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A new crisis of legitimation and the brutalization of geo-social conflicts
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The ideal of freedom in the Anthropocene: A new crisis of legitimation and the brutalization of geo-social conflicts

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Abstract
Modern social orders are legitimized by the ideal of freedom. Most conceptions of this ideal are theorized against the backdrop of nature understood as governed by its own laws beyond the realm of the social. However, such an understanding of nature is now being challenged by the ‘Anthropocene’ hypothesis. This article investigates the consequences of this hypothesis for freedom as an ideal legitimizing social order. We begin by discussing the conception of legitimation, after which we examine three classical notions of freedom (developed by Hobbes, Kant, and Hegel), in light of the Anthropocene. Following our claim that these notions all have severe weaknesses in view of the Anthropocene, we argue that modern social orders are facing a new legitimation crisis. Such a crisis, we suggest, involves a ‘brutalization of social conflicts’, which under the conditions of the Anthropocene assumes the form of geo-social conflict.

Keywords
Anthropocene, Brutalization, Freedom, Legitimation, Social Struggles.

Introduction: Freedom, the ‘Anthropocene’, and legitimation crisis
This article investigates possible consequences of the ‘Anthropocene’ for the legitimation of modern social orders.¹ In social theory, such legitimation has been understood more or less explicitly as based on the ideal of freedom. In The Sociological Imagination, Charles Wright Mills claims that ‘[t]he values that have been the thread of classical social analysis … are freedom and reason’ (Wright Mills, 2000: 130) and Donald Levine starts his seminal article on Max Weber (and Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel) by quoting G.W.H. Hegel; ‘reason and freedom remains our principles’ (Levine 1981: 5). Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émil Durkheim were all deeply influenced by German Idealist thinkers and their understandings of freedom. This influence is seen in how the classical sociologists treated what they saw as their fundamental task: to grasp the transition from traditional to modern society. Their basic answer can be interpreted as a kind of sociologization of the philosophy of Enlightenment. Modernization is not simply to be understood as a transition from unfreedom to freedom; rather, the general claim was that the possibility of a modern social order is to be analysed as an order under the conditions of freedom. Freedom is to be seen as the basic value of modernity, and modern institutions (e.g. the market, science, democracy) can thereby only be legitimated by this ideal.

¹ With “modern”, we here primarily refer to social orders of the “western” type.
This article begins from a notion of modern legitimation based on freedom as our first point of departure. While modern conceptualizations of freedom were developed in contrast to a mechanical understanding of the laws of nature, this perception of nature is now being questioned by Earth System Science (ESS) (Lenton 2015). ESS discloses the Earth as a much more complex system consisting of waves of interactions between humans and non-humans. According to these sciences, we have entered the ‘Anthropocene’. First coined by biochemists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000), the Anthropocene hypothesis describes our transition to a new geological epoch where human civilization has become a major geological force. In the Anthropocene, geological agency is distributed to humans, an agency previously reserved for natural agents such as meteors, colliding continents, and volcanic activity (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010: 2228). The imprints of humans\(^2\) on the Earth system and its atmospheric and biospheric processes have become so significant that they have ‘become a force of Nature – and forces of Nature are those things which, by definition, are beyond the powers of humans to control!’ (Morton 2015: 220). As Jan Zalasiewicz, geologist and chair of the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission of Stratigraphy, evaluates:

The Anthropocene (...) clearly has value in giving us a perspective, against the largest canvas, of the scale and the nature of the human enterprise, and of how it intersects (‘intertwines’ now, may be a better word) with the other processes of the Earth system. (Zalasiewicz, 2015: 12)

Thus, in the Anthropocene it becomes impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between human and non-human agencies, between culture and nature. As post-colonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in a seminal text, it is no longer possible to distinguish clearly between human and natural history; instead, we ought to think about a common ‘geohistory’, where the two are inseparable (Chakrabarty 2009).

Within this framework, by entering the Anthropocene, we have entered an epoch of earthly instability. Our previous geological epoch, the ‘Holocene’,\(^3\) was the only epoch that we know for sure could sustain the living conditions of human civilization as we know it. In the Anthropocene, Man could ‘be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’ – only more literally, than Michel Foucault once so famously suggested (2002: 422). This earthly instability is illustrated by the ‘planetary boundaries’ hypothesis forwarded by other Earth System Scientists (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015). According to this hypothesis, we have crossed four out of nine planetary limits stabilizing the Earth system. One of these transgressions is climate change: rising

\(^2\) Or the imprint of some humans, as critical scholars have rightfully argued; see Castree (2014) and Moore (2015).

