

Sovereignty Revisited

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Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 2006.35:295–315

First published online as a Review in Advance on June 7, 2006

The *Annual Review of Anthropology* is online at anthro.annualreviews.org

This article's doi:
10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123317

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0084-6570/06/1021-0295\$20.00

Key Words

political anthropology, violence, kingship, authority, body, government

Abstract

Sovereignty has returned as a central concern in anthropology. This reinvention seeks to explore de facto sovereignty, i.e., the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity. The central proposition is a call to abandon sovereignty as an ontological ground of power and order in favor of a view of sovereignty as a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence. After a brief account of why the classical work on kingship failed to provide an adequate matrix for understanding the political imaginations of a world after colonialism, three theses on sovereignty—modern and premodern—are developed. We argue that 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. The last section discusses the rich new field of studies of informal sovereignties: vigilante groups, strongmen, insurgents, and illegal networks. Finally, the relationship between market forces, outsourcing, and new configurations of sovereign power are explored.

NGO:
nongovernmental
organizations

INTRODUCTION

The current reevaluation of the meanings of sovereignty—critically informed by the work of Giorgio Agamben—resonates in profound ways with an intensified global crisis of the nation-state as the main vehicle of sovereign power.

Transnational corporations, the “soft” global network power of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and Internet communities, as well as the proliferation of ethnic conflicts in the post–Cold War age seemed to undermine the naturalness of the idea of national sovereignty in the 1990s. The aftermath of 9/11 made it clear that national sovereignty, war, and security regimes still remained the hard kernel of modern states. It was also clear, however, that the new threat to the established world order would come from forces that were difficult to conceptualize—highly mobile, evanescent, and resolutely global networks, akin to what Deleuze & Guattari (1987 [1980]) call “nomadic war machines,” rhizomes of force (*puissance*) that leave institutionalized power (*pouvoir*) highly vulnerable. There is no clearer example of the paradoxes of sovereignty in the twenty-first century than Iraq since the United States–led invasion in 2003. Here, multiple, fragile, and contested centers of military might, welfare, and ethno-religious and local loyalties claim sovereignty over people and land—both legal sovereignty as in the legitimate right to govern and de facto sovereignty as the right over life (to protect or to kill with impunity).

Recent work on sovereignty addresses, and maybe transcends, two long-standing theoretical impasses in anthropology: the decline of political anthropology with its emphasis on kingship, sacrifice, and ritual in “primitive” societies. This once influential strand in anthropological debates was so steeped in an ahistorical mode of analysis that it all but disappeared with the emergence of historical anthropology and the many critiques of colonialism since the 1980s. The subsequent reinvention of the anthropology of the political

and the state in the 1990s has been heavily indebted to Foucault’s attempt to cut off the King’s head in the social sciences (Foucault 1980) and to develop a nonessentialist ontology of power beyond notions of origins and centers or the continuity of cultural forms.

The triumph of a Foucauldian view of power has in many ways created an impasse of its own. If power is dispersed throughout society, in institutions, disciplines, and rituals of self-making, how do we, for instance, account for the proliferation of legal discourse premised on the widespread popular idea of the state as a center of society, a central legislator, and an adjudicator? How do we understand popular mythologies of power, corruption, secrecy, and evil as emanating from certain centers, people, or hidden domains? How do we interpret how violence destroys social ties but also produces informal authority? How can we understand war as a totalizing logic of life and society, as Foucault himself pointed out in the late 1970s (2003)?

The return to sovereignty, often via Agamben’s writings on banished life (*homo sacer*), desymbolized and “bare,” as the included outside upon which a community or a society constitutes itself and its moral order (Agamben 1998), promises a new and fruitful focalization—maybe another strategic reductionism—of ongoing debates on the nature of power and violence.

In the following, we offer an interpretation of what has prompted this revisiting of sovereignty as a central concern in anthropology; what possibilities this move has offered; and which new fields of inquiry it promises to open. This revisiting differs from the past endeavors in anthropology, and from the debates on sovereignty in political science and history, in two important respects: It is, in the main, oriented toward exploring de facto sovereignty, i.e., the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity wherever it is found and practiced, rather than sovereignty grounded in formal ideologies of rule and legality. This does not preclude studies of

legal practices or state practices but may help to reorient such studies away from the law as text, or the courtroom spectacle, toward exploring more quotidian notions of justice, of “legal consciousness,” and of punishment as they occur in everyday life. The key move we propose is to abandon sovereignty as an ontological ground of power and order, expressed in law or in enduring ideas of legitimate rule, in favor of a view of sovereignty as a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state.

