

Review - On Sovereignty and Other Political Delusions

Written by Xavier Mathieu

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XAVIER MATHIEU, DEC 24 2014

On Sovereignty and Other Political Delusions

By: Joan Cocks

London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Joan Cocks' book is a welcome contribution to studies seeking to reassess the concept of sovereignty and its implications. The author asks an important question that resonates with recent critical and post-structuralist attempts at de-mystifying sovereignty: is the association of sovereignty with freedom and independence justified? In a concise and elegant way she attempts to uncover how the "sovereignty/freedom nexus" (p. 36) is more problematic than expected. Cocks writes from a political theory perspective but combines this approach with an eclectic selection of scholars from various disciplines. Her book is divided in three sections: the first one tackles the concept of sovereignty itself and its 'delusional' association to freedom while the two following sections illustrate this argument by looking at the cases of the United States' and Israel's foundational violence.

Cocks begins her analysis by showing how "sovereignty today is widely seen as the prerequisite and inner substance of a freely lived life" (p. 36). Sovereignty and freedom have become largely equated since the struggle against monarchical sovereignty and the association of sovereignty with the 'people'. As a result, freedom nowadays necessarily takes the form of *sovereign* freedom. But in contrast to the usual association of freedom and sovereignty – or freedom *through* sovereignty – Cocks reveals how "a struggle for sovereignty could signify freedom for one group and obliteration for another" (p. 23).

In other words, we face an inescapable "sovereign freedom/domination nexus" (p. 110) that has its source in the foundation or establishment of sovereignty. Following post-structuralist insights into the formation of authority, Cocks explains that every foundation of a sovereign entity involves a "foundational violence" (p. 28) that takes two forms: the violence of the foundation of a new authoritative law (that is, by necessity, not justified in any previous right) and the symbolic violence implied by the erasure of "pre-existing right or, more broadly, the erasure of a way of life structured and animated by that right" (p. 51).

Hence, and although the myths of sovereign foundation usually exclude this foundational violence in order to maintain the fiction of 'immaculate freedom', there is no alternative to this freedom/domination nexus when freedom is expressed through sovereignty. Additionally, the realisation of freedom through sovereignty not only implies a restriction on the freedom of the other but also a restriction of one's own freedom. In order to control a population and to counter the (necessarily violent) reaction of the excluded other the sovereign state has to resort to oppression of its own people and to limitations of their freedom. The combination of these two ideas leads Cocks to conclude that sovereign freedom is "a pipedream for both parties [the sovereign self and the excluded other], as neither is free from the impact of the other to be a master of its fate" (p. 89). The dominant group itself will suffer from the 'boomerang effect' of its own achievement of sovereign freedom, i.e. the resentment created among the dominated others.

The main reason put forward by Cocks for the inherent violence of sovereign freedom is that "human plurality", or the existence of a plurality of wills and perspectives, inevitably ties sovereignty to (violent) domination over others. In a discussion that mirrors the debates in International Relations (IR) on the impossibility of achieving a real sovereignty due to the plurality of states, Cocks argues that sovereignty, this absolute authority and the freedom attached to it

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can only be realised by denying someone else's sovereignty. Her critique is thus directed at those who have forgotten – or are content to disregard – that sovereignty is inextricably linked to violence and that sovereign freedom for some means violence for others. In a convincing manner, Cocks shows that even a desire for freedom not involving any idea of domination will necessarily result in violence if it takes the form of a sovereign claim. This violence is also self-perpetuating – as a sort of “dialectic” (p. 123) – since those dominated are likely to seek their own freedom through their own (violent) sovereign alternative.

In order to explore these questions, Cocks develops two case-studies: the foundational violence of the United States against the American Indians and the foundational violence of the Israeli state against the Palestinians. The author rightly attaches a great importance to the issue of ‘settler states’ and land acquisition or appropriation since sovereignty is a specific way of exercising power over an (exclusive) territory. In both case-studies she reveals how dispossession took place and how this foundational violence was erased. In the foundation of the United States, the treaties signed between the American Indians and the new authorities allowed for the dispossession of Indian lands and their transformation into “settler property” (p. 66). This foundational violence was erased by the ideas of wilderness (the territory was supposedly empty) and sovereign equality (the American Indians sold their land through contract). Both erasures allowed the United States to preserve its own image of freedom and the myth of its peaceful foundation. This case-study is a good illustration of the author's claims (although this reader would have liked a more thorough analysis of the interplay between domination, freedom, and sovereignty in the Indian Treaties).

As far as Israel is concerned, a similar process is identified by Cocks in which a settler colony culminates “in a centralized sovereign state that creates right inside that still-expanding territory but is unauthorized to do so by any prior authority that is higher, more objective, or more universal than itself” (p. 88). Practices used in Israel include “the creation of a refugee population, the erasure of Palestinian material culture, the settlement of Jews in areas once inhabited by Arabs, and the separation of Jews and Arabs” (p. 101). As for the United States, this foundational violence is erased through the (supposedly pre-existing) lawfulness of these acts.

