4 The President as Mascot
Relations All the Way Down

Jairus Victor Grove

The occasion of this collection is the problem of worldviews for the field of international relations (IR). I want to invoke this problem in more than one sense. First, I am interested in how the kinds of worldviews we inhabit change the way we study international relations. In my case, I will try to present the reasoning behind my methodological decision to adopt a relational world view as opposed to a mechanistic world view made up of discrete objects with specific and stable essences. Second, I want to show the way that worldviews function in our relational world – that is, in practice.

In an attempt to create a conversation across the different chapters, I offer an account of what I think relationalism is and its origins within the tradition of international relations. As is often the case of adherents to a particular position, I want to show that we are all relationalists, just some better and more explicit than others. I also want to dispel a few presumptions about what I think relationalism can and cannot do, and give a sketch of what a relational approach could look like in addressing a seemingly straightforward legal or technical question about nuclear authority.

4.1 What is Relationalism, for Me?

First and foremost, relationalism is an *is*, not a *should*. I mean it as a claim to how I believe the world actually works. For me, it comes primarily from the radical empiricist tradition of William James, C.S. Pierce, Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, and Gabriel Tarde. Second, the goal of a relational approach is to figure out how things – including people, states, and technological systems – actually work, rather than to make claims about how things should work or predictive claims about how things will continue to work. Therefore, it is in the philosophical sense a *realist* position not primarily interested in questions of representation or interpretation, but also not indifferent to them. Relationalism sees problems of human access to the world (representation) and problems of meaning-making and communication (hermeneutics) as being horizontal with other relations,

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such as those we think of as biological or technological. This has been described by Manuel Delanda as a "flat ontology."[1] Human observation and interpretation is on the ground floor with everything else, rather than above it, apart from it, or looking down at the world.

Although it certainly has a strong claim to ontology – how things are – relationalism is an ontology of becoming. Process is privileged over structure or fixity in the traditional sense. Highly dynamic and transversal ecosystems are privileged over equilibrium systems such as those imagined by Talcott Parsons or other Hegelian inheritors who see the world as turgid and therefore only open to gradual and often purposive change.

The correlate to an emphasis on becoming or the dynamic evolutionary character of change within systems and of systems directs us to investigate processes – stories about distributed formations and deformations – rather than agents or variables which could be said to be the "effect" of a process. In part, the so-called "flat ontology" of relational worldviews renders distinctions between independent and dependent variables, and agents and structures, somewhat arbitrary. As an aside, arbitrary here does not mean meaningless. It simply means not essential – that is, not bearing an essence. What is causally significant, what is an agent, what is a system instead is most often an effect of investigation. At what scale one asks the question, and the scale of the investigator, radically alters what appears as a part and what appears as a whole. For instance, from this perspective, the methodological individualism of social theory and many other theories is not a natural unit of analysis. Instead, the focus on the individual as a causal principle comes from the unity we "feel" as an "I."

We rarely experience ourselves as disaggregated (although drug-induced effects, bouts of madness, dreaming, etc., are exceptions most people experience over the course of their lives). However, we are disaggregated. From William James' *Principles of Psychology*, in which we are a "bundle of affects and perceptions,"[2] through to contemporary neuroscience investigations of mood-altering gut bacteria, preconscious decision-making, and increasingly compelling philosophical accounts of a subjectless human by Galen Strawson and others, we have strong reason to believe that even this most basic unit quickly begins to come apart at the seams as we zoom in for closer investigation.[3]

[1] DeLanda 2005: 47. [2] James 1995: 107.

[3] Many philosophers of mind, neuroscientists, and political theorists have given compelling, data-rich accounts of human action and will that do not require a knowing, prospective subject. Consciousness is for many contemporary neuroscientists perpetually late to the party. We act and experience and reflect in that order not the other way around. Of the

As we zoom out, the litany of parts reveals more and more wholes. Consider group behavior in the form of riots and crowds, which exhibit flocking behavior even in humans. Extending the view just a little further, communities and then societies appear in which the lack of central planning (and even contrary to central planning) there is repetitive behavior, cooperation, and transactions of all kinds. An aerial view of a major highway system exhibits behavioral phenomena vastly beyond the conscious coordinating capability of individual humans or the technology they are interfacing with. Despite the high number of auto fatalities, that there are not more is astounding. The average daily commute is more than an hour a day of barely conscious muscle memory playing out amongst thousands of actors with little to no communication beyond turn signals and the occasional horn. And what about zooming out much further? If we occupy the space between the earthrise and Carl Sagan's little blue dot, the entire planet becomes something like James Lovelock's *Gaia*. The earth from this perspective is a kind of superorganism of feedback mechanisms, from the carbon cycle to the birth, death, and reabsorption of all of the necessary chemical and mineral components, as well as the creative drive to incorporate them into newly innovative forms of life. Scale as a spacetime, how close and for how long, drives the units of analysis and not the "natural" or "essential" unity of those units. Instead, there are relations at every scale crossing into every other scale. Which relations are most important, most operative, and most determinative of change or stability depends upon the region investigated.