The second difference is the focus on the body as the site of, and object of, sovereign power. Agamben’s work has made it possible to understand that it is not only the King who has two bodies, a natural body and a political body as in medieval political theology (Kantorowicz 1957). This duality is a generalized condition in modern societies where the citizen has an included body, a body that has itself (*habeas corpus*) and an array of rights by virtue of its inclusion into the political community, and simultaneously a biological body, a life that can be stripped of symbolization and humanity and reduced to “bare life” by decree or bio-political fiat. This is, Agamben shows, the nature of modern sovereign power of which the camp, designed for extermination, waiting, or infinite detention, is the most poignant expression (see Fiskesjö 2003). The larger point is of course that the body is always the site of performance of sovereign power, which becomes most visible in states of war, extreme conditions, fragmentation, and marginality. Sovereign power can be fruitfully regarded as the central, if often unacknowledged, underside of modern and liberal forms of highly codified and regulated (self) government (Agamben 2005, Hindess 2005).

We are, in other words, charting and advocating an ethnographic approach to sovereignty in practice. This may turn out to

be every bit as destabilizing to formal and legal notions of sovereignty as ethnography has been with respect to the idea of religion, the state, and the market.

We start with a brief and critical account of why the political anthropology inspired by Frazer, Hocart, and Evans-Pritchard produced many striking insights but failed to provide an adequate matrix for understanding the political imaginations of a world after colonialism. We also offer a brief assessment of how various assumptions about sovereignty persisted, if rarely in an enunciated form, in much of the influential work on colonialism and its legacies. The anthropology of colonialism has demonstrated that the anxieties of colonial rule were centered on its body politics, the imprinting of rule on the bodies of natives, and the protection of white bodies: the fears of miscegenation, the performance of European dignity, the presentation of the European family and domesticity, the taming and disciplining of immoral practices, etc. We also suggest that through the lens of sovereignty in practice, colonial rule appears less hegemonic and effective than in its self-presentations in official texts and plans. A key feature of the colonial world was that different kinds and registers of sovereignty coexisted and overlapped. Most modern states claim effective legal sovereignty over a territory and its population in the name of the nation and the popular will. Although this is always an unattainable ideal, it is particularly tenuous in many post-colonial societies in which sovereign power was historically fragmented and distributed among many, mostly informal but effective, forms of local authority.

The last section provides a discussion of the rich new field of studies of informal sovereignties such as vigilante groups, strongmen, insurgents, and illegal networks. We also address, albeit in a more tentative form, more recent work exploring the relationship between market forces, privatization, outsourcing, and the new configuration of sovereign power it produces in the present.

CORPUS MYSTICUM: ON KINGSHIP AND ENDURING CULTURAL FORMS

By and large, anthropologists have understood political authority, often studied under the rubric of kingship, in two different ways: either as embedded in the wider structures of production, kinship, and clan or as a distinct and centralizing institution, reproduced through public ritual, constituting a symbolic center of society. The former is commonly associated with work on segmentary and acephalous polities with relatively low levels of functional and institutional differentiation. In such societies, “the law” does not have an existence separate from procedures or injunctions outside the ethos of everyday life: “[T]he basis of law is force,” writes Evans-Pritchard and continues, “the club and the spear are sanctions of rights” (Evans-Pritchard 1969 [1940], p. 169). The functionalist thrust of this tradition posited a fundamental consonance between political symbols and rituals and the meanings and sentiments they evoked among subjects. “An African ruler,” Evans-Pritchard & Fortes write in their introduction to the classical collection *African Political Systems*, “is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them. He is . . . the embodiment of their essential values. . . . His credentials are mystical and are derived from antiquity” (Evans-Pritchard & Fortes 1940). There is no history in this perspective, only incessant feuds and conflicts that nonetheless follow intricate rules and patterns that in the end ensure the permanence and indivisibility of the realm or the community (Evans-Pritchard 1969 [1940], pp. 142–47; see also Barth 1959, Fortes 1945, Gulliver 1963).

