

Echoing Churchill's famous aphorism about democracy, *Politics without Sovereignty* argues that the sovereign state is the worst form of governance except for all others. In a forceful post-revisionist critique, the editors and contributors contend that only the sovereign state allows both collective agency and political accountability... This volume is a powerful challenge to current theory in international relations and requires all of us to think deeper about the virtues and necessity of global political change.  
**David A. Lake, University of California, San Diego, USA**

This multi-sided onslaught on fashionable notions and theories about the decline and the mischiefs of state sovereignty is not likely to convince all readers, but the authors' central point, about the fact that political accountability and agency require state sovereignty, is one that needs to be faced rather than evaded out of distaste for the excesses and liabilities of sovereignty.  
**Stanley Hoffmann, Harvard University, USA**

The chapters provide bold, closely argued and provocative normative evaluations of the notion of state sovereignty. The arguments here will start a number of hares that will run and run... The ideas in this book will be tested in the vigorous reaction which will undoubtedly follow its publication.  
**Mervyn Frost, Kings' College, UK**

Curiously, the defense of state sovereignty has so far amounted to little more than the bland reassertion of analytical state-centrism. *Politics without Sovereignty* lifts this defense to a higher plane... Together, the editors and contributors advance a defense of sovereignty that is at once analytical, normative, and deeply political. It is a volume that will confront and provoke, and in so doing fuel debate and, in turn, insight.  
**Chris Reus-Smit, Australian National University, Australia**

**Christopher J. Bickerton**, St Johns College, University of Oxford, UK.  
**Philip Cunliffe**, King's College, London, UK  
**Alexander Gourevitch**, Columbia University, USA.

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Philip Cunliffe and Alexander Gourevitch

# POLITICS WITHOUT SOVEREIGNTY

## A CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Edited by  
Christopher J. Bickerton, Philip Cunliffe  
and Alexander Gourevitch

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## Introduction

### The unholy alliance against sovereignty

*Christopher J. Bickerton, Philip Cunliffe and Alexander Gourevitch*

In this book, we argue that the current movement against state sovereignty participates in the degradation of political agency at both the domestic and international levels. The case against sovereignty is generally cast as a way of opening up our political imagination to new understandings of power and new possibilities for organizing the world. But its substance is to limit our sense of political possibility, and to sever the relationship between the exercise of power and political responsibility. As a consequence, there is little that is progressive about the current retreat from state sovereignty. The result is that we endure all the negative aspects of sovereignty, and enjoy few of its potential benefits. The sovereign state, however imperfect, still provides the best framework for the organization of collective political life. That, at least, is what we aim to show in this book.

No discussion of international affairs can avoid discussing sovereignty, and everyone has something to say about it. The intellectual productivity around the concept has been enormous. Political scientists Stephen Krasser and David Lake have published a number of books and articles examining the logical coherence and empirical relevance of the concept. Liberal theorists Fernando Tesón and Robert Keohane have looked at the concept in relation to human rights and humanitarian intervention. Postmodern theorists, such as Richard Ashley and Jens Bartelson, have traced the genealogy of sovereignty, while international lawyers, such as Martin Loughlin and Gerry Simpson, have outlined the basic tenets and historical movements of the concept.<sup>1</sup> What is more, sovereignty is a concept that escapes the dry arguments of academics and international lawyers into the wider realm of public debate. Major states and international organizations have published standard-setting treatises on the topic, such as *The Responsibility to Protect*, the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001), whose suggestions were incorporated in the United Nations' reform report *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* (2004). Prominent public figures feel obliged to take a stand on sovereignty. US President George W. Bush has repeatedly defended the invasion of Iraq on the grounds that he 'restored sovereignty to the Iraqi people'.<sup>2</sup> Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan tried to develop 'two concepts of sovereignty'.<sup>3</sup> But in all these theories and political discussions, the understanding of sovereignty is one sided. As we shall see, state sovereignty is in retreat on all fronts, and even its proponents are

not what they seem (on the latter, see Christopher Bickerton's, Alexander Gourevitch's and John Pender's chapters). All of which has led us to ask, what is politics without sovereignty?

In this introductory chapter, we seek first to demonstrate the breadth and depth of what we call the unholy alliance against sovereignty. We suggest that this unholy alliance explains the striking expansion of international theory in recent years. Insofar as this new international theory builds over the ruins of state sovereignty, it plays a key role in helping us to understand the political possibilities beyond the sovereign state. But how successful is it in this task? That is a question for the book as a whole. The second section of this introduction develops the conceptual relation between modern politics and sovereignty. Instead of providing an idealized conception of sovereignty to hold up against its critics, we pursue a different tack. We show that our central concern is the possibility for politics. This emphasis gives us good reason to appreciate the constraints of sovereignty, but also good grounds to judge theoretical and practical alternatives to the sovereign state. That is to say, alternatives must be assessed by the extent to which they expand our political and moral horizons in international affairs. Thus the second section of the introduction provides a theoretical frame for the rest of the book, which subsequent chapters will develop by investigating various alternatives to the sovereign state in different domains of international life. The cohering message of this book is that today's politics without sovereignty is a constrained and evasive politics, marred by a limited sense of political possibility, and organized around the increasingly unaccountable exercise of power.