Finally, we have the very strange and exotic wholes which make up much of international relations. So far, the descriptions of parts have been in some sense mechanical, or could be interpreted as such (i.e. brains or weapons, etc.). However, what about Benedict Anderson's imagined communities? Collectivities can feel history and connection with those they have never met, and will show up to fight a war for the injury of those anonymous brethren. Even the strange magic of memory and consciousness scales very differently when considered at different scales. However, we should not separate consciousness or memory from the networks of neurons, perceptions, gut bacteria, print media, and social network

many claims for which Nau is most concerned, this issue raises a serious conundrum for his world view. Nau wants a world of realist, rigorous science to act as a foundation for scholarship and a self-possessed, autonomous scholar to conduct that rigorous science that is in contradiction with the findings of science and much of contemporary philosophy of mind. For me, whether we are free in the way that Nau discusses mind and agency is an empirical question long since discounted by the modernist western scientific culture he seeks to defend. See Strawson 2018; Edelman 2007; Connolly 2002.

platforms that make it possible for consciousness to travel, imitate, innovate, and reaffirm conceptual habits.

At all scales, relationalism describes a multitude of relay and feedbacks constitutive of the processes that give form to what we experience as part–whole relationships in time. Many endure at different scales (plate tectonics for eons, species differences for shorter durations, fashion trends or diplomatic crisis for durations of hours or days) but they only exist, in some sense, solely in their process. When the relations change, the process is over or altered, and the only thing that remains is the impression left on the new arrangement by the arrangements that preceded it. This is true, according to relationalism, from the intimacy of identity all the way to the formation of stars.

While I follow a relational and primarily historical and interpretive approach, I do depart from many other adherents of relationalism in two significant ways.[4] The first involves the assumption of an ethical or normative content to what Milja Kurki calls the "relational cosmology" of the "relational revolution" (Chapter 3, this volume). Kurki believes an ethical impulse is "baked into" a relational worldview. There are a number of examples of this in contemporary theory inside and outside of IR. Two variants are those following Judith Butler and her debt to Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt, who account for violence as an abrogation of relations and a possibility of nonviolence in relations themselves. Here, violence is in some sense the ignoring of a fundamental relationality among human beings that would, if recognized, create an understanding mutuality opposed to violence. From these accounts, consciousness-raising about the fact of relationality is a solution to global violence just as "realizing" and "experiencing" relationality makes us open or indebted to "the other," to use Levinas' terms. The second variant focuses more on the natural environment and violence against nonhuman others. From this perspective on relationality, environmental destruction and extreme cruelty toward nonhuman animals is, like the Levinasian/Arendtian account, the result of a loss of relationality often attributed to modernist accounts of mind/body and nature/culture dualisms, or, more generally, of anthropocentrism. Like normative relationalism, the environmental strand believes that an awareness of this fact, or a cultivation of an ethos of interdependence beyond the human species, will reduce violence and possibly may make planetary life more sustainable. It is not unusual to take as evidence of this position the confluence of

[4] For a more comprehensive history of relational and ecological thought in the social sciences and International Relations, see Grove 2020.

environmental protections by indigenous peoples with relational cosmologies.

Both variants conflate the methodological insights of relationalism with a relational worldview. One is empirical while the other is aspirational. The risk, I believe, in this conflation is a confusion of expectations and a false sense that one has solved more philosophical questions than are possible to solve. It is enough to have an account of the world that integrates ideational and material forces into a single substance and ontology. We ought not expect that this, in addition, restores the world to some perfect order, or that striving for a more universal notion of the good escapes somehow the deep problems of competing interests, relativism, or incommensurable worldviews. Too often the appeal to relationalism's debt to science or fundamental, ancient ontologies is used to depoliticize its normative commitments. However, the ambivalent relationship between relationalism's cosmological and scientific origin stories ought to demand the inverse. Rather than seeing relationality as an ethical exit from particularity and the divisions in politics, it ought to insist upon both as the beginning of inquiry.

While an ethics can be built within a relational ontology, it does not necessarily follow from the ontological insights. After all, seals and great white sharks are deeply relational and aware of each other, and yet could not easily arrive at a common sense of the good. If any interspecies consensus could be reached between predator and prey, it would be minimal (maybe a consensus value on saving the ocean, for instance) and not as a mere result of their relationality, which is mostly characterized by teeth and blood. Could such a relationship be at least free of violence? Even that seems far-fetched given the findings of animal behaviorists that predators *enjoy* their hunt; killing for fun has been observed in orcas, dolphins, and cats.

In fact, rather than say that relationality and violence are opposed, I believe that the opposite claim can and should be made. If everything is relational – from our cells to our consciousness – then certainly violence is relational too. To go a step further, violence – a thoroughly human concept – only distinguishes itself from force or change because of the particular relationships of attention and intimacy which make cruelty possible. What makes an earthquake tragic – that is, unavoidable and indebted to no misanthropy or purposive end – is precisely what makes an act of war violent. Malice, sadism, cruelty, cultivated indifference – all of these extra characteristics are what change the ecological and political relations of actions such that they are violent as opposed to something else.

The second error of many relational approaches is to treat relations as a metaphor, or an independent substance. This is a common error of network theories and assemblage theories. In both cases relations are abstracted from the environment, resulting in an image of "nodes" which fall back into the original trap of agents – that is, unified, essential entities, independent of relations and surrounded by a "web" of connectors. This image is often borrowed from the internet existence we all live amidst. The vast series of "tubes" connecting things are either thought of as an independent substance, like the wires and fiberoptic cables of the network society, or as a kind of metaphor for communication across the ether between nodes.