\(^3\) We are commonly claimed to have resided in this epoch for the last 11,000 years (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010: 2230).
temperatures, rising sea levels, drought, floods, storms, and other extreme weather events; phenomena that will only intensify in the coming century and significantly challenge the shape of contemporary societies. These paradigmatic changes call for a new understanding of modernity as a social order under the condition of freedom. In accordance with e.g. Ulrich Beck (2016), Bruno Latour (2017), and Isabelle Stengers (2015a; 2015b), we consider the Anthropocene an ‘event for social theory’ (Blok and Jensen 2019). This is our second point of departure.

This article aims to juxtapose these two points of departure with one another, building, on the one hand, on the thesis that modernity should be understood as a social order under the condition of freedom and, on the other, on the sociological significance of the Anthropocene thesis. We combine the two theses to elucidate an urgent problem of our times – the climatic mutations – in a new and fruitful way. If true that contemporary social order finds its legitimacy in the commonly shared and deeply felt value of freedom and, further, that our understandings of this value have consequences that are unsustainable in the Anthropocene perspective, then we might not only be able to interpret contemporary green activism as signs of the beginning of a fundamental legitimation crisis.\(^4\) It might also help to explain the half-heartedness of humankind’s efforts to change its way of life, despite the prospects of its own obliteration. It is perhaps not only short-minded self-interest, the ‘iron cage’ of neoliberal capitalism, and the sheer magnitude of the problem that explain our present inability to act appropriately. Perhaps even more fundamentally, it might also be our more or less conscious and internalized conceptions of worth, value and meaning, and the normative structure of our basic institutions that counter such action.\(^5\) We merge these two theses by asking: What might be the consequences of the conditions of the Anthropocene for how we theorize freedom sociologically and for freedom as the legitimation of modern social orders? As Chakrabarty noted some ten years ago, no systematic discussions of the freedom concept have incorporated the human as geological agent (2009: 208). To our knowledge, this remains the case. Some scholars have indicated the necessity of either limiting or rethinking the realm of freedom in the Anthropocene (e.g., Dibley 2012; Hamilton 2017). However, treating freedom as something unambiguous is too simple. Throughout the history of modern social thought, freedom has been understood in many different senses (Aakvaag 2013; Berlin 1969; Honneth 2014, Neuhouser 2000; Schanz 2012). Thus, what is missing is a systematic theoretical discussion of different notions of freedom in light of the Anthropocene. Only from the perspective of a

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\(^4\) While e.g. Ulrich Beck (1995) and Niklas Luhmann (1991) have previously argued that ecological crisis leads to a crisis of society in general, neither of these scholars ground their argumentation on a sophisticated theory of freedom.

\(^5\) In some ways, this brings us close to Ulrich Beck’s argument of ‘risk society’ as characterized by ‘organized irresponsibility’ (1992; 1998).
multidimensional, theoretical discussion of freedom is it possible to analyse the consequences of the Anthropocene for the legitimization of modern social order.\(^6\)

We will proceed as follows. First, we will briefly specify the concept of legitimation under modern conditions and its significance for social theory. This will support our claim that modern social order is legitimated through the ideal of freedom. Against this backdrop, we will then examine three influential modern conceptions of freedom in light of the Anthropocene: Thomas Hobbes’ negative conception, Immanuel Kant’s moral conception, and Hegel’s social conception of freedom. Despite the title of his well-known essay, we actually find traces of such a differentiation between three general conceptions of freedom already in Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Two concepts of liberty’ (1969). In this seminal text, he distinguishes between negative and positive freedom while at the same time drawing a distinction between two forms of positive freedom: self-direction (Kant) and self-realization (Hegel) (Berlin 1969: 10). Berlin’s discussion of positive freedom is often blurred and misguided (Honneth 1999), however, and his crude critique of positive freedom prevents an understanding of the role of freedom for the legitimation of a modern social order. Our discussion of social freedom is instead inspired by Frederick Neuhouser (2000) and Axel Honneth’s (2014) interpretations of Hegel’s multidimensional theory of freedom in his Philosophy of Right. Our examination will show how the Anthropocene has far-reaching conceptual and normative consequences for each of these three modern understandings of freedom. This leads us, in a third move, to consider the following question: Are modern societies facing a new kind of legitimation crisis? Our response to this question will be positive, leading us to point out three different ways to proceed in view of the legitimation crisis. Among these three, we will focus on what we call the brutalization of geo-social conflicts.

**Legitimation of social order**

In sociology, the possibility of a society is often seen as dependent on the legitimacy of a social and political order among its members. In the history of modern social theory, the notion of legitimation has its background in Hobbes’ crucial claim that ‘the weakest has the strength enough to kill the strongest’ (Hobbes 1994: 74). Pure strength and force alone cannot uphold social order. However, it is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who develops this claim to a notion of legitimation; ‘[t]he strongest is never strong enough to be always the master unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty’ (Rousseau 2010: 2). In contrast to Hobbes, Rousseau understands society as a ‘moral and collective body’ (ibid: 7). This understanding leads him to elaborate a positive concept of freedom (liberté civile) as the basis of modern social order.