This is ultimately a Durkheimian view of the integrative mechanisms in “primitive” societies, a view of political authority as expressing a deep and collective political will and sovereignty. Gluckman writes on the hierarchically organized Zulu Kingdom with its powerful chiefs and aristocracy: “There-

fore, despite the apparent autocracy of kings and chiefs, ultimately, sovereignty in the State resided in the people” (Gluckman 1940). In this tradition, the body of the king is identical to the body of the people, the body-politic, and “political behavior” hardly exists as a distinct practice. Schapera (1969) suggests that the influence of colonial administration and missionaries accorded more law-making authority to the chiefs and thus opened a rift between the force of the law, backed by the modern state, and the legitimacy of a more consensual custom/tradition. In a Melanesian context, Sahlins’ distinction between the chief and the big man (Sahlins 1963) referred to the difference between societies hierarchically organized around a powerful chiefly or royal institution (see Valeri 1985, Thomas 1994) and the more unstable character of political authority in acephalous societies (see Sillitoe 1978, Godelier & Strathern 1991).

The second view of political authority sets it apart from the moral frameworks of ordinary life, either as chiefly or royal power. Although indebted to the countless examples of the mythical origin of kings in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (Frazer 1959), Hocart’s writings on kingship have exerted considerable, if not always acknowledged, influence on many anthropologists. Hocart was resolutely comparative, and often quite evolutionist, in his focus on the process of centralization of societies around the royal institution. He drew an analogy between human society and the evolution of the body. In lower forms of life, each unit of the body is relatively self-contained and independent, whereas mammals are incredibly centralized organisms where the head (and the brain) is the indispensable center of everything. In the place of segmentary organization of societies grows centralized and functionally specialized systems of rule and control. Thus, centralized and functionally specialized systems of rule and control supersede the segmentary organization of societies (Hocart 1936, pp. 38–39).

Drawing on examples from Fiji, South Asia, Africa, and Europe, Hocart’s central

propositions are that kingship originates in ritual; that kings are people endowed with, and entrusted with, special powers of symbolic representation and of moral transgression; and that kings carry the burden of impurities of a community in his body. The king is thus both divine and impure, and the realm of kingly behavior is constitutively different from that of his subjects. Kings are indispensable, both benevolent and dangerous (Hocart 1936). These insights have spawned debates on the differences between royal sovereignty and ritual purity in South Asia (e.g., Inden 1978, Raheja 1988, Dirks 1987, Quigley 1993); on notions of the generalized duality of royal power (Sahlins 1985, Scubla 2002); on the place of sacrifice and scapegoats in producing the sacred (Girard 1977); and on divine kingship, ritual murder, and the king as scapegoat (de Heusch 1982, Simonse 1991).

These two streams of work on political authority reflect two models of sovereignty—sovereignty as intrinsic to the community/people or as extrinsic—an alien and potentially threatening force that ensures renewal but also needs to be ritually domesticated. In philosophical terms, it corresponds to the distinction between Durkheim, Herder, and Rousseau on one side, and Hobbes, Hocart, and Schmitt on the other. Yet, matters are not so simple. Hobbes' famous idea of "the State of Warre" as the origin of sovereign power [Hobbes (1651) 1996] seems to be widely accepted in the anthropology of "primitive" or nonmodern kingship. This state of war is seen as an ongoing practice or tension that reproduces society, say among the Nuer or Zulus; an ever-present threat that has to be warded off through the labor of balance and ritual perfection in Bali (Geertz 1980); a potential that can be preempted through constant exchange and gift giving, as Sahlins (1974) pointed out in his perceptive essay on Mauss' *Essai sur le don*; or a memory of conquest and foundational violence that is ritually enacted as in Bloch's study of kingship in eighteenth-century Madagascar, a study that creatively attempts to combine the two mod-

els of sovereignty mentioned above (Bloch 1987).

Yet, for most anthropologists, it is imperative to show that a Hobbesian and Hegelian teleology of state formation does not apply to "primitive societies." A permanent state of war, or threat of war, may be a powerful impulse in consolidating and reproducing societies and the authority of kings, but these conditions necessarily produce neither a modern state nor a semblance of a covenant. The work of Clastres is particularly interesting in this respect. In his work on the Guayani in Paraguay, he rejects the evolutionist view that the many dispersed and highly mobile societies in the region have been unable to develop more complex forms of organization. These societies—organized as relatively egalitarian and acephalous bands of mobile warriors—were organized, argues Clastres (1989), in exactly such a way as to prevent them from ossifying and becoming settled and hierarchical structures. Permanent warfare and the constant elections and dismissals of war chiefs aimed to prevent any submission to the various forms of sovereign power that have existed in the region from pre-Columbian times to the contemporary state forms. In his efforts to reject a Euro-centric teleology of state formation and to account for such societies in their own terms, Clastres tended nonetheless to embrace Rousseau, another European thinker, and his idealization of the purity and equality of savage society (Clastres 1989 [1974]).