Either way, treating relations as a "thing" misses the entire point of the ecological approach. We are not constituted *by* relations. We *are* relations. Or, more accurately, everything is an unfolding and refolding process of relations. There are no solid inputs or outputs. All of life is origami. The differences are in the folds, not the substance. A relational approach does not study relations instead of actors or instead of parts. A relational approach studies the folds and processes that make differences, hence the ability to differentiate the therapeutic cut of a scalpel to remove a gangrenous hand, the punitive surgical removal of a hand because someone has been convicted of theft, and the horror of having your hand blown off by an adversary trying to kill you. Mechanistically they are all similar at one level, in that they all involve pain, a missing hand, or another actor creating the condition of losing a hand, a weapon, or a tool. At another level – that of the psycho-social economy, the chances of survival, the character of the trauma, and the feelings of gratitude or revenge – it is the variability of the relations of the process which will be the basis for creating these differences. This is what I mean by an ecological approach. There are not entities *with* relations; it is relations all the way down.

For me, relationalism is an entry point into the complexities of global violence rather than an exit from or prophylactic against it. Similarly, the highly complex and dispersed systems which make violence possible, from breathable air to enmity to the technological systems of enacting violence on larger and larger scales, to the rich histories of national belonging as well as forms-of-life which form the basis of legible differences, suggest to me that a relational approach is incredibly productive for studying such the variable and unstable arrangement of the things that constitute global orders. In what follows, I will present one example of how a relational approach would alter our discussion and research. The example focuses on nuclear weapons, particularly the relationship between constitutional authority and command, and control capability,

which are often treated as completely separate questions. My discussion of nuclear weapons command and control is not meant to offer comprehensive accounts of the vast literatures on this question. Instead, I want to show what kinds of questions or research might become visible with a shift to a relational ontology and an ecological research agenda.

4.2 A Relational Approach to Nuclear Authority, or the Insufficiency of Decisionism and Constitutionalism

Broadly speaking, there exist two very different literatures about nuclear weapons. Legal scholars and philosophers spend their time considering whether the American president has the right to use nuclear weapons either constitutionally or morally. A more technical literature on nuclear strategy and capability focuses on policy formulation and implementation. Little if any overlap exists between these two literatures and traditions of inquiry. I want to see what happens when we combine these questions, see how each is shaped by the other, rather than seeing either as primary. Furthermore, what comes of debates over sovereignty and decisionism when we take a more relational or ecological approach?

It is important to keep in mind that an ecological account of security is not simply about connecting technological change with legal and political development internally, but observing the change in the security environment's material conditions – that is, *all of the relations*. For instance, it is difficult to imagine the present state of nuclear weapons development that tended so heavily toward a sovereign model of command and control without taking account, at the most basic level, of the geographic specificity of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Even a distant competitor such as Japan would have altered the technological development of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). A basic feature of the environment like the relatively small size of the Japanese nation-state would probably not have driven the development of MIRV-ed delivery vehicle or even megaton yields entering into the double-digits.[5] The simple fact that

[5] There is a tendency toward weapons modernizations driven by war and competition, or what J.F.C Fuller calls the "constant tactical factor," that is the refusal to allow total domination by any actor. However, the kinds of modernizations, and the qualitative and quantitative elements of nuclear weapons, were driven by the geographic and demographic nature of the US opponent. Daniel Deudney's explanation of *security materialism* is a similar approach in that it contextualizes the multivalent relationship between politics, technology, and "nature" for violence capacity: "The forces of destruction are composed of the interaction of nature, particularly geography, and technology, as both the revelation of natural possibilities, and as embodied destructive capability" (Deudney 2000: 88–89). For an in-depth discussion of Fuller's "constant tactical factor," see Grove 2019: 104–15.

Japanese soldiers could not have threatened Western Europe, thus requiring a nonconventional arsenal to even the odds, would have altered the course of nuclear weapons development. But size, geography, competitor – these are *contingencies* of history, contexts for which either the legal/moral or strategic approach could easily account for and does not change how we understand the actors or institutions at work. For an ecological account to be significant (and worth the effort), the nature of change and the actors of the situation ought to appear different (alien, even) to the conceptual tools of methodological individualism presumed by moral legal theory and leadership debates in strategic thought. Otherwise, contingencies such as place, infrastructure, and communication networks are merely details. What is at stake in this section is to consider that these *things* are constitutive, internal actants – that is, details that make a difference in what is and is not possible and what is and is not thinkable. The sovereign is not exterior to the nuclear assemblage nor its command head. Rather, what we understand to be nuclear sovereignty – the final right and capability of nuclear launch of which there is no higher power – is the assemblage itself, by which any particular president is incorporated, habituated, and therefore plugged into. This perspective is in sharp contrast to the individual accountability that is a central value of the humanist Newtonianism that Haas and Nau (Chapter 2) and Nau (Chapter 6) defend so vigorously. As Nau puts it, the discussion of IR and the events we study "would not be possible without individuals."

There exists a fundamental problem in Nau's analysis. His claim of the individual as a basic unit rests on Weber's rich understanding of individual behavior that distinguishes between instrumental rationality, value rationality, emotions, and habits. Nau focuses exclusively on the first two and skips over emotions and habits when he writes "the individual remains primary over structure." Nau thinks that this assertion allows him to move forward with a reading of Weber in which "choice is free, not determined by science or higher norms." What little lip service Nau pays to Weber's rich understanding of structure is subsumed by a deep and abiding faith in a unified and autonomous individual. However, dismissing "structure" does not get us back to a unified individual for one simple reason. The individual is a structure constituted by the deep relationality between the four distinctive Weberian categories on which Nau relies. They are categorically relational even if one were to believe that instrumental rationality is a kind of governing executive function freed from its origins and the processes of perpetual recreation. Values, habits, and feelings (and, I would argue, also instrumental rationality) come from relations that predate the individual even if we want to be humanists. These categories are contingent on early childhood development and

