Anarchy in the Game of Thrones

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has come to rethink how the concept of anarchy captures the fragmented plurality of contemporary world politics. This article continues that inquiry through an interpretative reading of the popular TV-series Game of Thrones. The appeal of this show partly derives from its animation of medieval tropes to interpellate with contemporary global politics; it echoes power struggles constitutive of today's international relations. However, while the fantasy show portrays conflictual relations between different claimants of the Iron Throne in Westeros, it also composes subaltern voices amidst these violent claims to power. This article concludes that such an interpretation diversifies the meanings of anarchy, as both violence and freedom, in the 'game of thrones' of contemporary politics.

Keywords Neo-medievalism · Anarchism · Globalization · International relations · Subalternity

Anarchy and neo-medievalism

Anarchy has since long served to conceptualize the prerequisites of the modern world system. The notion of anarchy exposes how political and economic international relations—in the absence of a global government—can be comprehended as a perpetual conflict to appropriate such a power vacuum. In this sense anarchy is understood as "pathological but productive" (Havercroft and Prichard 2017); in a global anarchical society it produces what neorealist Waltz (1979) once called "order without an orderer." In the seminal piece *The anarchical society*, Bull (2012

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[1977], p. 246) suggested a move toward what he called a *neo-medieval* order that relocates nation-state power to "a structure of overlapping structures and cross-cutting loyalties that hold all peoples together in a universal society while at the same time avoiding the concentration inherent in a world government." The contemporary world order is in this sense understood to reassemble that of the medieval European world, a fragmented anarchical society of overlapping and incomplete sovereignties (Holsinger 2016).

The concept of neo-medievalism has frequently been recharged to analyze, for instance, digital communication (Kobrin 1998), international law (Arend 1999), the EU-project (Brommesson 2008), civil war (Winn 2004), and global warfare (Ligouri Bunker 2016). Whereas the medieval analogy in Bull's understanding has a normative connotation, as a catalyst for functional differentiation, cooperation, and diplomacy in the international system, critical scholars have warned that this idealized understanding of the medieval order is inadequate for describing the reality of contemporary world politics (Cerny and Prichard 2017), and that it has come to enforce, as Holsinger (2007) has it, "a paradigm of neoconservative intellectual renewal." Previous research has also shown how the imagery of the Middle Ages is frequently reproduced in popular culture (De Groot 2009), and how medieval tropes are employed to animate contemporary political issues (Eco 1986; Elliott 2017; Robinson 2012). As historian Amy Kaufman (2016, p. 56) puts it: "The medieval era is the dumping ground of the contemporary imagination."

In this article, we put anarchy and neo-medievalism in dialogue with a popular depiction of the medieval imagery: the TV-series *Game of Thrones*. This immensely successful screen adaptation of R. R. Martin's epic fantasy story, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, portrays a societal order that seeks to mimic a popular understanding of the feudalism of medieval Europe (Larrington 2017). As Game of Thrones (GoT) has become infamous for continuously broadcasting horrific gender relations, sexualized violence, rape, incest, and child abuse (Carroll 2018), its defensive legitimacy builds precisely on the alleged historicity of a patriarchal Middle Ages. However, whereas scholars have argued that GoT serve to normalize sexualized violence (Clapton and Shepherd 2017), stabilize aggressive masculinity (Kaufman 2016), and simply to broadcast rape culture (Ferreday 2015), others have to the contrary detected in GoT positive portraits of gender diversity (Askey 2018), and female agency (Abbasiyannejad and Supian 2016; Mitchell 2018). Likewise, the world-political framing of the GoT-show carries not only a pedagogical potential to teach International Relations (Young et al. 2018), but also to push for plural political agendas, such as climate change policies in the US (Milkoreit 2019), and left-populism in Spain (Virino and Rodríguez Ortega 2019). The GoT-show, then, seems to compose disparate narratives. Precisely such a plurality enables, we argue, a deeper understanding of the manifold and parallel workings in contemporary world politics.

