 63–64. ³⁹ LeCain 2017.

worked on the oceans, whether on coastlands or small islands, were of course more adaptable to oceanic forces. The early oceanic travelers, most famously the Polynesians, reveal how their techniques could generate great and sustainable achievements by following the movements of the oceans.

Today, we know better how oceans condition life on the terrestrial landscape. The route of the Gulf Stream explains why Canada's east coast is frozen much of the winter whereas England's is not, and why Western European shores, including the Norwegian coast, are milder than similar latitudes to the East and West.⁴⁰ The slowing of the thermohaline, deep-ocean conveyor belt due to polar ice melt is now contributing to colder European winters.⁴¹ Asian agriculture remains heavily dependent on the monsoon rains. Scientists have reported that the monsoons in Asia and Africa appear to correlate with reversals in the pressure gradient across the Pacific Ocean. Accelerated global climate change has destabilized the monsoon, and there are dire predictions of desertification across south and west Asia.⁴²

Well into the twentieth century, Carl Schmitt believed that the European *nomos* could not be conceived to extend over the oceans. After four centuries of deep-sea navigation, Schmitt continued to describe the "antithesis of land and sea as an antithesis of diverse spatial orders."⁴³ In contrast to the territorial sovereignty over land, the sea was free: "It could be freely exploited by all states . . . it had no borders and was open. Naturally, it was decisive that the freedom of the sea also meant the freedom to pursue wars."⁴⁴ In other words, the seas were beyond the pale of civilization.

Even if it was beyond the pale, the bloody contests on the ocean not only produced conquest and colonies, but also underwrote conceptions of sovereignty in Europe. In this new watery wilderness, pirates and navies were difficult to distinguish. Privateers such as Sir Francis Drake commanded warships in the service of the Queen of England. One's status on the seas depended on the backing of power. Laurel Benton has suggested that as royal commission holders, adventurers, and pirates staked claims over territories and waters in the New World and in Africa and Asia against other European claimants, they made sovereignty claims in the name of the king in legal courts in Europe, thus circling back to consolidate conceptions of sovereignty in the new order.⁴⁵

Unsurprisingly, the conception of history as linear and tunneled, and of a progressing Subject, whether religious, imperial, or ultimately national,

⁴⁰ Miaschi 2017. ⁴¹ Lozier 2010. ⁴² Amrith 2019. ⁴³ Schmitt 1976: 54

⁴⁴ Schmitt 1976: 179, 352. See also Raschke 2019. ⁴⁵ Benton 2010: 280–81.

arose roughly simultaneously with Newtonian cosmology and growing confidence about oceanic control toward the end of the eighteenth century. The epistemic engine concretes the process where ideas of sovereignty, overseas conquest, scientific advances, and the idea of progress coalesce.⁴⁶ The circulatory idea of the nation expressed through a roughly isomorphic historical form was picked up across much of the world by the end of the nineteenth century. Most national histories were constituted by a sequence of ancient, medieval, and modern periods, with some kind of “renaissance function” that enabled the recovery of an ancient past to join the modern. In this way, the nation was ancient or timeless while also launched on a modern progressive future. At the same, the bracketing of the medieval or the intermediate as alien, often both aesthetically and ethnically, spurred the self–other tribalism of the nation.⁴⁷

Between World Wars I and II, this Eurocentric *nomos* of the earth ended. In the Panama Declaration of 1939, the United States was the first to declare its specific security zone extending 300 nautical miles into the Atlantic and the Pacific. The theorist of Lebensraum, Friedrich Ratzel, declared that space had protruded into the expanse and evenness of the sea. Technological developments such as submarines and air-power added to the spatialization or, as we say today, the “territorialization” of the oceans and have robbed it of its elemental character.⁴⁸ Although Schmitt ends his inquiry with the hope of a new global *nomos*, the thrust of his final chapter, written during the Cold War, was not promising.

If oceanic violence was restricted mainly to surface waters and sea-catch until the end of the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century and our present time humans are penetrating the volume and depth of the ocean, leaving us with a predictable disaster scenario. The colonization of the ocean over the last hundred years or so has been an industrial and technological colonization, battering it with massive commercial traffic and fishing, nuclear testing, constant bombardment for oil and gas explorations, and militarized island buildings, among other invasions. Not least, it is being strangled as the dumpsite of the terrestrial planet.

Meanwhile, the epistemic engine has continued to propel the territorialization of the ocean. In 1982, the majority of the nations agreed on a nation’s extension of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to 200 nautical

⁴⁶ Concrecence is the process philosopher A. N. Whitehead’s term for actual entities and actual occasions (whether an electron or any other happening) to produce the “novel togetherness.” Concrecence *is* the process of growing together into a unified perspective on its immediate past. Note that subjects in process philosophy become objectified for other subjects (Whitehead 1979: 21, 31, 211–12).

⁴⁷ Duara 1995, 2015. ⁴⁸ Schmitt 1976: 284.

miles (nm). It has been estimated that should every coastal state make this national jurisdictional claim, it would cover 43 million square nautical miles, or approximately 41 percent of the oceanic area. Not satisfied with this, coastal states demanded that EEZ of 200 nm be extended from the edge of the coastal state's continental shelf, leading to further jurisdictional cover. Not only is this new edge difficult to measure, the extensions have also led to overlapping national claims generating potential and real conflicts.⁴⁹ Other principles evoked by the states, such as the (contestable) claims of "historical" maritime jurisdiction, make the fraught situation more warlike. The contemporary cases of China in the South China Sea and Russia in the Arctic Circle are simply the most prominent of these.

