

## Openings and Retrospectives



### SOVEREIGNTY: An Introduction

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On January 20, 2017, the day of Donald J. Trump’s inauguration as president, anthropologists across the United States organized a series of read-ins. The chosen text? One of Michel Foucault’s lectures from *Society Must Be Defended* (see [Jaschik 2017](#)). [Paige West and J. C. Salyer \(2017\)](#), who initiated the effort, explained that they had decided on this text because “it demands we simultaneously consider the interplay of sovereign power, discipline, biopolitics and concepts of security, and race.” The popular anthropology blog *Savage Minds*, as well as the journals *American Anthropologist*, *American Ethnologist*, *Cultural Anthropology*, and *Environment and Society*, gave positive coverage to the event and, implicitly, to West’s and Salyer’s chosen text.

Clearly, Foucault’s work on sovereignty has made a lasting imprint on the field of cultural anthropology. His theorization of sovereignty in the context of a transformation in the exercise of power in the eighteenth century—when “bio-power,” focused on the life of individual bodies and populations, became distinct from the legal and political mechanisms of sovereign power—has proven critical to the field. Furthering Foucault’s concept of biopower, [Giorgio Agamben \(1998\)](#),

2005) has examined how sovereign power is not necessarily linked to the capacity to bear rights, but often includes paradoxical exclusion—states of exception to justify violence and the decision of sovereign power. In recent years, cultural anthropologists studying the global crisis of the nation-state as the primary vehicle of sovereign power have taken up the critical reevaluation of sovereignty engendered by Agamben's work, inspiring new lines of inquiry and challenges to the foundational assumptions about state power in a range of ethnographic studies.

Why sovereignty? The field of cultural anthropology has considered sovereignty in new ways since the rise of a focus on globalization (e.g., [Humphrey 2004](#); [Wachspress 2009](#)). Works on the “anthropology of the state” emerged in the 1990s and have since become central to the discipline, unseating more conventional studies of “political anthropology” that had focused mainly on putatively traditional modes of power, kingship, and authority. Especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the anthropological study of political authority has shifted away from its historical focus on kinship, kingship, and hierarchical social structures (but see [Graeber and Sahlins, forthcoming](#)) toward a concentration on the historical formation of modern forms of governance, state authority, and the modern management of bodies, populations, and peoples through discourses of science, health, and security. In his 2003 Sidney W. Mintz Lecture at Johns Hopkins University, [Clifford Geertz \(2004\)](#) asked “what is a state if it is not a sovereign?” He conceded that an older island-and-mountain anthropology had fallen short of understanding the tumultuous birth of new states across the global South in the twentieth century because it had accepted the dominant fiction that states as entities comprehensively ruled a territory and a population, and that the state represented a modern and rational form of unitary governance. Yet Geertz also argued that anthropologists were uniquely equipped to study and theorize the complicated historical layers of authority, power, and other forms of attachment that constitute states and politics in most of the world today.

As [Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat \(2006\)](#) argue, sovereignty has returned as a central concern in anthropology in a reinvented form that seeks to go beyond de facto sovereignty by examining it as a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence. They delineate how classical works on kingship failed to provide an adequate framework for understanding the political imaginations of a world after colonialism. In their words, “although effective legal sovereignty is always an unattainable ideal, it is particularly tenuous in many postcolonial societies where sovereign power historically was distributed among many forms of local authority” ([Hansen and Stepputat 2006](#), 295). They also

emphasize studies of informal sovereignties such as vigilante groups, insurgents, and illegal networks—while tracing the relationship between market forces that also serve to reconfigure sovereign power. They thus chart and advocate an ethnographic approach to sovereignty “in practice” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, 297).

In 2001, the Society for Cultural Anthropology hosted one of its inaugural Culture@Large sessions at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association on “Rethinking Sovereignty,” which was organized by Vincanne Adams. The interdisciplinary event featured scholars thinking and writing about sovereignty in ways differently localized in relation to one another. Notably, it did not begin or end with a definitive statement on sovereignty. Rather, it aimed “to provide a space to examine the analytics of sovereignty in relation to the specificity of its ethnographic locations” (Adams 2008). As the session abstract put it:

Sovereignty as a concept and as a peculiar arrangement of power has been the topic of a wide variety of anthropological debate and inquiry of late. To some extent these debates pick up where Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics left off, placing questions about forms of discipline and governance in the context of globalization and attempting to explain the mechanics of subject-making in terms of economic, state, and repressive power as well as the liberatory politics such efforts might inspire.

These questions are now foundational to the field. A range of key texts and debates gave rise to this focus within anthropology and, in turn, produced other lines of inquiry, including projects that examine how states assert legal sovereignty contested by local communities as power is lived in distinct ways “on the ground.”

Scholars have especially focused on how states vying for a monopoly on violence contend with social forces challenging that authority—especially in urban areas across the global South with regard to a range of political movements and religious institutions. Anthropologists have paid particular attention to how colonial forms of government left enduring marks on the performance and legitimation of political power beyond Europe and the United States. And while the modern nation-state may remain the dominant form of political authority and imagination in the contemporary period, it has taken several specific forms throughout the world, without completely removing or superseding older languages of power and public authority (see Jennings 2011).

