

Openings and Retrospectives



UNSETTLING SOVEREIGNTY

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Once confined to the specialized realms of international relations and jurisprudence, sovereignty has recently become a central analytic—some might even say a buzzword—within a broad range of fields across the humanities and social sciences. It would be tempting to dismiss this phenomenon as a mere academic fad, or simply as a new sign under which old questions are currently being rethought, but I would like to suggest that the turn to sovereignty speaks to a particular political and intellectual conjuncture both within and beyond the academy. Contemporary writings on sovereignty are steeped in postcolonial, post-socialist, and post-civil rights disillusion, a sharp awareness of the enduring legacies of settler colonialism, a deep distrust of the post-9/11 surveillance state, and a sober engagement with the pressing realities of climate change. As a result, the sovereign turn is marked by a skeptical and disenchanting view of state power and supreme domination—both human and environmental. Anthropologists have cast an important critical eye on the forms of violence and inequity enacted by modern states in the name of sovereignty.¹ Yet insufficient attention has been given to the sign of sovereignty itself as a category of Western political thought.

In what follows, I offer a brief discussion of how anthropological perspectives have contributed to a critical understanding of the concept of sovereignty. However, I argue that we must refrain from deploying sovereignty as a neutral descriptor for forms of governance, and move instead toward a deeper interrogation of sovereignty as a concept, a norm, and an ideal—one that has been thoroughly shaped by the institutional, epistemic, and ontological orders of empire.

THE PROBLEM OF SOVEREIGNTY

Within political anthropology, the recent turn to sovereignty—and I mean here, specifically, the turn toward an analysis of the nature, limits, uses, and effects of state power—is in many ways the logical successor to the so-called global turn that preceded it. The rise of globalization studies, whatever its limits, demonstrated that political borders were porous and fickle, and that the persistent and longstanding flows of peoples, goods, and ideas across national boundaries made nation-states unsuitable units for many forms of analysis. The anthropological turn to sovereignty emerges out of that intellectual conversation, but is also rooted in a particular geopolitical context in which, despite blurred borders and brokered interactions, states themselves remain powerful entities in both the political system and the political imagination. Even as they broker duties among nongovernmental institutions and entities, states continue to wield power—fiscal, military, economic, discursive, and imaginative. States continue to act as agents: they legislate, they deport, they invade, they build, and they borrow. Even as governments are toppled, states themselves persist.² This does not mean, however, that they hold sovereign power.

If the literature on globalization served to reveal the porous nature of state boundaries, the attendant literature on sovereignty clearly exposed the tenuous nature of state power—particularly in the global South. As recent scholarship shows, the power of putatively sovereign states has been routinely and palpably restricted through negotiations with both internal and external actors, including insurgents, paramilitaries, and criminal networks, as well as lending agencies, global development firms, humanitarian organizations, and other shadow networks and agents (Appadurai 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Davis 2010; Ferguson 2006; Goldstein 2010; Hansen 2006; Humphrey 2004; Jaffe 2015; Nordstrom 2000). Commentators often claim that these processes have resulted in the waning or disarticulation of state capacities, leading to the rise of weakened states, failed states, and NGO republics (Brown 2010; Sassen 2006; Schuller 2007). Some have characterized these forms of fractured sovereignty as mutations

under a neoliberal regime or characteristics of a postcolonial landscape (Ong 2006; Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Yet the move to cast these political forms as mutations or exceptions problematically reinscribes the classic model of political sovereignty as an actually existing relationship—a measurable quality of states—rather than viewing it as a discursive figure produced through the colonial encounter.

Many scholars singularly trace the concept of sovereignty to the Enlightenment, rooting it in arguments about the limits of divine power. Yet debates over sovereignty were just as equally a part of the Age of Discovery, and thus directly tied to the need to codify and regulate the practices of conquest and the settlement of lands with peoples deemed uncivilized—and hence unsovereign (Anghie 2012; see also Silva 2007). During this period, notions of civilization, citizenship, personhood, and humanism became established and developed—not as mere descriptors, but as discursive categories within an interested debate over the reach of European power. The colonial project spurred the need to define the terms of territorial ownership and political belonging, to draw distinctions between savages and barbarians, citizens and subjects, incorporation and inclusion, occupation and settlement. The concept of sovereignty provided a legal technology with which to lay claim to putatively unowned lands (i.e., *terra nullius*), to dispossess native communities, or, alternatively, to establish treaties with native peoples in ways that incorporated them into an ontological order of civilizational difference.³ Sovereignty as a legal concept is thus grounded in concrete material practices of dispossession, the practical work of disenfranchisement, and the creation of legal regimes of difference.