In this vein, we set out to diversify the meanings of anarchy, as both violence and freedom, in the 'game of thrones' of contemporary world politics. Such an endeavor answers to ongoing re-conceptualization of international anarchy in recent scholarship. For instance, the concept of anarchy has been reassessed as a political possibility (Cudworth and Hobden 2010), an acknowledgment of freedom of states rather than conflict between them (Bain 2019), and as a conceptualization of the global

social movement nexus (Turner 1998). In this same, explorative vein, Cerny and Prichard (2017) suggest that anarchy could be used to conceptualize "economic and political power as disaggregated and decentralized, networked and plural." Such an approach challenges Wendt's (1992) personification of state power to instead conceptualize anarchy in terms of pluralization (Prichard 2017).

To try out this conceptual meaning of anarchy, we will here discuss the unfolding fragmentation of Westeros, and its neighboring polities, as depicted in the eight seasons of the GoT-show. Our analysis builds on a structuralist tradition of interpretation (Lévi-Strauss 1963), and more specifically a methodological reading of fictional narratives as societal allegories (Jameson 1982, 2019), while at the same time guarding against comparative simplifications as well as reductions of narrative multivocality (Kirby 2017). Through this interpretative framework, analyzing allegorical linkages between the GoT-world and contemporary global politics, we aim to diversify the meanings of anarchy. The following section will, accordingly, outline the *Anarchical society of Westeros* as an allegory of our own global politics. We will here analyze the plural and *Competing claims to power* as well as the *Subaltern voices* registered in the GoT-saga. Based on that interpretative reading, we proceed to discuss how diversifying the *Meanings of anarchy* can guide scholarly analyses of global (and local) politics.

The anarchical society of Westeros

The *Game of Thrones* is in the TV-series played out in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, a polity united by a monarch sitting on the Iron Throne in capital King's Landing.[1] In the very opening episode of the first season (s1e1), King Robert Baratheon sets the conflictual tone by explaining to his warden of the North: "There's a war coming, Ned. I don't know when, I don't know who we'll be fighting, but it's coming." The outbreak of the war is even more sudden than expected. When the king dies during a boar hunt, the Seven Kingdoms are soon in open war over the Iron Throne. Its rightful claim is complicated by the discovery that the king's children are not his own. This scenario prompts the *game of thrones*—the struggle for power in Westeros. While some aim to rule from the Iron Throne, others scuffle for a kingdom, a knighthood, independence from previous alliances, or simply for remembrance. It is a violent and foul *game*, branded by swiftly changing loyalties. As bluntly declared by a counsellor to one of the more promising claimants to the Iron Throne, Daenerys Targaryen: "all rulers are either butchers or meat" (Daario Naharis, s5e7). As the GoT-narrative unfolds, the game board changes: new alliances are formed, alleged protagonists disappear, and others emerge. Along the eight seasons of the TV-series, the game becomes ever more intense, treacherous, and deadly. Meanwhile, an imminent threat of complete extinction, carried by the Night King's fast-growing Army of the Dead, is used to build new military alliances

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[1] For an informative overview of the GoT-world, see *A Wiki of Ice and Fire* at www.westeros.org.

in a fight that reaches "beyond houses and honor and oaths," as Brienne of Tarth eventually has it late into the story (s7e7).

The fantasy setting is depicted as a template of the imaginary, pre-modern Europe. The GoT-world is strictly hierarchical; family and kinship are central to its political organization. The Realm has no standing army and no centralized monopoly of violence. Instead, order is upheld through alliances and marriages between powerful families. Such a societal order resembles vassal systems in medieval Europe in which the principals, in return for protection, provided soldiers for the rulers. Moreover, the economic system in GoT likewise brings to mind historical European feudal societies in which agricultural land was the chief means of production and working people mainly were engaged in rural subsistent farming, urban handicrafts, or a gendered division of labor in brothels and battlefields. This system, in turn, depends on a patron-client relationship where peasants access land in exchange for taxation, political loyalty, and provision of soldiers.