learning that are both radically intersubjective before the "I" emerges (as Erikson, Lacan, Piaget, and many childhood developmental psychologists have shown) and radically inter-objective (as the formation of what we recognize as the self comes from the ability to separate from the mother and connect to other people and objects in the formation of independence, as Klein argues).[6] Even if we argue that humans "congeal" at some point late in their teenage years (which is implausible for any teacher of university students and for anyone who thinks that experience induces learning), the four Weberian categories of individual action have to be coordinated by some means other than instrumental rationality, otherwise the others would no longer be categories for behavioral analysis; they would just be a bargain bin for rationality to sift through and choose self-consciously amongst. Of course, this is absurd. Instead, there is a plastic and oscillating intensity of relations between emotional, habitual, rational, and ideational formations of consciousness and sense. This is where structure, affect, intersubjectivity, pedagogy, aesthetics, metabolism, architecture, nonhuman animals, temporality, etc., all come back into play with a vengeance. Nau ignores all of this and moves forward with the rest of his critique of relationism and his defense of human freedom because he black boxes all of these relations in the emergence of consciousness. Put simply, Nau's individualism is Cartesian not Weberian. He thus fundamentally violates the foundational relational assumptions that are embedded in the Weberian model he deploys.

Consider Weber's attention to charisma in *Economy and Society*, applied here to the complex nuclear issue. Weber distinguishes between the power of bureaucracy and the charismatic leadership both in terms of their economy of power and the "rules" of legitimation (or lack thereof) that govern them. Economically, bureaucracy is dependent on a "continuous income" for its functioning.[7] In contrast, Weber writes of charisma that it "lives in, not off this world." Adding a further religious and almost magical tone, he continues: "Because of this mode of legitimation genuine charismatic domination knows no abstract laws and regulations and no formal adjudication."[8] Beyond laws and norms, Weber argues for charisma as a distinctive source of power that differs from the rationalized power of bureaucracy and the less-refined brute force that possess the capability to exercise domination and "transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms."[9] Weber's explanation of charisma deconstructs both the individualist explanation and the casual frame it might suggest – namely, that someone "possesses" charisma and

[6] Klein 1984: 50–52. [7] Weber, Roth and Wittich 1978: 1113.
[8] Weber, Roth and Wittich 1978:1115. [9] Weber, Roth and Wittich 1978: 1115.

uses it in some instrumental or individualistic way. For Weber, charisma cannot be something that is simply possessed by an individual, for it must *move* the people it inspires in unprecedented ways, often against their own interests. That is, charisma works by neither rational nor habitual means. It breaks rules and creates new values rather than relying on norms or laws. So how does one acquire such a power?

For Weber, for charisma to exist in the first place, charismatic leadership is relationally dependent upon those moved by its power. The self-determination of charisma is not that of the charismatic leader conceived of as a self-possessed individual. Instead, the self-determination of charisma is a co-emergent and semi-autonomous formation resulting from the relation between the leader and the people. In Weber's language: "Charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits. Its bearer seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his missions. If those to whom he feels sent do not recognize him, his claim collapses; if they recognize it he is their master as long as he 'proves' himself."[10] There is no means by which either the "bearer" of charisma or the will of the followers can be a sufficient cause for charisma. Instead, there exists a deep and variable relationality at the heart of the production of subjects, whom Nau calls individuals. Intersubjectivity creates the condition of possibility for charisma and the catalytic transformation it can deliver. Weber does not offer an individualist account of charisma. And Weber insists that no rational account is on offer as charisma "disrupts all rational rule."[11] It would be fine to ignore just how malleable and coconstitutive humans are if charisma were a rare force in political and geopolitical change. But I concur with Weber that in a "purely empirical and value-free sense charisma is the specifically creative revolutionary force of history."[12] The vision we are given by Weber is one in which all of the agents of change are swept up in a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts, much less any particular individualistic part.[13] For me, Weber's explanation is much closer to what I am trying to develop here in terms of a nuclear sovereign assemblage than is Nau's defense of a substantive or methodological individualism.

What I argue is the precise opposite of Nau. It is only once circulating in the assemblage that the American president can become a significant relay-exchange in the functioning or nonfunctioning of the assemblage, but is never the *final* relay-exchange. While we would likely blame or

[10] Weber, Roth and Wittich 1978: 1112–13 [11] Weber, Roth and Wittich 1978: 1117.
[12] Weber, Roth and Wittich 1978: 1117.
[13] It is worth noting that Weber draws heavily on the charisma of heroes and the ethos derived from heroic acts. However, even the substance and significance of heroism is mutually dependent upon its audience, as in the resonance between leader and crowd.

credit the president in the case of a nuclear launch, much as we did blame or credit George W. Bush with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, such an anthropomorphic image would be a mistake. The command as much as the compliance with the command is not possible without the collaboration of millions of people and countless numbers of things. Nau's image of individual responsibility may satisfy his moral appetite, but it does nothing to reveal how a decision takes place as an event which can unfold across systems and people seemingly as if their dispositions were already decided. How many decisions, infrastructures, years of training, or national identities had to come into formation for a presidential command to make sense, much less be effective in unleashing nuclear war. To put it another way: the decision comes after the potentiality of nuclear war, not before it.[14]