The hubris that human activity can destroy, negate, and transcend the medium of its sustenance is the mad thought that we face. The modern idea of the conquest of nature and the institutionalized and technological modes of exhausting it are unprecedented. Whether or not human agency can prevent the "slow death" facing much biotic life on the planet, it is not likely to happen without radical changes in the epistemic engine and the cosmology that have contributed significantly to it. Indeed, adaptations and changes to the cosmology which are perhaps not intrinsically impossible are made much more difficult by the entrenchment of the epistemic engine.

Over recent decades there has been considerable civil society activism regarding the environment that is converging – albeit from radically different and even conflicting perspectives and interest – upon a holistic philosophical attitude that rejects the God–world, subject–object, human–nature dualistic assumptions of the Enlightenment project. These movements represent widely different communities and civic associations, from the world's marginalized precariate whose livelihood is most directly threatened by climate change, to modern civic, religious, and scientific groups and agencies committed to environmental protection and justice. Forest dwellers, indigenous peoples, small island societies, and threatened rural communities, among others, often turn to their more holistic cosmologies and religious resources and leaders to resist corporate and state expropriation of the commons upon which they depend. They are often joined by – or coalesce with – NGOs and other civic groups of professionals, scientists, and various local and transnational agencies in the effort to protect the environment. While this is a weak historical force, it is poised on something globally significant.

⁴⁹ Schofield 2012.

I have argued that this coalescence converges on a loose notion of the sacrality of nature with social, discursive, and legal underpinnings. While for many of the threatened subaltern communities this sacrality is part of the ecology of life and livelihood, for the more disenchanting moderns, the sacrality of nature is expressed through the notion of legal protection as the “common heritage of humankind.” Legislation and judicial decisions of this kind have often been initiated, advocated, and pushed through by civic groups. I call these natural spaces sacred because they represent an *inviolability* arising from the elemental urge to protect the sources of life. There are more than 160,000 legally protected areas in the world (national and international), including almost 1,000 World Heritage sites (cultural and natural), which cover over 12 percent of the land area of the world. On several occasions, these expressions have begun to converge – for instance, in the Eastern Himalayas protected zone in Yunnan, which is the home of many minority groups as well as the cradle of NGO activism in China. In India, New Zealand, and Ecuador, to name just a few countries, indigenous communities have initiated movements to protect the commons that have succeeded in securing legal “rights of nature” sanctioned by the highest courts in the land.⁵⁰

As is evident, this conception of sacred nature mobilizing older conceptions, fragments, and inventions is an *emergent* one and depends to a considerable degree on the contemporary framework of the epistemic engine. Not only does it depend on national and transnational legal institutions, it also mobilizes the classic Enlightenment ideal of rights. What we find, and what I believe, is that we cannot ignore the past to build the future. Whitehead tells us “The novel entity is at once the together of the ‘many’ which it finds, and also it is one among the disjunctive ‘many’ that it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively, among the many entities which it synthesizes. The many become one and are increased by one.”⁵¹ Hence, it is necessary to join the most ethically defensible elements of Enlightenment cosmology with the alternative futuristic visions to arrive at the novel entity.

To be sure, this is easier said than done. There are debates among these groups over whether the argument of rights negates the religious and ethical worldviews of many groups in the world. One such debate is reported from the Buddhist groups in Taiwan, and particularly in the view of the philosopher-nun Shih Chao-hwei. For Venerable Shih, the most fundamental principle of environmental conservation is the equality of *all* life because all life is interdependent (dependent arising) and because suffering, not necessarily “rights” reasoning, is the standard for

⁵⁰ Duara 2015: 266–287. ⁵¹ Whitehead 1979: 21.

ethical consideration.⁵² Empathy and compassion for suffering is a basic element of many religions, not least in the figure of Christ. Arguably, it is (or can be) the ethical baseline for worldviews.

However, Venerable Shih's worldview about all sentient life is not shared by the indigenous hunter communities in Taiwan. The latter have objected to the Wildlife Protection law, which Buddhist groups have supported, on the basis of their *human* rights. Nonetheless, the indigenous groups continue to be interested in natural and environmental rights. Noting that rights of nature have been legislated and implemented in several parts of the world, Jeffrey Nicolaisen suggests that a space of agreement or compromise between the two groups and their political representatives has opened up.⁵³ A fundamental task for the environmental, civil rights, and religious groups is to generate a sustainable planet by mediating between the biocentric and anthropocentric views.

It is clear that those worldviews and historical cosmologies invoked to create an alternative world will likely need to pass through the channels of the epistemic engine. To what extent can the rights discourse be turned against some of the most fundamental functions that have made it the privileged instrument of the engine – that is, private property rights and sovereign rights? And if it can, can the civic activists who are the most important agents of its transformation play the role when their human – individual and collective – rights are weakened or abolished? In the end, there is work to be done on both ends: protecting human rights, and protecting our world where it is endangered by the very engine of these rights. Perhaps this is the *multiverse* that we will have to learn to work in.

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⁵² Shih 2014. ⁵³ Nicolaisen 2020.

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