### An unholy alliance

The sovereign state was the enabling concept of traditional International Relations (IR) scholarship. If sovereignty means supreme authority over a particular territory, it also implies its antithesis: international anarchy, the absence of a higher authority above the sovereign state. But if sovereignty carves out a sphere for IR theory, the sovereign state is also a profound constraint, as Martin Wight observed in his famous essay 'Why Is There No International Theory?' Wight argued that the division between international and domestic politics reflected the fact that the sovereign state is the exemplary achievement of human will and creativity in politics. For this reason, the sovereign state 'absorbed almost all the intellectual energy devoted to political study. It has become natural to think of international politics as the untidy fringe of domestic politics'.<sup>4</sup> As there is no overarching authority within the international domain, the ever-present possibility of war threatens to shatter any design for a more humanized social order between states. 'International politics is the realm of recurrence and repetition' and, consequently, international theory a brutalized 'theory of survival'.<sup>5</sup> So long as political life remained constrained by the sovereign state, international theory, too, would remain limited.

In light of these limits identified by Wight, it is logical to infer that international theory should proliferate on the back of the critique of sovereignty. What is more,

this proliferation should indicate an expansion of creative human energies into the international sphere.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one could even go as far as to inverse the places assigned to domestic and international politics by Wight. With the decline of ideologically charged party politics in the domestic sphere, the substance of government in many countries has increasingly been transformed into a mundane process of dreary administration (see Alexander Gourevitch's and James Heartfield's chapters in this volume). If anything, it seems that it is the politics of the domestic realm that is afflicted by 'recurrence and repetition' while it is the global realm that appears open to new possibilities.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a whole generation of Western youth have had many of their defining political experiences forged around international questions, rather than domestic issues emanating from within their own societies, including, for example: mobilization against the Iraq war, solidarity with the Palestinians, activism in defence of sustainable development, human rights and global cooperation to tackle climate change. School leavers and university students participate in far-flung NGO (non-governmental organization) projects throughout the developing world – developments that are discussed and criticized in David Chandler's chapter in this volume.

Recent developments in IR theory have appeared to extend and confirm the logic of Wight's intuition. Echoing Wight, R.B.J. Walker has argued that the study of international relations has been constrained by its exclusive concern with interactions between states:

theories of international relations affirm a claim that only within the secure borders of territorial states is it possible to engage in a serious politics, a politics that aspires to some kind of moral status on the basis of some kind of community... Politics, real politics, they suggest, can occur only as long as we are prepared – or able to – live in boxes.<sup>8</sup>

Thinking 'outside the box', as the management jargon goes (the box, in this case, being the sovereign state), means that the bottom effectively drops out of the discipline, and its intellectual prejudices dissolve. This shift is reflected in the grasping for a new conceptual vocabulary – 'global', 'globalized', 'transnational', 'cosmopolitan' – words that try to shift us beyond the restrictive idea of political, legal and economic relations between states, connoted by the more traditional term 'international'. The sheer range of ideas, issues and theoretical approaches that have battered down the walls of a previously isolated and self-contained discipline is truly dizzying. New theories of global justice, international community, cosmopolitan democracy, global civil society, environmental justice, humanitarian intervention, neo-trusteeship, world constitutionalism, global capitalism, empire and imperialism and world citizenship have rapidly gained a foothold in mainstream debates. The result, as described by one academic, is an 'intellectual Somalia', by which he means the fragmentation of the discipline into warring academic clans based around competing theories – constructivism, neo-realism, critical theory, feminism, post-structuralism, normative theory and international society.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, we intend to show here that this

diversity is belied by an underlying consensus: a distrust of state sovereignty. This shared antipathy towards a final authority in politics is the unifying, driving force informing most theoretical arguments today. Almost all of these international theories are convinced of the morally dangerous, conceptually vacuous or empirically irrelevant character of sovereignty, and of the need to discard or at least recast the concept in light of new global imperatives.

To be sure, it is the critical schools of thought in IR that have most vigorously established themselves by laying siege to sovereignty (see further our discussion in Chapter 1). Richard Devetak summarizes why state sovereignty draws so much fire from critically tempered IR theories:

State sovereignty is the foremost target in international relations because it is predicated on an exclusionary political space... ruled by a single, supreme centre of decision-making which claims to represent a single political community or identity. Sovereign statehood... claims to trump all other competing levels of decision-making or representation. The sovereign state may well be the dominant mode of subjectivity in international relations today, but it is questionable whether its claim to be the primary and exclusive ethical and political subject is justified.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, what makes the sovereign state so appealing a target is not merely that it arbitrarily restricts the boundaries of political life ('an exclusionary political space'). It is also that the sovereign embodies a unique concentration of power, combined in a single, self-sufficient entity: 'The sovereign, by the mere fact that it is, is always all that it ought to be' as Rousseau put it.<sup>11</sup> This 'terrifying image', in the words of William Rasch,<sup>12</sup> not only exercises supreme power, but brazenly proclaims its unfettered right to do as it pleases; it defines its own limits. The sovereign is not only supreme but also rational. In Rousseau's words: 'the general will is always rightful and always tends to the public good'.<sup>13</sup>