The Seven Kingdoms have different laws, rules for succession, beliefs, and customs, while there are some similarities regarding the social organization and the 'common' tongue. Westeros differs in this regard from its neighboring polities. In the far North, a massive wall separates the Realm from the 'wildlings'. These people live in egalitarian communities, with a limited division of labor, and are in a constant struggle over scarce resources. In the South-East inland of Essos, across the Narrow Sea, the nomadic Dothraki people make their living by plundering. Essos also hold the mercantile Free Cities as well as the slave economies defined by city-states of Slaver's Bay.

However, significant aspects of the GoT-world bring dissonance to the medieval analogy. There are overpowering weapons of mass destruction (dragons and wildfire), and biomedical technology is used for warfare ("The Mountain"). Coinage is centralized, and the Iron Bank of Braavos also offers an advanced international credit system—all unrecognized in medieval Europe. Moreover, the rural Westeros is organized through a religious blend of communitarianism and peasant rebellion, which became a political factor in Europe first in the mid-1500s. Daenerys Targaryen's military expansion furthermore illustrates a constitutional imperialism that denotes the peak of expansive modernization in the mid-twentieth century. However, as we will show in this article, it is precisely this dual resemblance and difference, between medieval Europe and the GoT-world, that makes it a fruitful allegory for contemporary international relations, and for examining anarchy and *neo*-medievalism therein. In the following two subsections we accordingly extract from the GoT-saga what we, inspired by Spivak (1988), call subaltern voices, silent whispers that coexist with competing claims to power.

Competing claims to power

The GoT-show depicts, above all, a foul and most *violent* game of thrones. While the Realm is hierarchically ordered from the Iron Throne, uniting the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, that order is undoubtedly fragile, always on the brink of war and chaos. Powerful families are on constant alert, to grasp political opportunities, to

mobilize defense against real or imagined military threats. Although the monarchal rule is legitimized by the promise of order and peace (at least by Stannis' and Daenerys' administrations), the game of thrones seems to always re-invoke conflict. That duality is enacted in a brief conversation, a dispute over Lord Varys' firm belief in 'good governance'—and the callous power grabbing of Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish' (s3e6):

> **Varys**: I did what I did for the good of the realm.
>
> **Littlefinger**: The realm? Do you know what the realm is? It's the thousand blades of Aegon's enemies [The Iron Throne]. A story we agree to tell each other over and over 'till we forget that it's a lie.
>
> **Varys**: But what do we have left once we abandon the lie? Chaos. A gaping pit waiting to swallow us all.
>
> **Littlefinger**: Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder.

This dialogue indicates how competing claims to power emanate from different incentives. Varys is depicted throughout the series as ruthlessly calculating but driven by a genuine ambition of maintaining a Hobbesian peace. Littlefinger, on the other hand, is portrayed as always hungry for more power. Nevertheless, both recognize the rules of engagement defining the game of thrones; the fundaments of the social and economic order are their common denominator. In the GoT-world the game is indeed played foully, but always with respect to these rules of engagement. For instance, when the powerful North breaks out from the Realm to declare independence under their own king, an initiative soon parroted by the Iron Islands, neither question the societal order nor the sovereignty of the competing kingdoms. The game of thrones is the structuring reality that defines agency in terms of power grabbing.

The claims to power in Westeros is indeed dependent on the capacity of violence, manifested by loyal soldiers, mercenary armies, weaponry, and warfare strategy. The *motivations* behind the claims to power, however, are plural. Littlefinger's motivation is to climb "the ladder" to seize ever more power. Such an egocentric motivation is also enacted by the assassin Bronn, who coldly provides his services to whoever offers economic power. In the final season, Bronn legitimates his alleged amorality by arguing that he is merely playing the game of thrones (s8e4): "That's how all the great houses started, isn't it? With a hard bastard who was good at killing people. Kill a few hundred people, they make you a lord. Kill a few thousand, they make you king." Closely related to Littlefinger's and Bronn's conceited claims to power is a motivation emanating from a realist, self-help assumption in the collective sense—the dynastical safeguarding. This motivation is notably embodied by Cersei Lannister, who early in the show (s1e4) declares that "everyone who isn't us is an enemy," and Olenna Tyrell who puts this approach even more pointedly (s6e4): "Many will die no matter what we do. Better them than us."