Such a claim, if demonstrated, changes how we understand constitutional constraints of nuclear war. The legal right is less significant, even potentially irrelevant, to the capability to set nuclear war in motion without, for instance, congressional approval. Similarly, in the context of strategic studies, the anthropomorphism that conflates the state and its nuclear arsenal into a single entity, a president, with a structured, individualized rationality driven by victory and survival, becomes self-evident. That is, the sovereign is shown to be a mere stand-in for something vastly more complex than a real, ontological entity. The president, in the most radical reading of this claim, is more like a mascot than a quarterback. In the informatic networks of early warning systems, targeting coordinates, satellite communication, silo commanders, rocket fuel, hangovers, weather balloons, and global ideological competitions, the American president doesn't call the play, the play calls them.[15]

[14] Nau's primary critique of relationalism is moral rather than empirical, what he calls a "broadside assault on western rationality" to which Nau attributes the advance of western civilization and its moral progress (Chapter 6, this volume) However, the individualism that Nau clings to does little to empower effective moral action. Consider how many times the effort to blame disastrous foreign policy has been laid at the feet of an individual scapegoat only to be repeated by the scapegoat's successor. The effort to constrain moral thought to the self-possessed, rational agent is efficient in the distribution of blame but does little to impeach the distribution and dispositions of human and technical populations that enable moral catastrophe to become habitual – that is, "just the way things are done."

[15] The chapter refers specifically to the American presidency because the particular history and structure of the US nuclear arsenal is essential to the argument. I suspect that the Russian and Chinese arsenals would be no less assembled than that of the United States, but I do not have sufficient knowledge of their command or infrastructure to make that claim here. I would only say that the level of centralized or decentralized command structure does not alter the claim I am making. As will be detailed later, the permanent possibility of accidental launch or detonation means in the final instance only chance is sovereign. No amount of legal or technical hierarchy changes this fact.

In what follows I will quickly identify the characteristics of the nuclear arsenal that lends itself to a relational or ecological analysis. As I argued in the introduction, relations are the real fabric of existence. They are ontologically real and not a metaphor. Does everything then lend itself to a relational approach? Not necessarily. Not all forms of reductionism – that is. the reliance on unitary actors or instrumental accounts of tools – are useless. Like the case of Newtonian physics, reductions and simplifications can be very powerful despite being in some sense simply inaccurate. However, there are scales of complexity and complexities of causality in which simplifications occlude more than they reveal. I want to argue that there are specific features of the nuclear arsenal that demonstrate the limits of legal-moral and strategic anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. Furthermore, to understand how war as an event, and nuclear war specifically, requires a relational account to describe the capacity to make wholes out of such disparate parts also goes a long way to discount Nau's belief that relationalism somehow smuggles utopia and peace into its conceptual worldview. Quite the opposite: a relational approach is essential to understanding collective catastrophe as much as it is to any other form of change. What we lose in the shelter of provincial humanist thought is the degree to which global politics depends precisely on the nonindividualistic capacities of human beings. Ought we let political realism off the hook if a president did not "mean" to cause a nuclear war or end civilization, or would the habituation of strategic thinking, nuclear development and deployment, and thousands of hours of drilling officers sitting in bunkers somehow find its way back to the logics of deterrence and escalation dominance that were simultaneously inspired by the vast networks of nuclear capability and that enlivened the circulation and modernization of those nuclear networks? The nuclear world we live in goes well beyond the four-part Weberian schema of social action described by Nau in Chapter 6. Likewise, unfortunately the inhuman and often indifferently autogenocidal character of the nuclear sovereign assemblage calls into question whether becoming part of the connected nature of things leads anywhere in particular, much less to what Kurki calls a "not only human... planetary politics."[16] Instead, relationalism merely is. The fact of the relational world may be as necessary for the possibility of a more humane planetary ethos as it is for the techno-human death cult of the nuclear balance of terror. However, the insight that we live in such a world is not sufficient to explain the inevitability of either outcome.

[16] Chapter 3.

4.2.1 Discovery, Defense, and Design

Unlike a spear, or even a rifle, nuclear weapons are technics of an entirely different order. For a fission or fusion detonation to take place, sufficient control must exist to alter the common conditions of the physical properties of reality. Fermi's achievement at Chicago Pile-1 on December 2, 1942 is exotic to terrestrial life. The capacity to achieve that feat requires vast cooperation between large numbers of humans, apparatuses, and the rare elements which lend themselves to being pulled apart at the subatomic seam. To date, no one can build a nuclear weapon in their basement by themselves. Each and every nuclear artifact is the congealed efforts of hundreds, if not thousands, of human actors and countless technical, mathematical, and elemental entities. And this is all before we have considered how to target, deploy, or scenario-plan the use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons have no earthbound correlate and are only possible because of a vast scientific-technical-socio-political order encountering the special properties of a relatively rare material rather than the genius of a few individuals. Methodological individualism fails entirely at understanding even one component of the nuclear arsenal: nuclear weapons. The novel or exotic properties of radioactive material and the near-accidental discovery of radiation by Marie Curie, the subsequent fits and starts on the pathway to develop a sustained chain reaction, and the hundreds of different mathematical, physical, chemical, and geographic discoveries that accumulated to make possible the now refined high-yield ICBM all challenge a simple, linear, explanation of the current state of affairs as being the result of planning or decision-making as we would understand it within the frame of the moral or strategic individual.

But that is just history. Can we not begin with the individual once a president has inherited the vast assemblage of the nuclear weapon? However, the basis on which that individual emerged as an American president for which a nuclear weapon makes sense, or is at one's command, is no less complex. The security environment and the necessary interpretation of the environment that made nuclear weapons desirable is outside the decisional character of the president. In time, the security environment preceded the president. Practically speaking, the relevant nuclear knowledge is not present or directly under the jurisdiction of a president. Furthermore, the decision to launch or not launch is the result of hundreds of daily security briefings, which are each the result of the interpretation of thousands of analysts, which are the result of intelligence and data collected, sorted, coded, and processed by myriads of

individuals. And what of the frame by which each of these analysts comes to understand the significance of what they see?