The problem for various radicals therefore, is that sovereignty is not just repressive, but that it shuts down our collective imagination by limiting politics to a monolithic 'terrifying image' of unity, rather than plurality and possibility. Post-modernist Richard Ashley considers sovereignty a 'metaphysical conceit', in step with Walker's dismissal of sovereign states as mere 'boxes'.<sup>14</sup> The surprisingly popular Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* rejects even the most democratic form of sovereignty – popular sovereignty – as 'really nothing more than another turn of the screw, a further extension of the subjugation and domination that the modern concept of sovereignty has carried with it from the beginning'.<sup>15</sup> Not to be outdone, critical theorists, such as Andrew Linklater, argue that 'achieving the aims of critical theory requires the reconstruction of the state... and the introduction of post-nationalist conceptions of citizenship'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, 'feminism... questions the very core of conventional international relations practice, namely the supreme value of sovereignty'.<sup>17</sup>

Imagining themselves to be rebels against the consensus, the radicals and post-modernists are in fact the champions of a new consensus. Liberals and

humanitarians have also ardently attacked sovereignty as a morally regressive concept. International lawyer George Robertson luridly denounced the 'great play of sovereignty, with all its pomp and panoply' that 'can now be seen for what it hides: a posturing troupe of human actors, who when off-stage are sometimes prone to rape the chorus'.<sup>18</sup> Ken Booth condemns 'Westphalian sovereignty' as a 'tyrant's charter'.<sup>19</sup> The Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, has argued that 'sovereignty cannot be used as an excuse to avoid human rights commitments' and has 'praised the decision to overrule the claims of tyrants and war criminals to be protected by the cloak of national sovereignty'.<sup>20</sup> Liberal political theorist Fernando Tesón has radicalized the human rights critique of sovereignty and demanded that the concept be wholly redefined so that 'gross violation of human rights is not only an obvious assault on the dignity of persons, but a *betrayal of the principle of sovereignty itself*' (original emphasis).<sup>21</sup> Tesón means to substitute a new concept of sovereignty in place of the old one, as is discussed in Philip Cunliffe's chapter.

The moral and political critiques stand shoulder-to-shoulder with what we might call more empirical critiques. For globalization and cosmopolitan theorists, such as Susan Strange, David Held and Daniele Archibugi, sovereignty is not just politically atavistic, but also historically outdated. Susan Strange's *The Retreat of the State* (1997) is the most well known of a raft of books and articles arguing that the rise of global financial networks, multinational corporations, regional trading blocs and expansion of the world economy has rendered the nation-state obsolete. David Held argues that the internationalization of communication and culture has pushed not just economic processes but political identities themselves beyond the state:

any assumption that sovereignty is an indivisible, illimitable, exclusive and perpetual form of public power – entrenched within an individual state – is now defunct... the boundaries between states, nations and societies can no longer claim the deep legal and moral significance they once had.<sup>22</sup>

'Cosmopolitan' theorist Daniele Archibugi echoes Held's assessment, arguing that 'state sovereignty is not called into question by armies, missiles and armoured cars, but by elements which spontaneously escape national government control'.<sup>23</sup> He takes the argument to its logical conclusion – world government. 'The state is too large for small issues, too small for bigger ones. It is here that pressures arise for a new form of world governance, more potent than anything that exists.'<sup>24</sup> Sovereignty is, on this account, not only an impediment to thinking the world anew, but also to seeing the current world as it is. In other words, sovereignty is not only morally dangerous but also politically impotent. Even if one does not share the progressive and emancipatory goals of more radical critics, these thinkers suggest we must jettison sovereignty if we wish to keep control over those elements – human rights, economic and social policy, cultural identity and defence of the environment – that are already accepted as general concerns.

Even from the more traditional and mainstream thinkers sovereignty has taken a battering. Liberal Robert Keohane thinks that the indivisible and inalienable right of sovereignty has been transformed into something that can be traded away: 'sovereignty' is less a territorially defined barrier than a bargaining resource for a politics characterized by complex transnational networks.<sup>25</sup> Realist Stephen Krasner believes sovereignty has always been a kind of 'organized hypocrisy', in which formal sovereign status fails to correspond with actual respect for sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> Krasner's edited collection *Problematic Sovereignty* (2001) addresses a number of case studies (China-Taiwan relations; the protectorate in Bosnia Herzegovina, Palestinian state-building) that are designed to explore how we might find solutions to crises, if only we are willing to move beyond our attachment to the traditional notion of sovereignty as supreme authority over a particular territory and population. The creation of semi-autonomous entities offers a way of sidestepping the problems that arise from bitter struggles to resolve competing claims to supreme political authority over a given territory – an argument he has pressed with even greater force in more recent writings on 'shared sovereignty'.<sup>27</sup> Realist scholar David Lake argues, 'sovereignty is far more problematic than recognized in the classical model' because it represents international politics as relations among equals, thereby blurring hierarchical relations of power that exist today.<sup>28</sup> This not only hampers our ability to see power at work, it also impedes effective conflict resolution: 'To the extent that states find the norm of juridical sovereignty attractive, showing that practice differs systematically and frequently from this norm undermines its salience and its utility as a justification for other practices.'<sup>29</sup> Better, thinks Lake, to accommodate our 'norms' to reality, than to operate with redundant concepts. Here we see political scientists like Krasner and Lake converging with normative theorists and human rights advocates who argue, for example, that the colonial-era institution of trusteeship<sup>30</sup> is a moral necessity, needed to tackle the misery prevailing in 'failed states', as discussed further in Christopher Bickerton's chapter. This gives us some idea of the extent to which hostility to sovereignty cuts across the various schisms in IR theory.