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\(^6\) Not only freedom, but also the Anthropocene has been theorized in many different ways. For a critical overview of some of the most influential understandings of the Anthropocene ‘as an event for social theory’, see e.g. Blok and Jensen (2019).
In the further discussion of the notion of legitimation, it is possible to find at least three traditions of thought. In the genealogical tradition of Nietzsche and Foucault, legitimation is seen as an instrument of domination. Here, the task is to deconstruct political power by disclosing the strength behind the claims of morality and rights. Max Weber, on the other hand, ‘sociologizes’ the notion of legitimation and transforms it into a concept for empirical analysis of power without any critical intentions. However, he relates it to his theory of rationality and, in so doing, the concept remains (at least implicitly) connected to a limited form of normative validity. By means of a critique of Weber’s notion of rationality, Habermas develops a third understanding of legitimation (Habermas 1992: 541ff). Legitimacy in a modern society cannot, as Weber claims, only be tied to legality, but needs a moral base of some kind. ‘Legitimacy means a political order’s worthiness to be recognized’ (Habermas 1979: 179). Thus, a political order ‘can have and lose legitimacy’ (ibid.). It depends on its normative validity. According to Habermas, the foundation of this validity is to be understood as formal rather than substantive. To the extent that political deliberations among citizens follow procedures that exclude violence and manipulation, these deliberations are to be understood as mechanisms of legitimation. However, such democratic procedures cannot in themselves and in any direct way determine the result of the deliberations (Habermas 1992).

In recent years, Axel Honneth (2014) is the one to most explicitly and extensively outline the interdependence of freedom and social order in contemporary social theory. He basically agrees with Hegel that ‘the right … of subjective freedom, constitutes the middle or turning-point between the ancient and the modern world’ (Hegel 2008: §124). In many ways, Honneth stands in the tradition of Habermas’ notion of legitimation. However, his conceptualization differs from Habermas in two general ways. First, the foundation of legitimation should not primarily be understood as procedural but is to be found in the ethical life of modern societies. Honneth claims that: ‘social reproduction hinges on a certain set of shared fundamental ideals and values’ (Honneth 2014: 3). Secondly, his conceptualization of legitimacy is not only a question of a political order, but of the social order in general. He writes that ‘all social orders, without exception, must legitimate themselves in the light of ethical values and ideals that are worth striving for’ (Honneth 2014: 4). Modern social institutions – personal relationships, market economy, and democracy – are to be analysed as more or less well-developed institutions of freedom. With other words, Honneth is critical about Habermas’ distinction between life world and system and thus rejects Habermas’ Luhmannian conception of “norm-free sociality” (Honneth, 1991). The notion of a modern social order as dependent on the institutionalization of legitimate values and norms is therefore even more fundamental in Honneth’s social theory than in Habermas’. It is Honneth’s Hegelian reformulation of Habermas’ understanding of legitimation that comes closest to our use of this concept when we now proceed to the second part of the article and discuss the consequences of the Anthropocene condition for the three notions of freedom mentioned above.
**Negative freedom in the Anthropocene**

Even if Hobbes tended to sacrifice liberty on the altar of survival and protection, his thoughts on freedom would become hugely influential not least for the liberal tradition (Habermas 1971: 72; Pettit 2005: 131). For Hobbes, as he writes in *Leviathan* (1994: 136), ‘the proper and generally received meaning of the word’ freedom relates to the absence of external constraints. In the terminology of Berlin, this is a ‘negative’ concept of freedom – a ‘freedom from’ rather than a ‘freedom to’ – and it relates to the extent rather than the source of power (Berlin, 1969). According to Hobbes’ mechanical materialism, the world basically consists of corporeal bodies (Hobbes 1994: 459). The natural state of these bodies is movement (ibid.: 3), and his notion of freedom mirrors the possibilities of movement of bodies. Freedom is the power to move and is defined as the absence of external impediments or obstructions to motion, understood as constraints to that which the body or actor would have been capable of doing had it not been externally hindered (ibid.: 136). Freedom thus has to do with keeping something external at a distance; it has to do with a given space for motion and action.