Therefore, the origin story, or what others have called an onto-story, of the nuclear president is neither a legal-moral history, a strategic history, nor a technical history – it is all of these at once. If the nuclear assemblage is all of these things, there is not one place, or a first place, to identify as an origin; instead, the preference for an onto-story is to think about how something emerges not for the first time but again. We start in the middle because there is no beginning of an assemblage, there is only the tangle of its relations.[17] In short, despite the fact that they appear to be built more uniformly from human things such as perceptions, representations, ideas, and stories, the strategic environment and the legal-moral environment are no less assembled and distributed than the highly inhuman technics of nuclear weapons.

Because of its significance to both legal-moral history and strategic thinking, I will focus here on the Cuban Missile Crisis. For the missile crisis to take place, we need to track and understand the missile as another highly complex technical component of the nuclear assemblage.[18] Before the missile, the American Strategic Air Command was rapid and destructive by prenuclear standards of warfare, but the increasing desire to centralize decision-making and the state's destructive capacity at a distance follows the course of the missile not the airplane. To achieve the transformation from air-power to missile power, teams had to be assembled. Codenamed Operation Paper Clip, the United States employed Werner von Braun, the leading Nazi scientist, to develop rocket technology for production in the United States by extending the capability of the V2 rocket developed and deployed by the Third Reich during World War II. The first two designs, the Redstone IRBM and Jupiter IRBM, were relatively clumsy Intermediated Range Ballistic Missiles. The first actually *Intercontinental* Ballistic Missile was the Atlas, which was made operational in 1959. The Atlas was cumbersome, slow, and subject to attack because of its above-ground launch pad. The first SLBM went underwater in the USS George Washington, on November 15, 1960.[19] The SLBM locked in Second Strike capability because of the inability to target and kill submarines in a decapitating first-strike. The first generation of ICBMs that fit the sovereign image of intercontinental

[17] For extended discussion and methodological defense of starting in the middle or "in media res," see Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020: 99–118.

[18] For a relational account of how the missile becomes a dominant form of warfare, see MacKenzie 2001.

[19] Norris, Kosiak, and Schwartz 1998: 136–37.

exchange, the Minuteman, was deployed two years after the first SLBM was put on alert, on October 27, 1962.

These technological achievements gave contour to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The technological achievement of the Minuteman created the violence capability for a truly intercontinental conflict. Despite the name, the nuclear sovereign assemblage is not primarily radioactive. Its sensory and informatic character is equally important. If you cannot see anything or know anything, what then? Therefore, the reliability and clarity of U2 photographs were also essential to the crisis in Cuba and how the nuclear sovereign assemblage defined the model of executive leadership and sovereign control that emerged from those fourteen October days.

Kennedy's minute-by-minute crisis-management decision-making was a highly complex system of institutional organization, technological capacity, ideology, and leadership, each constituted by and feeding back into the other. What emerged was a new conception of time and warfare that only escalated and consolidated sovereign power and technological development further, but neither sovereignty nor technological development, nor even geopolitical competition, would fit primacy or firstness, much less exogenous characteristics of what scientifically we would call a "cause."

From the perspective of those witnessing the event in real time, at no other time did the American president seem as significantly in charge. From Arthur Schlesinger's front row seat, the Cuban Missile Crisis was the very paradigm of a methodological individualism: "the management of the great foreign policy crisis of the Kennedy years – the Soviet attempt to install nuclear missiles in Cuba – came as if in proof of the proposition that the nuclear age left no alternative to unilateral presidential decision."[20]

And yet, immediately after this statement, Schlesinger points out that Kennedy did not make his decision alone: "Kennedy took the decision into his own hands, but it is to be noted that he did not make it in imperial solitude" Instead, he created and relied upon a special executive committee.[21] While commendable and imperative to the situation, there is nothing democratic or republican about such a committee. Nor is there any means of review or accountability for the committee's actions. As Schlesinger succinctly puts it, "Congress played no role at all."[22] While I take Schlesinger's point that the procedures of the US constitutions were made obsolete, it was not the replacement of Congress – a collective body – by the president – a single individual – that took

[20] Schlesinger 2004: 173. [21] Schlesinger 2004: 173. [22] Schlesinger 2004: 174.

place. Instead, one collectivity – Congress – was replaced by another collectivity – the nuclear sovereign assemblage. One may be less democratic than the other, but not because of its unitary nature.

The question, then, is what enabled a president and a single room of advisors 1,200 miles from the potential battlefield to take command? President Kennedy may have been commander-in-chief in this situation, but he was not in any sense in control or even in charge in the way Schlesinger imagined it. The ability to implement extensive networks and organizational changes such that presidential authorization from one mobile source could predictably command the whole of the US strategic nuclear forces creates a new kind of executive authority resting with the network rather than with the messages in the network.