In the mid-twentieth century, subaltern populations took up the notion of sovereignty (tied to the idea of self-determination) in hopes of transforming their status through entry into a system of states and nations as equal sovereigns. Yet the legacies of the civilizing mission were already deeply encoded into the very strictures of international law (Anghie 2005). Indeed, the entire field of international relations—driven by theories of so-called race development—emerged precisely to manage international and interracial forms of difference, both foreign and domestic (Vitalis 2015). Contemporary divisions of the world—into developed and undeveloped, democratic and rogue, and so on—continue to replicate these civilizational tropes. The once-held hope that the toppling of colonial rule would effectively transform the lives of subaltern populations, or that non-Western states might bring about a postimperial shift of power—a hope deeply palpable in what became known as the “era of Bandung”—seems to have faded after

projects such as the nonaligned movement failed to transform the political order of empire (Scott 2012). As national sovereignty became a global norm, the meaning and force of sovereignty changed significantly (Cooper 2014; Kelly and Kaplan 2001, 2009). Abstract pledges of codified equality were accompanied by a careful escort into enduring structures of systemic inequality. As a result, postcolonial sovereignty more often than not resulted in enduring forms of non-sovereignty (Bonilla 2013, 2015).

The idea of a Westphalian order in which all states are, if not equally powerful, at least equally sovereign, has thus now come under significant revision with the recognition that the Westphalian order is at best a founding myth and at worst a form of organized hypocrisy (Ferguson and Mansbach 2007; Osiander 2001; Krasner 1999). Moreover, the idea of state power as sovereign—singular, supreme, absolute, autonomous, and free from external control—has also been brought into question as both a political reality and an unequivocal ideal. Across academic fields, we are increasingly coming to understand sovereignty as an uneven and fragmented performance, rather than a stable capacity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Masco 2014; Rutherford 2012; Geertz 2004). The notion of a sovereign state, and its attendant sovereign individual who speaks and acts autonomously, is thus giving way to the recognition of the non-sovereign nature of most social relationships—political, intimate, and affective—all of which require brokered and negotiated forms of interdependency and a relinquishing of autonomy (Berlant 2011a, 2011b). Indeed, some contend that the contemporary challenges we face, most notably climate change and global pandemics, require a global community of coordinated action rather than a world system of competing sovereignties (Chakrabarty 2009). At the same time, others insist that we must reevaluate our understandings of not just the global system but also of the chain of existence itself, suggesting that the idea of human beings as self-contained, sovereign, and supreme within the natural order must be upended (Bennett 2010; Agamben 2003; Haraway 2007; Grusin 2015).

If the global turn (at its best) spurred an interest in historicizing and provincializing the idea of the nation-state by demonstrating the existence of other ways of imagining and organizing communities, economies, and polities—within, across, and beyond national boundaries—then the sovereign turn has the potential of helping us historicize the idea of sovereign power as singular, absolute, rooted in a social contract, and territorially bound. This task becomes particularly urgent in the present political landscape, as politicians across the globe increasingly call for a return to sovereignty through policies of exclusion that include border walls,

Muslim bans, and other forms of xenophobic statecraft.⁴ This is why, beyond simply historicizing and provincializing sovereignty as a category of Western political thought, we must also examine its particularity as a political norm and an ideological project.

Concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, freedom, and even universalism are not neutral categories of analysis, nor simple reflections of European history (Trouillot 2003, 35). These are the native categories of the West as a *project*, not a place.⁵ When tackling such concepts, our task is thus not simply to undo their coherence. Rather, it is to interrogate how they have become hegemonic, what the consequences of that normative dominance are, and what social conditions maintain and reproduce this dominance (Asad 2013, 13).

An anthropology of sovereignty must thus begin with a critical interrogation of the concept, norm, and ideal of sovereignty itself. That is, we must treat political theory as part of the larger field of ideology and practice we seek to examine. We must thus ask: How does the norm of sovereignty emerge and how has it been sustained? How does it order forms of life and condition aspirations? Which social orders does it enable and which does it disavow? Finally, we must also explore alternative ways of imagining the social, political, and natural orders that trouble or upend the norm of sovereignty.⁶ Only then will we move beyond simply provincializing sovereignty and toward *unsettling* the notion of sovereignty itself.