GoT furthermore holds claims to power based on religious beliefs. Religion is, in fact, an imperative factor in the Game of Thrones. Divination is part of the very legal system in Westeros; litigation can be settled through trial by combat,

understood in terms of divine judgement. It is intimately associated with Stannis' claim to power, and the Nordic separatist war is too motivated by religious differences between themselves and the Southern kingdoms (s1e10). The North, like the Free People beyond the wall, worship the Old Gods in contrast to the official religion: The Faith of the Seven. The Faith is, in turn, more fiercely exercised by The Sparrows who seek its radicalized revival. Furthermore, the Iron Born worship a Sea God, the Dothraki pray to the Great Stallion, and the people of Braavos bow to death disguised as the Many-Faced God. The Lord of Light is primarily worshiped in Essos, but also in Westeros by Stannis Baratheon and The Brotherhood without Banners. Religious beliefs hereby traverse dynastical loyalties in the political geography of Westeros. While some of these religions co-exist—many swear by both the Old Gods and the Seven—other deities, like the Lord of Light, require total worship and conversion of unbelievers. Religion is indeed a motivating factor in the competing claims to power.

At the same time, if we return to Lord Varys, the emergent protagonist who recurrently shifts allegiance according to his political conviction, we recognize a non-religious, or secular, claim to power. Varys embodies a firm belief in a particular form of 'good governance' to save the people from, as he calls it (s3e6), a "gaping pit waiting to swallow us all." In his quest for such governance, he begins supporting Daenerys Targaryen's claim to the Iron Throne. In time Varys becomes a part of her governmental administration, along with other characters also choosing to abandon previous loyalties (Tyrion Lannister, Jorah Mormont, Daario Naharis, Barristan Selmy, Missandei, Grey Worm). The Daenerys administration bears in several regards the banner of good governance, primarily as it seeks to abolish slavery and implement economic redistribution in the city-states of Essos. At the same time, Daenerys holds a tremendous capacity for violence; she orders the most brutal armies along with her ferocious dragons. It is precisely this combined characteristic that motivates Tyrion Lannister to join Daenerys' quest, which is an act of severe disloyalty to his own family's claim to power. Tyrion's motivation for supporting Daenerys is exposed in their introductory meeting, in which he calls her terrible (s5e8):

Daenerys: I'm terrible?

Tyrion: I've heard stories.

Daenerys: Why did you travel to the far side of the world to meet someone terrible?

Tyrion: To see if you were the right kind of terrible.

Daenerys: Which kind is that?

Tyrion: The kind that prevents your people from being even more so.

As Tyrion, along with Varys, becomes increasingly significant in the narrative, so is the idea of a contractual submission to a state so powerful that it prevents societal collapse into chaos. Daenerys is depicted as having potential—with the right administration to tame her violent and authoritarian tendencies—to implement precisely

the sort of governance necessary for peaceful order in the Hobbesian sense. When first using a weapon of mass destruction (one of her dragons), she motivates for Tyrion her extreme violence in terms of good governance (s7e5): "We both want to help people. We can only help them from a position of strength." Tyrion accepts this, later explaining to Sansa Stark (s8e4): "Every good ruler needs to inspire a bit of fear." Deprived of both fertility and living relatives, Daenerys' succession cannot rely on kinship but needs a political program in its place to prevail. As a self-acclaimed Breaker of Chains, she accordingly builds this politics on conditional choice; she asserts the freedom to be loyal to her governance. Hence Daenerys' claim to power is not based on religious belief but on the promise of security, order, and liberation (s8e4): "I'm here to free the world from tyrants. That is my destiny and I will serve it, no matter the cost."