As compared to an actual command, where the charisma and respect of the leader may be at play, or legal authority relying on institutional legitimacy, in the nuclear arsenal the bully pulpit is replaced by the "football." Presidential authority becomes more significantly a question of signal fidelity. By April 1967, less than five years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1,000 Minuteman ICBMS were built and deployed.[23] Following the Cuban Missile Crisis and the new nuclear force structure and capability, "the football" – aka "the button" or "trigger" – was always with the president. Although technical more than political, the football is not a literal button, but contains a SIOP decision handbook and the codes so that the president can authenticate that he is indeed the president. The actual "go" codes are decentralized and housed at secure facilities throughout the country.[24] The incredible breadth of telephone coverage and its redundancy established by AT&T by the 1950s made it possible for the president to communicate from any location to virtually any other location. The result is what Paul Bracken calls a "self-healing network," depriving the Soviet Union of central communication targets.[25] By the 1970s, Command, Control, Communications and early warning networks (intelligence) (C3I) accomplished the goal of bringing "the individual pieces of a defense system together into a coherent overall structure."[26] From the perspective of a strong advocate of the system, Bruce Blair, this is meant to be total; "once deterrence fails, it fails completely." Blair's only concern is to maintain an "undeniable capacity to destroy the Soviet target base in a retaliatory strike."[27]

In terms of presidential consolidations of sovereignty, deterrence made it possible for one human being to be the head of the forces from almost

[23] Norris, Kosiak and Schwartz 1998: 131.
[24] Blair, Pike and Schwartz, 1998: 222. Ford 1986. [25] Bracken 1983: 207–8.
[26] Bracken 1983: 179. [27] Blair 1985: 5.

any location, facilitating the already desirable centralization of nuclear-war-making authority in the president. Neither the sovereign nor sovereignty are simply *present* or *absent* in a decision or the ability to make decision. The sovereignty or authority of the president must be *built* out of wire, telephone poles, hardened targets, rapid transport, and early warning systems. Authority is coterminus with capability, and the possibility of a decision is coterminus with the sensory infrastructure that makes that authority possible, further routinized by the targeting which was determined by scenario planning and war gaming that both influenced the development of technical capability and were influenced by the limits and capacities of technical capability. In this relational account, individual accountability is submerged in a variety of assemblages and relationships.

4.2.2 From Presidential Powers to the Nuclear Sovereign Assemblage

The very effort to secure the survivability and centrality of the American president's decision and the effort to build a sovereign that could command a nuclear arsenal created the very techno-strategic ecosystem in which the American president became a mascot rather than a quarterback. Here I will try to theorize how to understand the ambiguous role of the sovereign in the assemblage of nuclear sovereignty. Furthermore, I will argue that the anthropocentric image, or Schmittian ideal, of one *human* in charge is insufficient for understanding how the event of a nuclear war would take place.[28]

In Schlesinger's account of nuclear decision-making we have a stark image of nuclear weapons as the totalization of sovereignty rather than the end of the sovereign. The nuclear state of emergency sidesteps democracy because it is possible for a single individual to decide and to go to war and to finish that war in 30 minutes. At first glance, this apocalyptic diagnosis seems accurate. Nuclear weapons at current numbers could destroy the condition of human life as we know it. And, given the structure of the US nuclear command, any Congressional or popular attempts to stop the process of nuclear launch would likely be in vain. Politics and a democratic balance of power require time: time to react, time to respond, time to debate, time to strategize, time to implement. ICBMs nullify time. Nuclear decision-making is, as Deudney says, "dominated by the dogma of speed."[29]

[28] Consider how indebted International Relations is to a sovereign that is a single individual. Carl Schmitt's vision of the political as they who decide on the exception is common well beyond those who cite Schmitt 2007 explicitly.

[29] Deudney 1995: 26.

While the nuclear state of affairs runs contrary to the possibility of democracy, it does not favor the autocrat – at least, not as we would understand it as an all-powerful individual. The threat of the *extreme case* has obscured the actual case that presents opportunities for intervention as well as a very different image of decision-making and the decider. Politics, whether micro or macro, does not begin and end with the sovereign decision; the sovereign decision emerges from a relay of forces, connections, and other previous decisions, resonances, and actants that are presupposed in each subsequent iteration of the sovereign decision, each layered into multiple streams of time, perception, and medium of relation. Even an increasingly automated nuclear arsenal requires the participation of millions of people and countless networks, objects, tectonic stability, stable solar flare activity, and on and on. Focusing on individual accountability, as does Nau (Chapter 6), does not help us explain how we got to such a vulnerable and contingent state of things any more than it tells us how to get out of it. The decision and the decider only appear singular when we truncate time and space to the moment the president "pushes the button." Or, to put it another way, the president as nuclear sovereign only appears if we are primed by methodological individualism to look for an already constituted, single decider, in space and time, to explain a nuclear event. Here, I think we can see precisely what Kurki means when she writes "At the heart of liberal approaches is an acceptance of not only states as a key institutional reference point, but also, fundamentally, the *separation of human institutions from the 'environment' as a background to be controlled and managed*."[30] While I am not sure there is the tight connection Kurki sees between the relational perspective and a particular political ethos, I am fully in agreement that analytically we cannot understand the complex arrangements of the world and the novelties that emerge from them if we hide in a Newtonian reductionism or narrowly Weberian humanism. What we do with that understanding is unfortunately also beyond the scope of humanism as much as it is the individual. What the knowledge will become, what processes it is folded into and intensifies exceeds the control of an individual or even collective of individuals. To put it another way, the capacity of the nuclear sovereign assemblage and its resilient cybernetic network was also indicative of a relational worldview that displaced unitary command structures and more ancient ideas about the unity of the executive.

So, while real danger exists, the destructive capacity of the system does not rest with the president. To illustrate this point, I want to keep the president as sovereign in torsion with the assemblage of sovereignty. In so

[30] Chapter 3 .

doing, I want to consider how an alternative image of sovereignty – that is, the nuclear sovereign assemblage – accounts for the discrepancy between nuclear authority and capability. The goal is to provide a more-than-human account of the nuclear-predicament account that sees beyond the moment of nuclear decision to the broader landscape of atomic politics, and to take one further step down the relational rabbit hole.