UNSETTLING ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology as a discipline emerged from the same epistemic framework as sovereignty. Its theories and *raison d'être* share ontological ground with imperialism and internal colonialism.⁷ As colonies became postcolonies, some speculated that a “science of the savages” (Macquet 1964, 51) would quickly fall by the wayside. Others proposed transformations from within that might produce a decolonized anthropology for a decolonized world.⁸ Neither option fully came into existence. At present, we are witnessing the emergence of another call for decolonial academic practices and orientations (Escobar 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2011; Mignolo and Escobar 2010; Quijano 2000, 2007; Sandoval 2000). This move signals a recognition of the constitutive role of the colonial project in the formation of the modern world, and of the enduring coloniality of the present. It recognizes that the treaties, charters, and forms of recognition produced by twentieth-century sovereignty regimes served to sustain, rather than unseat, colonial hierarchies. Moreover, it makes plain that if we are to adequately

critique and contest these formations of power we must directly confront the inherent limits and foundational foreclosures of our disciplinary practices.

In line with these developments, I believe it is worth exploring what a decolonial, rather than postcolonial, notion of sovereignty—and of anthropology itself—might mean.⁹ However, I prefer the term *unsettling* to *decolonizing* not only because it privileges the perspective of settler colonialism (which has often held a backseat within postcolonial studies) but also because I remain skeptical as to whether one could truly decolonize either sovereignty or anthropology, given that there is no precolonial status to which either could return. *Unsettling* avoids the telos of decolonization. What is unsettled is not necessarily removed, toppled, or returned to a previous order but is fundamentally brought into question. The move to unsettle sovereignty—to trouble its presumptions, question its origins, and explore its alternatives—should thus be tied to a broader unsettling of the discipline as a whole. This requires more than a simple diversification of existing theory and practice under the banner of an otherwise unaltered intellectual project. Rather, it necessitates refashioning our intellectual commitments and collective purpose. The stakes of unsettling both sovereignty and anthropology are thus high—as, indeed, they imply thinking beyond these colonial technologies altogether.

NOTES

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1. In this sense, the anthropology of sovereignty might fall under what [Sherry Ortner \(2016\)](#) describes as “dark anthropology.”
2. For more on the difference between state and government, see [Gupta and Sharma 2006](#) and [Trouillot 2001](#).
3. Within native studies, several authors have pointed to the contradictions and contortions of the sovereignty project. See, for instance, [Alfred 2002](#); [Cattellino 2008, 2010](#); [Kauanui 2008](#); [Rifkin 2009](#); and [Simpson 2014](#).
4. For more, see the recent *American Ethnologist* forum on “Brexit, Trump, and Anthropology,” edited by [Jeanette Edwards, Angélique Haugerud, and Shanti Parikh \(2017\)](#).
5. I borrow this phrasing from [Glissant 1989, 2](#).
6. For example, in my own work, I have examined how Caribbean political actors engage in non-sovereign politics, which I see as the search for something *other than* the sovereignty project that was promised to, imposed on, and thwarted for the global South ([Bonilla 2013, 2015](#); [Bonilla and Hantel 2016](#)).
7. As [Talal Asad \(1991, 315\)](#) writes: “It is not merely that anthropological fieldwork was facilitated by European colonial power . . . it is that the fact of European power, as discourse and practice, was always part of the reality anthropologists sought to understand, and of the way they sought to understand it.” See also [Asad 1973](#) and [Trouillot 1991](#).

8. See, for instance, [Asad 1991](#), [Fahim 1982](#), [Harrison 1991](#), and [Trouillot 1991](#). For an important assessment of this project and its place within a larger intellectual generation, see [Allen and Jobson 2016](#).
9. Trouillot, who perhaps best outlined the implications of anthropology's role as the colonial "savage slot," argued that despite its shortcomings, anthropology still represented one of the best tools with which to trouble Western concepts and categories. He saw promise in the discipline's attention to native categories and non-Western standards of evidence, as well as its insistence on exploring multiple ways of ordering and narrating the world ([Trouillot 2003](#), 136).

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