In other words, the players of the game have diverse motivations; the competing claims to can be *egoistic* (Littlefinger, Bronn), *dynastical* (Cersei Lannister, Olenna Tyrell), *religious* (The Brotherhood without Banners, The Sparrows), or *political* (Lord Varys, Tyrion Lannister). Hence the anarchical society of Westeros, with its fragmented and plural claims to power, brings inevitable struggle, disorder, and suffering. This conflictual state of nature—the game of thrones—does not implicate "order without an orderer." Neither threat of extreme violence or faith-based claims to power bring order to the Realm, nor does the conflictual situation itself. The promise of peace is not even fulfilled in the light of an imminent extinction. In the final seasons, as the Night King's Army of the Dead becomes an alarming danger, the game of thrones is temporarily paused. The competing houses settle for a truce to join forces against the Night King that endangers life itself. However, not even this immediate threat of total extinction brings solidarity and order in Westeros; Cersei Lannister, flanked by Euron Greyjoy, seizes the opportunity to restore her weakened position. War is once more initiated, again fueled by mercenary armies.

Anarchy, in this regard, means endless conflict, struggle, and war. We will soon return to discuss how this observation charts us to highlight the fragmented meanings of anarchy in the study of contemporary world politics. To do this, however, we must first illustrate how the meaning of *anarchy-as-freedom* allows us to detect peripheral agency, beyond hegemonic claims to power, by listening to the unruly voices of the subaltern.

Subaltern voices

Whereas the GoT-show has become infamous for its graphic depiction of sexualized violence, exploitation, and abuse, we argue that it—alike the contemporary world(s)—also contains meaningful stories of other socialites and polities. We call them *subaltern voices*; articulations at the political and social margins that appear incomprehensible to the claimants of power.

Since loyalty and honor is regarded as moral currency in The Seven Kingdoms, allegiance-shifting becomes a narrative driver in the GoT-storyline; Robb Stark's marriage with Talisa Maegyr leads to the subsequent "Red Wedding"; Sandor Clegane deserts the Lannister army and begins an indefinite voyage towards

resurrection; Arya Stark abandons the order of Faceless Men to retort her dynastical claim to power; Jamie Lannister mutinies against "The Mad King" and even his beloved Queen Cersei. Whereas these and other ruptures of disloyalty serve to intensify the conflictual game of thrones, they also indicate, we argue, deeper workings of defiance at play in the GoT-world. Take, for example, The Brotherhood that mobilizes peasants and rural workers against the powerful—but without making claims to the Iron Throne. This Brotherhood without Banners (a most unruly label in a world structured around family dynasties) defies the authority of both monarchs and local lords by refusing to pay taxes and enlist as soldiers. Another defiance of playing the game of thrones is animated by the autonomous community set up in the rural Riverlands by a deserted soldier converted to pacifism (s6e7). This religious community, along with The Brotherhood, subverts the dualism between a violent anarchical 'order' on the one hand and full-out chaos on the other. They also demonstrate how religious belief not only fuels competing claims to power, but also functions to motivate resistance.

The GoT-saga here portrays how emancipation is explored by *not* playing the game of thrones. A most curious thread here, one that brings to the fore a meaning of *anarchy-as-freedom*, is the myriad of beyond-wall Free Folk communities lumped into the pejorative term 'wildlings'. The first two wildlings we get to know are Osha and then Ygritte, two fierce and independent women who proudly present themselves as members of the Free Folk. This self-declared character of freedom is animated by Osha risking her life to rescue Bran and Rickon Stark from Theon Greyjoy's violent sack of Winterfell (s2e6). The first independent act of the Free Folk, depicted in GoT, is thus to secure freedom not only for Osha herself, but also for two children in immediate danger. We are then introduced to the insubordinate appeal of Ygritte. Through a belligerent love affair with the dutiful and compliant Jon Snow, a bond sealed in a desolate cave beyond the wall, Ygritte becomes eager to convert Jon to the Free Folk's customs. "You could be free, too. You don't need to live your whole life taking commands from old men," she tells Jon (s2e7). "I could teach you how to do it."

Nevertheless, as Ygritte and Jon eventually become enemies in battle due to their conflicting loyalties, their last dialogue—Ygritte is dying in Jon's arms—at once animates the potential and impossibility of exiting the warlike conflicts that define the GoT-world (s4e9):

> **Ygritte**: Do you remember the cave? We should have stayed in the cave.
>
> **Jon**: We'll go back there.
>
> **Ygritte**: You know nothing, Jon Snow.