But as we have already observed, the assault on sovereignty goes far beyond the academy. In a trendsetting document for the post-Cold War era, former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote, 'The time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty... has passed; its theory was never matched by reality.'<sup>31</sup> His successor, Kofi Annan, carried the torch with his own pronouncement that 'state sovereignty, in its most basic sense, is being redefined'.<sup>32</sup> Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright agreed, saying that 'Sovereignty carries with it many rights, but killing and torturing innocent people are not among them.'<sup>33</sup> Former British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, has argued for 'pooling sovereignty' because '[i]t is at the supranational level that we can achieve our goals in a way which is no longer possible at the national level'.<sup>34</sup> In the words of the renowned Czech intellectual Vaclav Havel, 'Human liberties constitute a higher value than State sovereignty. In terms of international law, the provisions that protect the unique human being should take precedence over the provisions

that protect the State.'<sup>35</sup> An article in the *Economist* magazine, evocatively titled 'Taming Levathan', brought together the advance of human rights alongside recent economic and technological developments:

sovereignty is no longer absolute, but conditional... Eventually, a government's claim to sovereignty may depend on whether it respects the basic human rights of its citizens. That is the way in which international law is slowly moving. Other forces are pushing in the same direction. Global economic integration, the growth of international broadcasting, telecommunications and travel will all make it more difficult in future for repressive regimes to go about their business unhindered by outside influence.<sup>36</sup>

The erosion of state sovereignty does not just apply to poor and weak states that are unable to enforce their authority or resist the armies mobilized under the banner of the international community. Francis Fukuyama traces many of our prevailing attitudes towards sovereignty to the integration activities of the European Union over the last half-century. From its inception in the post-war cross-border economic arrangements within western Europe, integration has been defined according to Fukuyama by the impulse 'to embed those sovereignties [of Europe] in multiple layers of rules, norms and regulations to prevent those sovereignties from ever spinning out of control again [...] a kind of antisovereignty project.'<sup>37</sup> These public statements demonstrate that there is a broadly based antipathy to the idea of a final, absolute authority in political life – namely the sovereign state.

But perhaps this unholy alliance is weaker than we make it out to be. Indeed, a counter-offensive has already been launched by the so-called new sovereignists, a 'group of academics – many of whom are highly credentialled and attached to prestigious institutions or conservative Washington think tanks'.<sup>38</sup> The foreign policy of the Bush administration is believed to be undermining the transnational achievements of the 1990s. The new passion for state-building that has so exercised the United States and various European governments seems to herald a return of active support for the idea of independent statehood. Yet, as the chapters by Christopher Bickerton, John Pender and Philip Cunliffe show, the new champions of the state are not what they seem. Initiatives such as state-building are wholly within, and even presuppose, a deeper and more profound antipathy to the self-determination and political autonomy once enshrined in sovereignty. Nor is the United States as straightforwardly 'sovereignist' as it is made out to be, as Alexander Gourevitch demonstrates in his chapter.

But if the hostility to state sovereignty is real and profound, perhaps we should not set too much store by it. The sceptic would point out that the discipline of IR itself was born amidst speculation about the imminent demise of the sovereign state. In one of the discipline's founding texts, *The Twenty Years Crisis*, E.H. Carr was only one among many on the eve of the Second World War to muse whether the nation-state would 'survive as a unit of power'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the Second World War saw virtually all the historic nation-states of Europe overrun or overthrown in conquest. Though the sovereign state was restored after the war, it never

fully recovered.<sup>40</sup> Its perceived weakness and illegitimacy was such that, even nearly 30 years later, Hedley Bull observed that liberalism, the political doctrine that gave birth to the sovereign state, could only survive in the era of imperialism by mutating into the search for world government or other similar, second-best solutions:

The feeling of unease about the system of sovereign states... exists not only among those who explicitly espouse the elimination of this system, but also where we might least expect to find it, in pronouncements of the servants of sovereign states themselves... These pronouncements often betray a sense of inadequacy of the... system, a lack of confidence in its situations, a tendency guiltily to disguise their operation of the system or to apologise for doing so. The League of Nations and the United Nations we are invited to see not as diplomatic machinery in the tradition of the Concert of Europe, but as first steps towards a world state. Military alliances, in this manner of speaking, become regional security systems; exclusive political groupings, like... the British Commonwealth, experiments in world order; war, police action.<sup>41</sup>

But if the sovereign state has been called into question at different points throughout the twentieth century, each time it was in a different context. Though the sovereign state remains the predominant unit of political organization throughout the world, and though its numbers continue to grow,<sup>42</sup> it would be wrong simply to ignore the cacophony of claims questioning the reality or desirability of state sovereignty. However exaggerated some of these claims may seem, this does not exonerate us from the task of thinking through what is historically distinctive about the way in which sovereignty is being attacked today. It is unarguing the relationship between the historical context and the reigning political ideas at any particular moment that is the challenge. It is to this challenge that this volume is addressed. As we have seen, the unholy alliance exists along a spectrum of opinion, ranging from those who think sovereignty must be modified, restrained or qualified, to those who see it as a totalitarian monolith in need of deconstructing. But they all agree that the idea of sovereignty with which we have worked in the past must be rethought. It must be rethought so that we can deal with the realities of our world in a more appropriate way, or even to realize new possibilities on a global scale. But what form of politics is supposed to replace sovereignty?