This negative freedom concept has received extensive criticism from rationalists for disregarding the fact that humans can become ‘servants of passions’ (Rousseau 2010: 20). We can lose our freedom not only because of external impediments, but also due to internal desires and inclinations (e.g. Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Durkheim). Further, negative freedom has been empirically and normatively problematized by communitarians and Marxists, criticizing the atomistic anthropology that it presupposes (e.g. Taylor 1985). But the Anthropocene raises new problems regarding the Hobbesian concept of freedom. The Anthropocene reminds us of how there are earthly limits to human motion and activities: The Earth is round but not infinite. It has limits for human prosperity. This is exactly what the notion of planetary boundaries tells us. Human beings have crossed four of the nine earthly limits, driving out of our ‘safe space operating zone’ (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015). This Anthropocene condition underlines the necessity of limiting, constraining, or obstructing the actions and movements of human individuals, making it difficult normatively to defend a Hobbesian negative conception of freedom. This critique can be traced back to Garrett Hardin’s theory of ‘the tragedy of the commons’ (1968). If the Earth has such limits, defined by human actions, it becomes difficult to argue that human actions should not be limited, externally. As Ben Dibley writes:

… what the Anthropocene poses as an epoch is not only potential tipping points in planetary biogeochemical processes which imperil the human species’ life-support system; it is also the antithesis of a politico-ontological condition central to modernity: freedom … the Anthropocene posits absolute limits to human activity, curtailing the sphere of human freedom. (Dibley 2012: 2)

The Anthropocene inscribes the necessity of constraining negative freedoms and the necessity of thinking freedom differently than the absence of external constraints. The
ultimate endpoint of such lack of constraints is a biospherial meltdown; or, as some biologists call it, a new ‘mass extinction event’ (Ceballos et al. 2015; Ceballos et al. 2017). Thus, the Anthropocene raises the stakes of classical critiques of a negative conception of freedom. The (neo-)liberal dream of expanded negative freedom, unfolded on a ‘free market’, seem even less possible to defend on an Earth with limits. We might therefore very well follow the lead of Bruno Latour (2017) and Michel Serres (1995; 2000), asking ourselves if the Anthropocene inscribes a new ‘State of Nature’, where we must once again limit negative freedoms if the life of man is not to be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’ (Hobbes 1994: 76).

Moral freedom in the Anthropocene

From the perspective of Kant’s moral philosophy, a Hobbesian freedom concept disregards the kind of unfreedom that emerges when one becomes enslaved to one’s own passions. Instead of simply focusing on the problem of external constraints and thus localize the practice of freedom in the external, objective non-obstructed space for movement and action, Kant develops the notion of freedom in the sense of being one’s own moral legislator (1998: 39; 2015: 26). Thus, he expands the practice of freedom to the inner life of the subject. In Berlin’s terminology, Kant subscribes to a positive notion of ‘freedom to’ rather than a negative ‘freedom from’. Neuhouser calls this kind of positive freedom ‘moral freedom’, whereas Honneth calls it ‘reflexive freedom’ (Neuhouser 2000; Honneth 2014). According to Kant, who was widely inspired on this point by Isaac Newton (Friedman 2012; 2013), the mechanical, causal laws of nature are deterministic. The source of freedom and morality must therefore be found beyond this ‘realm of necessity’; only beyond the laws of nature will the human will be autonomous, i.e. being its own legislator, and not heteronomous. Kant’s solution is to locate human freedom and morality beyond the empirical, ‘sensual’ world, where the human will is not determined by the causal laws of nature (Kant 2015: 95); only the reasonable, ‘noumenal’ self beyond the empirical world is really free. As Berlin writes, ‘Kant’s free individual is a transcendent being, beyond the realm of natural causality’ (Berlin 1969: 12). Ultimately, for Kant, practicing or enacting freedom becomes acting in accordance with the formal maxims of the ‘categorical imperatives’, which apply unconditionally. In following this ‘moral law’, human freedom becomes possible (Kant 1998: 52–53).

The Kantian notion of freedom has previously been criticized for leading to ‘self-abnegation’ and ‘the retreat to the inner citadel’ (Berlin 1969). From the Hegelian perspective, Kantian ‘moral subjects lack the resources they need in order to give concrete, non-arbitrary content to the conception of the good … moral subjectivity is “abstract”, “empty” and “formal”’ (Neuhouser 2000: 32). The domination of such a notion of freedom results in ‘suffering from indeterminacy’ (Honneth 2010). From the perspective of the Anthropocene, however, it becomes urgent to further criticize Kant’s formal conception of freedom. Under these new conditions, the notion of freedom once again seems in need of becoming material and sensual, and it seems to require a departure from any inherent anthropocentrism. Most importantly, however, the strict
distinction between nature and culture, upon which Kant’s concept of freedom is built, itself becomes unsustainable. As Serres and perhaps more famously Latour (Serres and Latour 1995; Latour 1993) have convincingly argued, Kantianism more than any other philosophy is constituted around a dualistic distinction between the ‘known object’ and the ‘knowing subject’. It presupposes the possibility of a complete separation between the objective, natural world, governed by laws of necessity, and a subjective, human world characterized by reason, morality, and freedom. This distinction between a ‘realm of necessity’ and ‘realm of freedom’, together with an anthropocentric focus on the subject, is the ultimate legacy of Kant’s Copernican revolution (Latour 1993: 56).