The goal of an ecological approach is not to replace sovereignty with its assemblage. Certainly, the sovereign decision is a powerful, expressive, performative act of individuation, and is highly effective in mobilizing populations of things. A sovereign nuclear decision even more so, but such a decision is not self-constituted or self-causal. The processes of individuation and mobilization require a field of relations and resonances from which the sovereign decision emerges. The decision itself is also not decisive. The sovereign – in so far as they are constituted by the enunciation of decisions – is a condensation point for a national ethos, affect, and institutional individuation. Each decision is constitutive not of the "sovereign" alone, as is the case in Schlesinger's observation, but of a sovereign point of identification or reified consistency which can become habitual but need not – and in fact cannot – remain static or immobile.

What I hope is becoming clear is that a focus on the ecology or assemblage of nuclear sovereignty need not supplant or ignore a degree of human involvement in the signification of actors and events. Rather, the point is that *real* networks or fundamental entanglements of things are further complicated by the way humans participate in meaning-making in those entanglements. The task here is to demonstrate the degree to which the emergence of a discourse of sovereignty ought not to be mistaken for the actual nuclear sovereign assemblage that amplifies and makes possible the event of nuclear war. We see only the effects which we correlate to the sovereign, often through secondhand accounts or the personality politics of media streams.

The impersonal character of the presidential position in the nuclear sovereign assemblage could in part explain why there is so little transition time between each sovereign and so little variation in the intensifying breadth of war powers. The sovereign is a reference point or index for a history of actions and events made more complex by the function it is believed to serve – a body, but not the body in the sense of an individual. It is a body that is built from the matter of decisions. It is the titular focal point of an assemblage, a mascot not a quarterback.[31]

[31] Fuller 1998.

By way of a crude time line one could say that sovereignty in the United States has been characterized by three periods. 1. The republican model, whereby the inherent advantage or tendency toward centralization through war plays out as a juridical struggle between the three branches of government. Prior to an intensely mediated society the role of the American public is limited but not nonexistent. 2. The autocratic model, whereby the development of nuclear weapons enables the president to ignore the other two branches because war can begin and end without a single soldier putting their boots on. 3. The assemblage model, whereby the means of war becomes dispersed such that the sovereign's function becomes more like a refrain to give consistency to a dispersed, pluripotential network with each strand on the cusp of escaping or disrupting the state/military apparatus.

The transition from each stage is roughly cybernetic in so far as it is periodized by the evolution of "codes." In the first model we have a code of conduct or an expectation of behavior: the gentleman sovereign. In the second there is the attempt to centralize the C3I of nuclear war through a centralization of codes vested in the president. Lastly, there is the dispersal of codes such that the system can maximize survivability but the result is a system that can no longer secure hierarchy or sovereignty in relation to war. Instead, the sovereign survives as an expressive point of identification. War then becomes more obviously emergent. Resonances and relations throughout the nuclear sovereign assemblage exist in a continuum between nonwar and war, depending on the necessity for testing, alert, or accidental machinic statements provoked by weather balloons, reactor meltdowns, or acute paranoia.

One danger of continuing to sustain the individualist fiction that the nuclear arsenal can be wielded by the president directly is that it undermines the capacity to resist and steer nuclear politics. A new constitution, more Congressional oversight, more or less automation, or electing a president who is more moral or strategic would not be sufficient to alter how highly distributed and deeply embedded the assemblage of the nuclear arsenal is. A nuclear crisis reduced to the personality or authority of a president tells us little about the nature or possibility of a nuclear conflict. Behind the curtain of the American presidency lies a vast machine-like vista well beyond the control of any *one* person, or even any one ideology or system of governmentality.

4.3 Conclusion

In the case of nuclear command and its ambivalent relationship to sovereignty as imagined in our habitual descriptions of presidential authority,

I have tried to show how a relational approach to nuclear sovereignty as opposed to either a materialist or ideational approach is necessary to understand how embedded and at times perpetual the infrastructure of nuclear violence has become. What is presented here is not sufficient to make that case indisputably or lay out what new mode of political action would be equivalent to the complexity of each problem. That is beyond what can be done in one chapter. However, I hope that the slightly different account of the problem that more fully accounts for the relational complexity and inhuman character of nuclear command as ecological problems can open up practical questions about how purely individualist approaches or purely discursive approaches blunt our understanding of how these problems work. To craft from that a way forward would need to center in some sense on the very practical and material condition by which territories, spaces, and habits of each encounter are built and repeated, often below the radar of anything we would call a decision.

However, the deadlock of arms-reduction treaties and even contemporary efforts at threat reductions, are, from a relational point of view, much easier to understand. When the more concrete assemblage of nuclear power becomes part of the discussion the interests of the strategic actors seemingly wielding the weapons, as well as tired narratives about the failure of "political will" or "leadership," can be displaced in favor of the nuclear infrastructures which are in some sense more durable than our political systems. The nuclear sovereign assemblage has a momentum and a trajectory well beyond the intentions or agency of those who thought themselves its maker. In a sense, then, Nau may be right that "individual freedom is at stake," but not because relationalism somehow "dissolved it" – although wouldn't it be a neat trick if the ontological framework of the universe could be altered by a compelling argument? Instead, individual freedom, in the way conceived by Nau's reading of Weber, may be at risk precisely because it never existed in the first place, and that is precisely why the predicaments we find ourselves in, from a nuclear armed world to an imploding ecosystem, come to pass in the first place.

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