The final, characteristic conundrum of Ygritte highlights that she accepts what Jon denies: that their emancipatory experience was always conditional, temporary, a transient moment of freedom in dissonance with the world around them. By this token, the GoT-show repeatedly narrates how individual and collective attempts to emancipation—the freedom not to play—ultimately collapses under the game of thrones. As violence becomes normalized, through ever-intensifying

wars, the pacifist community in The Riverlands is soon massacred. Then, the once Free Folk becomes incorporated in the politics of the Realm. At first, Stannis wants to recruit the wildlings, at this point his war captives, for a military quest to seize the Iron Throne. "If they swear to follow me, I'll pardon them," Stannis assures Jon when asking him to convince the wildling leader Mance Rayder to enlist the Free Folk (s5e1). "I'll declare them citizens of the Realm. […] I'll offer them their lives and their freedom if Mance kneels before me and swears his loyalty." Although Mance refuses, and is executed for it, the 'wildlings' nonetheless become entangled in the game of thrones when later fighting alongside Jon in his quest to retake Winterfell (s6e9). Perhaps this is what Ygritte "knows," unlike Jon Snow: the ominous impossibility of free, peaceful community galvanized by reciprocal love.

A related example of an *appropriation* of emancipatory freedom we find in the scene where Astapor's obedient slave army, The Unsullied, is liberated by Daenerys Targaryen. After gaining ownership over The Unsullied from their previous owners, she gives a victorious speech that simultaneously assures freedom and offers a new loyalty (s3e4):

> You have been slaves all your life. Today you are free. Any man who wishes to leave may leave, and no one will harm him. I give you my word. Will you fight for me? As free men?

The Unsullied, who have been brutally forged into blind obedience since infancy, immediately 'chooses' to continue their violent service under Daenerys' rulership. Their conditional freedom is later pointed out by a slave master who mockingly tells Grey Worm, Captain of The Unsullied (s6e4): "You think you're a free man now? You still follow orders." A similarly unproblematized submission of freed slaves is also depicted in the city of Yunkai, where the liberated people immediately submit to their new Queen (s3e10). Another scene is when Daenerys assassinates the Khal's of Vaes Dothrak and the remaining khalasar kneels before her to assert their submission (s6e3). However, later in her career, Daenerys learns that she cannot entirely abolish the institution of slavery while at the same time claiming power for herself. Following her grounded ambition to rule, she eventually decides to reopen the morally dubious fighting pits in the city-state of Meereen (s5e1), however not for slaves, but for "free men only."

The conditional freedom enforced by Daenerys Targaryen is increasingly portrayed as an illegitimate exercise of extreme violence. In the finale of the GoT-story, Tyrion eventually concludes that her emancipatory quest is nothing but yet another claim to power (s8e6): "she'll go on liberating until the people of the world are free and she rules them all." For the now regretful Tyrion, it is precisely Daenerys' compelling credence to 'good governance' that makes her so dangerous: "Everywhere she goes, evil men die and we cheer her for it. And she grows more powerful and more sure that she is good and right." Even the dutiful Jon Snow is ultimately overpowered by disbelief in Daenerys' governance. "I know what is good," Daenerys tells Jon to calm his skepticism (s8e6). "What about everyone else? All the other people who think they know what's good," he asks in reply. Daenerys, not at all

comprehending the significance of this interrogation, spells out the implication of her conditional freedom: "They don't get to choose."

So the seeds of emancipation seldom take root in the GoT-world; freedom often becomes colonized by hegemonic forces. Yet anarchy-as-freedom sprout in the liminal spaces of Westeros, the seeds of emancipation grow in the cracks of the political system. When the liberated 'wildling women' at Craster's Keep are offered security and labor opportunities by the Night's Watch, they turn down the offer (s4e5). "Meaning all respect, Ser Crow," the women answer, "We'll find our own way."

Meanings of anarchy

In our interpretative reading, Game of Thrones broadcasts a reality composed by competing claims to power, but also of subaltern voices, elusive stories of emancipation. This duality can be taken as an allegory for the international relations of our own world. The anarchical society of Westeros—fabricated in the late 2010s' political context of unstable global security, and an alarming ecological threat of multispecies extinction—arguably serves as a commentary on the (im)possibility of creating, as Waltz (1979) once had it, "order without an orderer."