In the Anthropocene, however, these realms are blended. The footprints of free humans are co-constructing the laws of nature, rendering it impossible to put morality and freedom on one side and natural necessity on the other. In the words of Bruce Matthews, echoing Friedrich Schelling’s ‘organic philosophy’, freedom is ‘[w]oven into the fabric of nature’ (Matthews 2011: 34). In the Anthropocene, values and facts, morality and materiality seem inextricably entangled. When humans are affecting the Earth system and exceeding Earth’s planetary boundaries, then duty, freedom, and morality cannot be understood beyond the natural. Rather, when the destiny of humans becomes deeply entangled with the destiny of Earth, our responsibilities, duties, morality, and our freedom become material. They become earthly. As Clive Hamilton argues:

> It was Kant’s supreme insight that, for the enlightened human, freedom should be exercised within the constraints of self-imposed moral law. The moral law he had in mind, however, governed only our dealings with each other. If in the modern era freedom was understood as a relation between humans, as we enter the Anthropocene freedom must also, and primarily, be understood as it bears on our relationship with the Earth. (Hamilton 2017: 150)

**Social freedom in the Anthropocene**

In his *Philosophy of Right* (2008), Hegel outlines a concept of social freedom where the will actualizes itself in the external world through action. Thus, this notion of

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7 Schelling’s discussion of freedom takes its point of departure in a philosophy of nature rather than social philosophy. This is important, because it reminds us that one can approach the question of freedom in the Anthropocene from a discussion of the ontology of nature rather than from a discussion of social order. See e.g. Didier Debaise (2017) for a recent work approaching the questions at hand from the same point of departure.

8 Christoffer Stone’s influential article “Do trees have standing?” (1972) and the discussions in environmental ethics and politics that it sparked can be seen as preceding this argument; see also, e.g., Casper Bruun Jensen (2015).

9 Neuhouser (2000) distinguishes between Hegel’s speculative concept of freedom and his practical concept(s) of freedom. For Hegel, an entity is free in the speculative sense when it cognitively understands and overcomes the otherness of the world. Conversely, practical
freedom is directed against any conception of a retreat to an inner citadel, i.e. to the private room that is so dear to the liberal mind. Individual freedom, according to Hegel, cannot fully be realized in opposition to others or society, but only together with others in society (i.e. in common ethical life). However, Hegel’s general theory of freedom excludes neither the notion of negative nor of moral freedom; rather, it incorporates both. Thus, we find three different concepts of freedom in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. First is ‘personal freedom’, understood as the ability of the will to choose between pre-established goals. This ‘arbitrary will’ is a kind of self-determination in the sense of making rational choices between one’s inclinations (Neuhouser 2000: 24). Secondly, we find a more complex, Kantian ‘moral’ concept of freedom. In contrast to personal freedom, the moral concept of freedom is not based on a passion-driven subject. A moral subject is able to determine its will based on reflections on what is right and wrong (Ibid.: 25). And finally, Hegel outlines his own notion of social freedom, which is a freedom shared with others and realized in a common ethical life. According to Hegel, it is through participation in good, social institutions that the individual reaches their highest form of self-determination (Ibid.: 32–33). As social members, individuals realize their freedom by experiencing how their own self-conceptions are actualized through their engagements in social life: ‘In Sittlichkeit freedom is’ (Ibid.: 18). Personal freedom is determined by pre-established and external goals. Moral freedom only includes other human beings in a formal way and can thus be institutionalized only as ‘abstract right’; that is, in an order of right rather than in a social order (Bielefeldt 1997). Social freedom, on the other hand, includes ‘the concrete mores and ethos of a culture’ (Pinkard 1986: 214); that is, what Hegel calls ‘the living good’ (Hegel 2008: §142). In that sense, this notion makes possible the realization and actualization of an inclusive and substantial freedom.

Hegel’s positive conception of freedom has been extensively criticized for opening backdoors to paternalism, normalization, and totalitarianism (e.g. Berlin 1969). But as in our discussion of Hobbes and Kant, we are instead interested in evaluating Hegel’s freedom concept from the perspective of the Anthropocene. Moreover, new theoretical problems arise in this case. Hegel did not consider the possibility or necessity of including not only humans but also non-humans in ethical life. When Hegel wrote that ‘the authority of ethical laws is infinitely higher, because natural objects conceal rationality under the cloak of contingency and exhibit it only in their utterly external and disconnected way’ (Hegel 2008: §146), he could not foresee, just as Kant could not, that duty in the Anthropocene can no longer be found beyond the ‘natural objects’. Rather, in our new geological epoch it becomes impossible to make a clear-cut distinction between ethics and natural laws. Thus, the problem with Hegel’s social freedom relates to action and practical engagement in the world (ibid.: 18–20). As our intentions are sociological rather than philosophical, our focus here is on Hegel’s practical concepts of freedom that interests us here.