Before turning to some of the limits of the book, I want to emphasise two elements that are particularly compelling and resonate with recent debates in the IR literature. First, and because of its very ‘grammar’ (i.e. its way of organising power along exclusive and hierarchical lines for a unified and homogenous ‘people’) sovereignty is inevitably attached to violence. More specifically, founding a sovereign political society involves imposing a specific world-view on a human group and differentiating this ‘people’ from others “who become their potential enemies” (p. 49). This (violent) construction or performance that forms the basis of sovereignty has lately been analysed by critical and post-structuralist scholars in IR (Campbell, 1992; Doty, 1996; Weber, 1995 and 1998). As cogently put by Cocks: “any subject seeking sovereign freedom – that is, freedom to act according to its own will without being subjected to the pressure of the wills of other subjects – either will have to fly a distant star or devote itself to crushing the capacity for free action of others here on earth, thereby becoming vulnerable to their warranted hostility” (p. 122-123). Cocks enables us to understand that it is the very nature and form of sovereign power that leads to such a problematic outcome.

Second, Cocks' argument explores contemporary concerns among post-colonial scholars about the possibility of alternatives to the (Western-defined) idea of sovereignty (Shaw, 2002; Dunn, 2003; Anghie, 2005; Havercroft, 2008). For Cocks “Sovereign power is self-naturalizing and self-multiplying in the sense that it often incites desires for sovereign power in those it oppresses, even when they did not have such desires before, for the simple reason that their most evident chance for freedom lies in producing a counter-concentration of power of such magnitude that they can defeat the concentrated power of their opponent” (p. 76). In this sense alternatives become unthinkable and freedom movements are compelled to use the same idea of freedom through sovereignty to achieve their goal. But in doing so, these movements “are likely to re-create for others the political injuries they are trying to escape for themselves unless they find a way to transcend the sovereign power ideal” (p. 10). The book also engages in a discussion of American Indians' relationship to the land and of their ways of organising political rule that is particularly welcome to illustrate alternatives to sovereignty and to its foundational violence. Cocks shows how alternative life worlds are at odds with the sovereign way of imagining and arranging political authority, thus making it difficult for those already dominated to use it. One could argue that the domination they suffer also possesses a normative character since their own political grammar has been delegitimised.

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Although Cocks's arguments are convincing, the short format of the book does not allow its author to explore some aspects in sufficient details. For instance, is not the idea of sovereign freedom delusional *for some only* and not for all (as Cocks maintains)? Arguably, the American and Israeli settlers have realised their own freedom (even if they achieved it at the expense of others' freedoms). Hence, if "sovereign freedom and domination are inextricably intertwined" (p. 6), the dominant group might not find this domination particularly problematic. This is all the more true since Cocks does not give any specific example of the 'boomerang' effect of freedom through sovereignty in the case of the American settlers. The consequences of 'sovereign freedom' on the dominant group – and how this domination/freedom is justified and excused – would need a deeper analysis.

A second problem lies in the choice of case-studies. Because Cocks attributes a great – and justified – importance to territory, she focuses on colonial settlers but ignores the more mundane and everyday foundational violence on which sovereignty depends. In other words, violence is not restricted to a 'foundational' moment but is continuously reproduced and repeated in order to maintain the sovereign state. Cocks acknowledges this point – violence is not restricted to the 'birth' of the state – but her own expression ('foundational violence') and her choice of cases could mislead the reader.

Finally, Cocks is certainly guilty of a romanticising of the Indian and Palestinian alternatives to sovereign freedom and domination. Her discussion of these cases reveals an idealisation of 'politics' that could function without conflicts. Although these alternatives are interesting to provide a counter-point from which to understand sovereignty, they should certainly not be idealised as instances of politics without violence (in particular symbolic violence).

Overall, and despite these limits, this book offers a captivating engagement with the idea of sovereignty and its practical/historical realities. In a refreshing way Cocks disregards disciplinary boundaries and navigates with ease between politics, philosophy, history and ecology. The book will thus appeal to a large audience and particularly to those interested in the intricacies and contradictions of sovereignty.

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Xavier Mathieu is a PhD student in the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. His thesis explores the normative character of the concept of sovereignty and its link to Western civilisation through a historical study of French early colonialism in Canada. His research is concerned with the concept of sovereignty, hierarchy and 'otherness' at the international level, intervention and state-building as well as performativity as a theoretical tool for the study of international politics. He recently published (with Nicolas Lemay-Hébert) an article exploring the OECD's discourse on 'fragile' states.