### Sovereignty and modern politics

Whether the sovereign state is in decline, and possibilities for global cooperation on the rise, is the question for the book to answer as a whole. In the final part of the introduction, we seek only to lay some intellectual markers that will help orient the reader to subsequent chapters. Each of the chapters will try to answer the question 'what is politics without sovereignty?' by investigating the retreat of state sovereignty in relation to specific domains of world politics, such as

security, international law, European integration and so on. Alternatives to the state tend to gain more acceptance from the way they share in the disenchantment with sovereignty than from proving their merits on their own terms. Yet assessing them on their own terms, as the chapters in this volume do, does not relieve us of the burden of giving our own account of sovereignty. If we are to judge the alternatives to sovereignty according to their ability to provide a superior form of politics, we must understand what kind of political form sovereignty is, and how it is related to modern society.

Sovereignty, as supreme public power, has traditionally been counterposed to property, or private right. The distinction can be appreciated through contemporary discussions of the decline of sovereignty. Consider the stylized argument that 'Westphalian' sovereignty, defined by Krasser as the 'exclusion of external actors from domestic authority',<sup>43</sup> is being gnawed away by globalization. As globalization liberates social relations from their territorial restrictions, this undermines the ability of a quintessentially territorial organization – sovereignty – to regulate these densely interwoven, globalized social links. But there are two sleights of hand in this stylized argument. The first is the rhetorical sleight of hand in the reference to Westphalian sovereignty. The emergence of this idea is usually associated with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which is taken to have ushered in the modern state system. The suggestive power of the idea that *Westphalian* sovereignty is fading today insinuates that, by the early twenty-first century, a 350-year-old institution is redundant by default. This is conveyed in the politely sneering language of UN reports ('Whatever perceptions may have prevailed when the Westphalian system first gave rise to the notion of State sovereignty...'<sup>44</sup>). In fact, the idea of sovereignty that is fading today is of more recent origin: the liberal, constitutional sovereign state ('nation-state') that can be usefully dated to the 1789 French Revolution. Indeed, the revolutionary French state was inspired by *philosophes* who excoriated the Westphalian states for their egotistical power struggles that sustained the domestic rule of the parasitic 'plundering classes', in the words of Tom Paine.<sup>45</sup> The *philosophes* argued that political authority had to be based on the ends of individuals in civil society, rather than on the caprice of belligerent sovereigns.<sup>46</sup> This is important insofar as we need to be clear about the nature of the sovereignty that is being eroded – in this case, the idea that government should flow from the will of the people, and not the absolutist conception of sovereignty connoted by the term 'Westphalian'.

The second sleight of hand involves the role played by globalization. The implication of globalization is that sovereignty is essentially 'parasitic' on a certain set of social relations, and when these change, sovereignty simply shrivels away.<sup>47</sup> But this is to misunderstand the nature of sovereignty. Sovereignty is a *political* concept, and as such cannot be reduced to material factors. While private, economic power involves ownership and control over material resources, political power is more narrowly the product of a relationship among individuals, the power that emerges when people form an association for the purposes of action.<sup>48</sup> The autonomy of politics is enshrined in the idea of sovereignty, as it forms public power by uniting the wills of all citizens. This establishes the general

will in opposition to the private will of any particular individual. By virtue of its claim to embody ultimate authority based on consensual relations between citizens, sovereignty is at once supreme and collaborative, thereby endowing modern states with historically distinctive efficacy and power. This is illustrated by G.W.F. Hegel in his discussion of the difference between modern valour and the valour of the medieval knight or robber. Specifically, Hegel argues that modern valour renders violence and courage impersonal. Alluding to the success of British colonial conquest in India, Hegel writes that

the true valour of civilized nations is their readiness for sacrifice in the service of the state, so that the individual merely counts as one among many. Not personal courage but integration with the universal is the important factor here. In India, five hundred men defeated twenty thousand who were not cowards, but who simply lacked the disposition to act in close association with others.<sup>49</sup>

The impersonal nature of modern valour grows out of the fact that it embodies a joint effort, whereby the individual *willingly* helps to enact the activity of a greater whole, rather than merely pursuing his own private gain.