The GoT-show depicts a fragmented political landscape consisting of the Realm, its Kingdoms, family houses, various alliances, peasantry and working classes. That fragmented reality arguably mirrors contemporary global politics, what Cerny and Prichard, in their conceptual article "The new anarchy" (2017, p. 385), describe as "a complex set of relations between individuals, and social groups, from classes to vested interests, tribes to religions that relate across state and regional boundaries." Constantly shifting alliances between actors within and across these societal layers produce neither order nor peace, but a violently competing struggle for power. In the anarchical society of Westeros, as in the contemporary world, ideas, beliefs, and alliances are in constant flux, it is a fragmented political landscape, defined by competing claims to power that restrain functional differentiation. Anarchy here means little more than an impetus for violence.

Daenerys' claim to power in the name of 'good governance'—backed up with the capacity and will to use massive violence—is in our world corresponding to the spreading of development and civilization (Mignolo 2011). Much like in Essos, where Daenerys' violent program of invasive emancipation never stabilizes, contemporary world politics also seems evermore plagued by epidemic militarism under the banner of democracy (Larsson 2016; Lundström 2018). As in the fictional world of Westeros, religion and tribalism have become imperative to the violent game of thrones in contemporary politics, not only through Salafi jihadism but also to reinforce white radical-nationalist articulations of cultural specificity. Yet these unfolding conflicts do not fit so neatly into a supposed clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993); although conflicts are increasingly *framed* in terms of cultural differentiation, such an outline primarily serve to enforce social exclusion by re-inventing memories of imaginary pasts (Griffin 1993). Furthermore, these claims to power, motivated in terms of cultural specificity, coexist with ideologically motivated actors both in Westeros and in our contemporary world.

Differently put, the political fragmentation of "the anarchical society" (Bull 2012 [1977]) does not produce the functional differentiation that brings "order without and orderer" (Waltz 1979). Quite to the contrary, the 'game of thrones' in contemporary world politics, in the sense of *anarchy-as-violence*, seems to invoke ever more conflict. We see this not least under the banner of liberal democracy, but also with the religious and tribal convictions that fuel divergent movements of Salafi jihadism and white radical-nationalism. Moreover, unfortunately very much alike the GoT-world, inter- and intra-national conflicts intensify even despite the most rampant ecological threat of multispecies extinction. However, whereas the GoT-show portrays competing claims to power, it also depicts refusal to play the game of thrones. As in our own world, flashes of another politics are both indiscernible and ephemerally fragile; subaltern voices that speak are notoriously silenced, eclipsed by hegemonic claims to power (Spivak 1988). The GoT-world contains a social and political periphery, liminal spaces disobedient to the very rules of the game. These "nonstate spaces," to speak with James Scott (2009), cultivate an "art of not being governed." Although they often face closure as promptly as they are cracked open, these spaces might also be acknowledged and widened (Holloway 2010).

Anarchy, in this latter sense, would signify not the pathological state of never-ending conflicts but precisely the embracement of a condition where ruling misfits. Anarchy would mean no throne to claim, and no game to play. With that meaning, the concept also becomes charged with political potential. *Anarchy-as-freedom* becomes a condition desirable. As Prichard (2017, p. 362) has it, "anarchy is a political and moral value, as well as structure for politics, that we ought to defend." The political, economic, or social future of such a defense is truly indeterminate. In the best scenario, it magnifies subaltern voices, paves new paths to dethrone power, and conjures rebellion against our extinction. However, we may also have to settle with the anarchic sentiment of Mance Rayder. In motivating his grounded refusal to play the game of thrones, in the face of his execution (s5e1), Mance clarifies to Jon Snow that "if you can't understand why I won't enlist my people in a foreigner's war, there's no point explaining." Jon, still not comprehending such a peculiar meaning of anarchy, exclaims "I think you're making a terrible mistake." Mance sighs, looks patiently at Jon, and gives his explanation one more try: "The freedom to make my own mistakes was all I ever wanted."

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