10 We are using Neuhouser’s (2000) terminology in the following.
concept of freedom is its sharp distinction between the social and the ethical versus the natural.

While personal freedom presupposes the possibility of an instrumentalization of outer and inner nature, both moral and social freedom implicate the isolation of freedom from nature. In that sense, also Hegel’s notion must be seen as a retreat to a citadel, but in this case a social rather than a subjective citadel. Both kinds seem impossible in the Anthropocene, where both moral subjectivity and social institutions must be understood as entangled with the earthly conditions. Even though Hegel’s notion of freedom expands the realm of freedom as compared to both the private satisfaction of desires and moral respect for and tolerance of the freedom of others, his conceptualization of freedom remains within the modern dualistic distinction between the human and the non-human. It does not grasp how, in our new geological epoch, non-human forces present themselves as ethical ‘matters of concern’ (Latour 2004). It does not grasp how freedom in the Anthropocene must now also be negotiated with the Earth. Moreover, Hegel’s social concept of freedom becomes overly anthropocentric, since understanding freedom as ‘being with one-self in another’ (Hegel 2008: §7), as he has formulated it, remains an intersubjective human relation.

Legitimation crisis: Three different ways to proceed

Thus far, we have tried to show, first, how modern orders are legitimated through the ideal of freedom and, second, how three of the most influential modern concepts of freedom encounter theoretical and normative difficulties due to the rise of the new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. While a Hobbesian concept of negative freedom underlining the lack of external constraints becomes problematic in light of planetary boundaries, Kant and Hegel’s positive notions of freedom presuppose any understanding of moral subjectivity and social ethics residing beyond the realm of the natural. Thus, in so far as the Anthropocene thesis has some truth to it, which we believe it does, the fundamental a priori in these modern conceptions of freedom have crucial shortcomings. This leads us to argue that we are currently facing a new crisis of legitimation of the modern social order. It should be emphasized, however, – just as Habermas does in his Legitimation crisis – that we are ‘concerned that the clarification of very general structures of hypotheses not be confused with empirical results.’ (Habermas 1976: xxv)

As far as we can see, there are three general ways to analytically proceed in view of this severe dilemma. First, one might want to try to go on where Hegel stopped and elaborate an even more encompassing conception of freedom; after all, Hegel’s theory of freedom is formulated in opposition to Kant’s dualistic thinking and developed by systematically including more and more aspects of life. To go on would be to focus on ethical cultivations of attachments, assemblages, and entanglements between the human and non-human – and encompass these in an expanded conception of freedom. Some scholars have explored this way: Heikki Ikäheimo (2021) has recently re-examined the nature–spirit distinction in Hegel’s philosophy. The work of
environmental political theorists, including Murray Bookchin (2005), Andrew Dobson (2004), and Robyn Eckersley (2004), also points also in this direction. Finally, Pierre Charbonnier (2020) has called for an understanding of liberty that is not based on material abundance. A second way to proceed might be to investigate the end of modernity in the sense of a rise of social order that is legitimized by a constitutive ideal other than freedom. Such an investigation could be either a philosophical or sociological task. In the former, one would ask what kind of constitutive value would be able to replace freedom as a basis for legitimation of social order under the condition of the Anthropocene. This direction is indicated by e.g. Latour, who has suggested for a shift from a ‘system of production’ to a ‘system of engendering’ in which the constitutive value of human freedom is replaced with the value of connections between humans and non-humans inside Gaia (2018: Chapter 18). In the second case, one could investigate whether strong new values are arising in the green movements. Within the French pragmatic sociology tradition, such sociological investigations can be found in e.g. Laurent Thévenot’s work on a green justification regime (e.g. Lafaye, Moody & Thévenot 2000), in Évé Chiapello’s work on ecological critique (2013) and, more recently, in Laura Centemeri’s work on green valuation practices (2014; 2019). In this article, we can merely indicate the fundamental significance and urgency of elaborating these first two ways.

A third way to proceed would be ‘staying with the trouble’ (to use the title of Donna Haraway’s famous book) and look for possible empirical manifestations of such a legitimation crisis. It follows from what has been claimed so far that such a crisis undermines social order. At this point, it is important to emphasize that social order is not to be understood in a harmonious sense. The normatively based institutions of a well-ordered society do not counteract conflicts in general, but rather conflicts that are dominated by the logic of strength. In a legitimation crisis, on the other hand, institutions lose their normative base. Honneth has in this context talked about ‘the brutalization of social conflicts’ (Honneth 2012), which in this case means that struggles are fought outside any normative framework. In German, Honneth uses the term Verwildung, which is difficult to translate, but means that social conflicts are growing increasingly wilder. This choice of term seems to imply a state of nature in Hobbes’ sense. Such struggles are struggles without any relation to socially shared constitutive values. They are to be seen as fights for sheer survival and self-preservation.