It is important to be specific about the claim here. It is not that politics *always* takes the form of sovereignty. Rather, it is that in capitalist societies based on relations between contracting individuals, sovereignty is the form that collective activity for public purposes takes. In societies defined by contractual associations between formally free and equal individuals pursuing private gain, the pooling of common human purposes can only be made effective if it is distinct from the routine bustle of social life. As Martin Loughlin puts it, politics is achieved 'through the establishment of a governing authority that can be *differentiated* from society and which is able to exercise an *absolute* political power' (emphasis added).<sup>50</sup> Paradoxically, then, the consciousness of society as a collective endeavour between people can *only* exist in a form raised over and above society, as David Runceiman indicates:

It is states that go to war, not peoples, and it is the existence of the state that allows peoples to know when they are at war, when the war is over, and whether they have won. Otherwise war would not be war, but chaos. It is, in other words, the state that enables peoples to know whether they are up or down.<sup>51</sup>

The point of this abstract discussion is to be clear about what is at stake in the narrative of the eclipse of sovereignty. Globalization theory asserts the unravelling of the sovereign state. But the autonomy of the political indicates that economic expansion and new technologies alone are insufficient to eclipse politics. Political power has an intangible quality, given that it is founded on mediated relationships between individuals. It involves both material capacity in its institutionalized forms, such as the public power of the state, *and* the subjective will of every citizen; it is reducible to neither.

As James Madison put it

If it be true that all governments rest on opinion, it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct depend much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, the agency of the sovereign is internally related to the agency of the individual. Modern society does not spontaneously act upon itself. All socially purposive activity is mediated through various social spheres and institutions, which help to steer society in particular directions. Sovereignty, by virtue of its totalizing claims, is the pre-eminent sphere, to which all others are subordinate. The alienation of the state from society gives it the potential to exercise tyranny over society. But the totalizing claim of the sovereign is a vivid reminder of the fact that society is a product of human agency. By rooting itself in the consent of citizens, sovereignty contrasts human will to divine power, private morality and economics. For this reason, sovereignty means that an individual or group of individuals can always be held responsible for the political order. To act as sovereign is to claim the mantle of responsibility. To lose grasp of sovereignty, then, is potentially to lose grasp of society as the conscious creation of individuals. Without sovereignty, there is little left that stands in opposition to all that is merely mechanical or spontaneous in social development. At the very least, it is up to the alternatives to sovereignty to demonstrate how they better keep sight of the way society is, or at least can be, the product of human will and agency. Political progress must be measured by the degree to which that ideal collective potential is made real.

If individuals must look beyond their private differences to participate in politics, it is also apparent that political passions and interests are always rooted in society. The 'political' and the 'social' are not two ontologically distinct spheres. Critics of sovereignty are of course right to say that politics pushes up against the limitations of the sovereign state. As the representative of its citizens' general will, the sovereign state is universal, in that it allows all of its citizens to participate in politics within its own borders. Within the protective shelter of the sovereign state, all citizens are free to build the good life as they see fit. But the sovereign also violates his own promise, by limiting this universalizing impulse. Political self-assertion in international affairs often means one nation pitting itself against another. Thus the expression of collective political agency, when expressed in the form of the sovereign state, ends by dividing humanity against itself. Universalism becomes mired in national particularism.<sup>53</sup> It is precisely because of these hazards and limits of state sovereignty that we shall assess the alternatives to state sovereignty from the viewpoint of politics and agency: do the practical alternatives to state sovereignty lay the ground for greater political possibilities than the sovereign state provides? Does the new international theory enhance our understanding of these new possibilities? The critics of state sovereignty cannot be allowed to earn their progressive credentials simply by attacking the limited political form of state sovereignty.

There are limits to any abstract, logical analysis of a concept. Its meaning only really comes alive in relation to the ideas against which it is counterposed. The brief, foregoing analysis of sovereignty prepares the ground for the chapters that ensue. But it does provide us with at least a preliminary conclusion about the political significance of the unholy alliance, and the explosion of international theory.

First, it is not straightforward that the critique of sovereignty and the proliferation of alternative views of international politics are the sign of an enhanced sense of political possibility on the global stage. We shall, indeed, argue that, at present, what we find is the opposite. The retreat of state sovereignty has coincided with diminished political possibilities throughout the world. Second, the concept of sovereignty is bound up with a particular idea of responsibility. The idea of a supreme power, subject to no higher law, articulates the idea that human beings are the authors of their own destiny. Power is always exercised by an agent representing the supreme power of the collective, an agent who, in claiming that power, is therefore at least in principle accountable for that act. Although many critics of sovereignty claim to be making power relations more visible by jettisoning the vexing abstraction of sovereignty, we argue that the result of this is that one form of power – collective power – is rendered more oblique, and the exercise of power is made less accountable. If it is not inevitable, it is nonetheless not surprising that the reorganization of political theory and practice around a fragmented, divisible conception of sovereignty serves to separate the relationship between power and responsibility. That is to say, political activity still exists, and collective power is still exercised, but in a mystified and more unaccountable way.