Anthropology of the state, the law, and biopolitics center the way power operates in a range of contexts—from the institutional to the intimate—and attend to the relationships mediated by political actors and the structures that frame them. Anthropological studies on such topics as bureaucrats, political factions, actors, movements, and stateless subjects draw attention to practices of power and provide crucial insights into how power and social life manifest, intersect, and become mobile. These analyses have grown into a corpus of research focused on a broad range of questions, including ones about citizenship, crime and policing, contemporary legal systems, governance, language and the law, ritual violence and state organization, sovereignty, state formation, socialism, and postsocialism.

Any discussion of sovereignty is sure to entail competing epistemological frames, and thus different ontological orientations and diverse political forms in theorizing our political present. From a diverse range of social and geographical contexts, the essays in this Retrospectives collection trace the emergence of concerns on sovereignty that followed the rise of the work on globalization. Each traces how the problem re-emerged, its scope, and the relevance of the concept to different areas of study within the field.

In her essay, Yarimar Bonilla tackles the contested meanings of sovereignty, tracking the concept as it has become a central analytic in cultural anthropology and beyond. Acknowledging how most anthropological writings have rightly criticized the forms of violence and inequity that have characterized modern states under the sign of sovereignty, she details how there has been inadequate consideration of “the sign of sovereignty itself as a category of Western political thought” (Bonilla 2017, 330). Her essay discusses how anthropological perspectives have contributed to a critical understanding of the concept, and therefore challenges us to question sovereignty. As she argues, this focus necessarily entails “unsettling anthropology,” since the discipline emerged from the same epistemic framework as, and therefore shares ontological ground with, imperialism and colonialism, especially as they have centered on the production of otherness.

In her contribution, Circe Sturm (2017) takes up the meaning of sovereignty in the study of Indigenous peoples subject to the political domination of the U.S. and Canadian states. She examines it as both a conceptual framework and a discourse that marks a distinct type of lived experience, which she argues must be understood within the context of settler colonialism. Yet, as she notes, the discipline of anthropology has been slow to take up settler colonialism as an analytic, even though the field’s practitioners have long engaged with understand-

ing and theorizing various complex forms of colonial order. Sturm points to the fruitful possibilities of learning from scholars working in Indigenous studies, a field in which sovereignty centers Indigenous perspectives. Providing important theoretical insights about the nature of political authority that are widely applicable beyond the bounds of Indian Country, she outlines some of the key conversations demonstrating the links between the two analytical frameworks—sovereignty and settler colonialism—as they offer anthropology important correctives.

Amahl Bishara's article examines how Palestinians' structural predicament calls attention to important variations in sovereignty. She attends to the ways in which Palestinians and other people in the Middle East assert provisional popular sovereignties. As she argues, these are forms "not resting on law or acknowledged rights . . . but rather on either insistent confrontation or quiet acts of caring for community in the face of abandonment" (Bishara 2017, 350). Bishara (2017, 350) shows that even though they have not ultimately restructured state sovereignty, these assertions "challenge the legitimacy of state authorities, create new forms of collectivity, and forge new ideas of how power should function, even though they have not ultimately restructured state power." While concepts of liberation, statehood, and self-determination were presumed to be one and the same during the region's twentieth-century anticolonial struggles, their outcome has produced fresh challenges to this version of sovereignty. Bishara's contribution to this collection shows how cultural anthropologists may reconceptualize both state and popular sovereignty, while noting that the latter must also be examined with attention to fractures and exclusions in movements. As she argues, focusing on collective forms of power, their emergence, and their contestation of state power at its limits can enable a movement beyond individualistic concepts of rights, as well as a recognition of how politics can change on the ground despite entrenched political structures.

Finally, in her essay, Kamari Clarke delineates how anthropology has understood and taken up modern conceptions of sovereignty, and been centrally engaged in critical conversations across disciplines about the nature of sovereignty through notions of political authority and reconfigurations of body politics. She begins by offering a selective genealogy of the concept of sovereignty in relation to both Foucault's and Agamben's works. Foucault's interventions in the interdisciplinary social sciences enabled new understandings of political authority, sovereignty, the state, and power, which "revolutionized anthropological thinking" (Clarke 2017, 362). Foucault, Clarke (2017, 363) writes, "expanded and decen-

tralized a view of sovereignty and legitimate power that had led to many decades of writing about how power is produced and how it produces certain effects.” Then Agamben proposed a renewed focus on state violence that accounted for biopower at the site of the camp as a prime example of the state of exception. Noting the fractures of that account through spaces of exception and transformations of the body politic, Clarke (2017, 361) suggests that new reflections on sovereignty demand a shift in the way we understand governance “through new ways of constituting bodies of persons through technological forms of bodily mediation.” In turn, she encourages us to resituate our understanding of political authority through the force field of bio-mediated politics. Her contribution highlights the importance of anthropologists returning to a focus on the body as “an important analytic for making sense of new forms of mediation” (Clarke 2017, 360).

These essays illuminate the porous and often still problematic odyssey of sovereignty’s formation and its function as social category. All of them challenge the rationalization of sovereignty as simply the unification of power and the basic concept of political organization; indeed, their brilliant analyses demand that we probe how possibilities of political life come to be defined by the difficult task of deriving freedom from the concept of sovereignty.

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