We believe this perspective is useful for proceeding in the third way. However, Honneth himself does not include the Anthropocene conditions in his theory of brutalization, and he actually bluntly neglects ecological crisis in developing his theoretical framework (Carleheden, 2021). Therefore, to understand social conflicts in the Anthropocene, we suggest supplementing Honneth’s theory of brutalization with
Latour’s recent work on ecological politics and social struggles\textsuperscript{11} (Latour 2017; Latour 2018). In *Facing Gaia*, Latour alludes to Hobbes and analyses the Anthropocene condition as a ‘New State of Nature’, where political struggles are taking place outside any yet-established normative framework (Latour 2017). In addition, Latour argues in *Down to Earth* that social struggles will intensify in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century and transform into geo-social struggles over habitable land and territory as a consequence of climatic mutations (Latour 2018). By bringing these two theoretical points of departure together, we suggest to investigate a new legitimation crisis in terms of a brutalization of geo-social conflicts. Before reaching our conclusion, we will end this article with a short theoretical discussion of what the brutalization of geo-social conflicts entails.

**Brutalization of geo-social conflicts**

So far, we have suggested that the Anthropocene conditions will lead to a modern legitimation crisis, where anthropocentric freedom ideals disintegrate as a normative horizon for social order and that one way to proceed analytically is to investigate what we refer to as the brutalization of geo-social struggles. In this last section, we will sketch out the contours of idea. Our goal here is neither to present a finished theory nor to test this concept empirically in any methodologically valid manner. Much theoretical and empirical labour is required before arriving at such a stage. Instead, we simply wish to explain more clearly what we mean with this concept and hereby indicate why we believe it should be further developed as a theoretical hypothesis.\textsuperscript{12} So what does a brutalization of geo-social conflicts entail?

As mentioned, Honneth uses the idea of brutalization to describe how social struggles in a time of legitimation crisis are growing wilder and starting to take place outside the normative framework of modernity. Latour, on the other hand, has coined the idea of geo-social struggles to denote how social struggles are intensifying and beginning to centre around habitable territory as a consequence of the common-yet-stratified loss of territory resulting from global climate change. In sum, with the concept of brutalized geo-social struggles, we thus wish to denote the wilding and intensification of social struggles over land and territory beyond the modern framework of freedom.

Instead of struggles for freedom, we imagine these conflicts as intensified and brutalized struggles that concern securing a fundamental set of means of existence, necessary for survival. They are conflicts and struggles over a wide array of earthly, material conditions of subsistence (e.g. air, water, food, land, soil, climate) that allow individuals or collectives to subsist, to survive, or to reproduce at a moment in history

\textsuperscript{11} More fundamentally, both Honneth’s theory of social order and his theory of social conflict are based on dialectic intersubjectivity. Conversely, Latour’s analysis of social order and social conflict is based on a relationalist interobjectivity (e.g. Latour 1996, 2005). This, we believe, is a theoretical strength when analysing the current legitimation crisis.

\textsuperscript{12} In other words, following Swedberg’s work on theorizing we are still in the context of discovery, as opposed to the context of justification (Swedberg 2014).
where such means can no longer be taken for granted. Thus, our idea is not only that struggles are brutalizing as consequence of the legitimation crisis of the Anthropocene, but furthermore that the *shape and direction of these struggles are becoming inseparably linked to the habitable earthly conditions that are becoming scarce in this epoch*. In this perspective, the sociological consequences of global climatic change are thus double: first, these consequences brings the legitimation of modern social order to its knees, and, secondly, make the emerging social struggles into struggles over habitable earthly conditions necessary for subsistence.

As such, these are struggles that unfold beyond the framework of political modernity. They are not struggles for freedom and they are not framed by institutions that were supposed to secure such freedoms. Rather, they are material struggles for the means that secure the basic needs of reproduction. This, however, does not simply mean that we move from Hegel to Marx and from an idealist historical struggle for freedom to a materialist historical struggle for the means of production. Instead – as one of us has previously argued elsewhere (Schultz 2020a; 2020b) – these are struggles for survival that take place beyond the framework of the sphere of production. They are not simply economic struggles that we can navigate by position in the system of production; rather, they ought to be understood as brutalized, socio-ecological struggles for the necessary earthly conditions that allow people to subsist within a wider set of social, earthly processes, characterized by an unequally distributed loss of habitable territory.