### The 'mixed condition' of twenty-first century politics

Understanding the limits of international politics is always important for understanding the limits of politics more broadly. Tom Paine observed that the wars fought between absolutist states in late-seventeenth-century Europe buttressed the *ancien régime* in its rule at home. Warfare abroad perfected the 'art of conquering at home'.<sup>54</sup> Slavoj Žižek has made a similar point about the Iraq war today:

We should... be very careful not to fight false battles: the debates about how evil Saddam was, even about the cost of the war, and so forth, are red herrings. The focus should be on what actually transpires in our societies, on what kind of society is emerging *here and now* as the result of the 'war on terror'. The ultimate result of the war will be a change in *our* political order.<sup>55</sup>

But discussions about sovereignty are about more than how international politics may buttress the limits of domestic political systems. The idea of sovereignty is integrally bound up with the most fundamental concepts of modern politics, such as freedom and democracy. The natural rights theorists of the seventeenth

century observed the English, French and Dutch determinedly pursuing their commercial and colonial self-aggrandizement with little regard for the theological constraints of medievalism. Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes were inspired to propose a new model of society and politics, based around the self-determining, reflective individual, rationally pursuing his own ends. This model of nations robustly pursuing their own interests would, via the doctrines of the natural rights theorists, eventually suffuse all of society, reflecting modern societies centred on notions of autonomy, individuality and rationality.<sup>56</sup> The ebbing away of a vigorous idea of the sovereign state reflects the ebbing of a wider model of robust, determined political individuals, pursuing their idea of the good life in a more rational social order. The limited sovereign state of the day mirrors the depleted, withdrawn individual of contemporary society.<sup>57</sup> In the words of Richard Tuck:

There has been a much greater willingness on the part both of philosophers and the general public to accept the existence of a wide range of moral constraints on the principles which can govern a civil society – the idea of sovereignty is unpopular both in politics and ethics, and the dangers of the unpoliced international realm are seen as mirroring the dangers of the unpoliced civil society.<sup>58</sup>

We began this essay by observing how fashionable it is to damn what the critics misleadingly call 'Westphalian sovereignty'. Of the original critics of the pre-1789 Westphalian system, Rousseau is perhaps the most eloquent. Troubled by the wars of the latter half of the eighteenth century, Rousseau pondered whether the civil peace within society was bought at the expense of wars between them. How could 'the perfection of the social order' be reconciled with wars between states?<sup>59</sup> This prompted Rousseau to observe that

by living both in the social order and in the state of nature, we are subject to the inconveniences of both without finding security in either... the mixed condition in which we find ourselves [is] the worst state possible.<sup>60</sup>

Here Rousseau is pointing, once again, to the sovereignty/anarchy paradox. But Rousseau is, with the idea of a 'mixed condition', also going deeper, by eyeing this paradox from the viewpoint of the individual subject. The individual who sacrifices certain liberties in order to benefit from the security of living under a sovereign loses all these benefits by being dragged into the wars between sovereigns. The sovereigns, having no overarching power above them, exist in a state of nature themselves. What is worse, the wars fought between sovereigns are vastly more destructive than any conflict among individuals in the state of nature, outside of society. Thus 'everywhere the vain name of justice only serves as a shield for violence'.<sup>61</sup> The 'mixed condition' that results from submitting to the sovereign means that we cannot enjoy either the pristine liberty outside of society (the state of nature), nor the safety allegedly provided by the sovereign (the social



order). Thus, we endure insecurity that is much worse than the insecurity outside of society (wars between states), while we are simultaneously burdened by the constrictions of having entered society (the alienation of liberty to the rule of law). The result is 'the worst state possible'.

Rousseau's analysis of the 'mixed condition' blighting eighteenth-century European politics could be justifiably levelled against today's states system. While we have watched the political substance of sovereignty ebb away, we now find ourselves in a situation where we still endure all of the worst features of state sovereignty, and yet derive none of its benefits. The world is still fragmented into different peoples; the freedom of movement is still impeded by borders and barbed wire; the state still exists as a 'body of armed men with prisons, etc., at their command' as Lenin tersely put it;<sup>62</sup> militarism still propels states into war with each other; liberties are still trampled in the name of security. All this is endured without any of the benefits that sovereignty should impart. If agency is still exercised in all those repressive, divisive ways, with the shift from 'government' to 'governance', we have lost the ability to formulate a general will that can bend the institutions of public power to sovereign ends. Sovereignty has been lost, but no more universal form of political organization has emerged to replace it.

As we saw earlier in this essay, what makes the power of sovereignty distinct is its rootedness in human agency; it is a force that is only sustained by conscious human will. Individuals must be able to abstract themselves, look beyond their differences and find the common basis for collective action. The ability to direct oneself only emerges in the self-creative process of acting politically. For all its historical imperfections, and however attenuated it may be today, the framework of the sovereign state remains the best means of organizing and sustaining the process of politics, in opposition to all that is offered in its place.

If at one level the critics of sovereignty express a rather limited view of politics, at another level, they reflect a politics that attempts to conceal its own existence. This change, which we label a 'politics without sovereignty', is a politics that is at odds with itself. The essential feature of 'politics without sovereignty' cannot be logically deduced from the critique of sovereignty alone, but made apparent only through an investigation of the alternatives that constitute it. We conclude with a brief outline of the rest of the book.

### **The structure of this volume**

Each chapter focuses on a discrete realm of global politics. The first chapter of the book, collectively authored by the editors, provides a critique of two 'reflectivist' schools of international theory – constructivism and post-structuralism. Both of these theories have explicitly counterposed themselves to traditional IR theories by advancing criticisms of sovereignty. This makes both of these schools useful barometers of changing ideas of state sovereignty. In addition, in their criticisms of state sovereignty, both of these theories claim to be establishing theoretical foundations for the exercise of greater political agency in international politics. In this chapter, we will contest that claim, criticizing both of these schools for offering impoverished ideas of agency in place of the sovereign state. Being

unable to offer a coherent account of agency leaves these theories unable to root international relations in political will.

In Chapter 2, 'Sovereignty and the politics of responsibility', Philip Cunliffe analyses one of the most influential new ideas of sovereignty – the 'sovereignty as responsibility' doctrine, which aims to shift sovereignty away from supremacy to responsibility. Cunliffe argues that, theoretically speaking, the doctrine has nothing to offer, in that sovereignty already gives us a coherent theory of political responsibility. In practice, by pulling apart responsibility (enshrined in the sovereign) and ultimate authority (enshrined in the international community) 'sovereignty as responsibility' only means that the exercise of power is that much more distant and unaccountable to a state's citizens. In Chapter 3, 'National Insecurities: the new politics of the American national interest', Alexander Gourevitch analyses the national interest in US political history. America is usually identified as the archetypal great power, jealously guarding its sovereignty and aggressively pursuing its interests. Against this, Gourevitch argues that the traditional, refined concept of an 'objective' national interest made sense when it stood above the contested field of domestic politics. As political contestation in the domestic realm has declined, so the traditional 'national interest' has nothing to define itself against. Just what the national interest is has therefore proved increasingly difficult to identify. Building on the theme of security, in Chapter 4, 'From state of war to state of nature: human security and sovereignty', Tara McCormack analyses the shift from state-centred conceptions of national security to 'human security'. Rather than establishing security policy on a more humanistic basis, McCormack argues that taking the viewpoint of the isolated individual rather than the state has, perversely, multiplied security problems by assimilating more and more social issues under the rubric of security. But the more social issues are transformed into existential questions of security, the less they are open to political debate.

In Chapter 5, 'State-building: exporting state failure', Christopher Bickerton analyses the internationalization of state-building in post-conflict regions and further afield around the world. Bickerton argues that policies designed to strengthen governance in weak and failing states exacerbate the very problem that they set out to solve. The products of state-building are frail because they derive their authority from their relationship with international organizations, rather than a political relationship with their own societies. The technocratic approach of state-building is rooted, Bickerton argues, in the misconceived theory of state failure, which he criticizes. In Chapter 6, 'Country ownership: the evasion of donor accountability', John Pender analyses how the new politics of aid are changing the role of the state in development policy. Through a case study of Tanzania, Pender investigates the shift to 'post-conditionality' forms of development. In place of openly coercive structural adjustment, today's development policy seeks to 'empower' poor countries to wrest control of development back from international organizations. Against this, Pender argues that the rhetoric of empowerment and autonomy is belied, first, by the reality of wider international influence in developing countries, and second, because the rhetoric of empowerment makes it more difficult to hold aid donors to account for their policies. In short, talking up

the agency of poor countries makes them responsible for policies that are set by outside powers.

In Chapter 7, 'European Union: A process without a subject', James Heartfield argues that the dynamic driving the European Union cannot be reduced either to the *realpolitik* scheming of a great power, nor to any intrinsic dynamism of the organization itself. Rather, argues Heartfield, the Union's haphazard forward momentum derives from the political involution of its member states, who hand over sovereign responsibilities to the Union. He concludes by suggesting that, instead of seeing the Union's institutions as unfinished stepping stones to a fully fledged superstate, these semi-formed institutions are the product of an integration process that has no coherent, centrifugal agency driving it. Chapter 8, 'Deconstructing sovereignty: constructing global civil society' by David Chandler, assesses critically 'global civil society', the new model of transnational politics that claims to pioneer new solidarities beyond the sovereign state. Chandler argues that, under the cover of renouncing state-based politics, global civil society activists are also renouncing the democratic accountability and formal representation that goes along with territorially based politics. This in turn reflects a deeper disenchantment with mass politics. This disenchantment is at once the precondition for the articulation of global civil society, while also throwing up intrinsic barriers to the realization of its own political goals. In Chapter 9, 'Legalizing politics and politicizing law: the changing relationship between sovereignty and international law', Michael Savage scrutinizes international law, which has often been upheld as a means of 'taming' state sovereignty. Savage examines the extent to which the substance of international politics has been assimilated to the formal framework of international law in the post-Cold War period, and the implications of this development. Savage argues for the disentanglement of international law and politics, in so far as both spheres would be strengthened by using them as distinctive tools for steering international affairs.

As should be apparent from this overview, there are common themes that are repeated, refreshed and reinforced throughout this book. The key theme is to describe how the decline of state sovereignty crystallizes in different domains of international politics, and to analyse what this can tell us about the contemporary exercise, and understanding, of human agency. The final chapter, 'How should sovereignty be defended?', is the transcription of a round table discussion that took place in late 2005 among Professors James Der Derian, Michael W. Doyle, Jack L. Snyder and David Kennedy. This chapter not only provides an overview of the thought of these leading scholars, but also has them probing each other's ideas in relation to concrete issues of world politics, such as terror, nationalism and globalization. As such, Chapter 10 brings together four dominant and distinctive approaches to the contemporary problems of international politics.

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