That we insist on leaving the Marxist framework of struggles within the system of production to delineate these struggles does not mean that such economic conflicts do not exist. Of course they do. It simply means that brutalized geo-social conflicts are material struggles that cannot be reduced to economic interests. More precisely, they are brutalized struggles where the core of the interests is the land, territory, or the earthly conditions themselves, because these entities are necessary to sustain life and survival. Indeed, such brutalized geo-social struggles might be *mediated* by economic practices, but their essence is not economic interests. Their essence is rather *territorial interests* in the scarce, earthly means for subsistence, fought for at a time of global climate change, when such material conditions of existence cannot be taken for granted.

Indeed, we cannot here give empirical proof to this hypothesis, but what we can do is to give a few examples that can motivate or make more probable this idea. One empirical example has been much discussed by investigative journalists and critical geographers in recent years, and it relates to the territorial strategies of the ultra-rich (O’Connell 2020; Garrett 2020a). For years, it has been described how billionaires around the world have begun investing in luxurious escape properties, climate disaster-secured bunkers, and vast areas of self-sufficient farms and land to prepare themselves

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13 See Lucas Chancel’s *Unsustainable Inequalities* (2020).

14 See Schultz (2022) for an article on geo-social classes and COVID-19 that discusses some of the following examples in more detail.
for – among other catastrophes – a coming climate apocalypse (ibid.). Lately – and not least manifested by the COVID-19 pandemic – there are indications that such escape strategies are ‘trickling down’ through the social strata (e.g. Ptacin 2020). The catastrophe-bunker business is booming, with growing numbers of clients now coming from the middle class. The acquisition of survival property and the attainment of a self-sufficient life largely seems motivated by fears of seeing modern institutions, such as the state (law) and market (food-supply chains), breaking down in times of political, social, and climatic collapse. Relatedly, in recent years, the so-called ‘prepper’ or ‘survivalist’ movements – the essence of which is learning how to survive in times of catastrophe – have become ‘mainstream’ (Campbell et. al 2019; Garrett 2020b), with a significant increase in people preparing for surviving self-sufficiently in scarcity.

These examples, we suggest, can be seen as first indications of a brutalized geo-social conflicts, where a struggle for habitable territory and the fundamental material conditions of survival is beginning to be fought at a time of modern legitimation crisis. What these examples include is a ‘turn to survival’, where the essence of the social action of individuals and collectives is the securing of a wide array of fundamental, material conditions of subsistence at a time when they cannot be taken for granted. These are not social struggles for freedom, but rather social and material struggles for survival; and indeed, if a struggle for freedom, then it is a freedom found outside the normative institutions of society. We believe that the analyses of such struggles for survival should be furthered by sociologists if we wish to understand how social conflicts are intensifying at a time of legitimation crisis.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued that the Anthropocene leads us to a crisis of legitimation, where freedom as a common horizon for modern societies has vanished, and where a brutalization of geo-social struggles can be understood as a possible outcome. To argue so, we first showed how modern social orders are social orders legitimized by the ideal of freedom. Further along these lines, we showed how three classical notions of freedom all suffer from serious weaknesses when evaluated within the framework of the Anthropocene conditions. While Hobbes’ negative concept of freedom and its understanding of freedom as a lack of external constraints becomes problematic in a time of ecological boundaries, Kant’s moral concept of freedom and Hegel’s social concept are built on ideas of moral subjectivity and social ethics disconnected from ‘Nature’. These weaknesses lead us to argue that modern social orders are facing a legitimation crisis, where the ideal of freedom can no longer legitimize modern societies. In continuance of this drama of legitimation, we suggested three ways to proceed. First, one could go on and elaborate a move encompassing conception of freedom, fit for a time of global ecological crisis. Secondly, one could investigate the end of modernity, i.e. the legitimation of social order through another ideal than freedom (either in a philosophical or sociological manner). Finally, we suggested that one could proceed by ‘staying with the trouble’ and investigating its social implications. By bringing together Honneth’s theory of brutalization and Latour’s ideas on geo-social
conflicts, we suggested that one possible outcome of the legitimation crisis was a ‘brutalization of geo-social conflicts’, understood as intensified, brutalized social struggles for habitable territory and the necessary material conditions for survival in a time of global climate change. We ended our article with a discussion about what such conflicts entail, and with a call for sociologists to continue down this path of investigation in order to strengthen our understanding of the social implications of the current legitimation crisis, as it unfolds in the Anthropocene.

**Note**
The argument of this article was first elaborated by Nikolaj Schultz in his Master’s Thesis *Frihed i den Antropocene Epoke* (Schultz 2018). It was supervised by Mikael Carleheden and took its point of departure in a joint course at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen about the notion of freedom in social theory. A preliminary draft was presented at the Midterm conference of the ESA Research Network 29, Social Theory at Institute of Sociology, Technical University of Berlin, 5-6 September 2018.

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