FROM KINGSHIP TO MODERN FORMS OF POWER

How useful has this substantial body of work on kingship been in subsequent work on what in the 1960s became known as "new states" in the postcolonial world? The answer is that it has been surprisingly absent, as if the conceptual gulf posited between the traditional and the modern became quite accurately applied to the distinction between colonizer and colonized, Western and Eastern/African, modern

modalities of power versus traditional registers. In a recent meditation on how anthropology was forced to adjust itself and be more sensitive to history and to the new tumultuous world of postcolonial states and their polities, Geertz (2004) suggests that anthropologists have been so beholden to an idea of the homogenous nation-state as the essential form of modern power that they have failed to understand actual states “against the background of the sort of society in which it is embedded—the confusion that surrounds it, the confusion it confronts, the confusion it causes, the confusion it responds to” (p. 580). Geertz calls for an understanding of states and sovereignties as cultural constructs but not necessarily as entities whose nature and practices can be derived from, or reduced to, any cultural logic. To push the point further, it was historians and a few distinguished anthropologists of Latin America and the Caribbean (Wolf 1982, Mintz 1985) who, in their interrogation of colonial history, began to blur these distinctions and pointed toward a more complex and necessarily globally entangled history of the formation of states and sovereignties, as we discuss below.

There were some, if relatively rare, attempts to project “traditional” cultural logics of authority and sovereignty onto modern, postcolonial forms of state and political authority. Some of these studies have demonstrated that cultural holism and the concomitant assumptions about ideological cohesion and shared cultural meanings throughout a society—whether of a Boasian/Herderian or Durkheimian/Rousseauian provenance—are ineffective as analytical templates for analyzing modern societies and polities. For all its perceptive analysis of royal ritual and symbols, Combs-Schilling’s (1989) work on Moroccan kingship has little to tell us about how royal sovereignty and ritual actually connects and combines with modern forms of governance in Morocco. Kapferer’s (1988) attempt to explain ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka by projecting ideas of corporate religious identity onto entire groups, i.e., to equate the religious body of

Buddhism with the political body of the state, appear unduly totalizing and curiously insensitive to the intricacies of actual politics and modern government in the country (Kapferer 1988). Other attempts have been more felicitous, such as Apter on Nigeria (Apter 1992), Burghart on Nepal (Burghart 1990) and Anderson on Indonesia (Anderson 1990), but the work on premodern kingship has generally been sitting uncomfortably with much of the recent anthropology of nationalism, power, and the state.

The inability of anthropologists to understand “primitive societies” as historical formations is a main reason for this impasse, and the singular focus on symbolic forms and cohesion is another. However, a third reason has been a poor and undifferentiated understanding of the specificity of modern forms of power, and more particularly the forms of sovereignty that developed around the colonial encounter. Hutchinson’s ethnography of the Nuer (Hutchinson 1996) is exemplary in its attention to the salient forces of war, weapons, and the presence of the state in contemporary Nuer life, and thus is an unusually well-crafted corrective to the rarefied timelessness in which much older anthropological work was set.

Much of anthropology has juxtaposed a thick description of the practices and symbolic forms of the exotic other and a thin, ahistorical, if not bland, symbolic representation of the West—as if, say, the nature of modern sovereignty could be understood through a reading of Hobbes. The result has been a formulaic reproduction of a distinction between a homogenized realm of modern/Western/capitalist concepts of power and government and another deep, rich, and heterogeneous realm of the traditional/primitive/uncolonized/authentic notions of power and agency. This work has been useful for rhetorical clarity but detrimental to a nuanced understanding of our contemporary world. Abeles’ otherwise excellent analysis of Mitterand’s presidential practices and performances through a prism of

royal ritual aiming at symbolic integration of society is a relatively rare attempt to dissolve this analytical boundary. Abeles focuses exclusively on ritual form and myth created by and around Mitterrand to show that modern political forms, like traditional ones, are deeply infused with religious imagery and sentiment. Yet, Abeles has little to say about the forms of sovereign power and modern government—invested in the nation and the state—that made Mitterrand’s performance both possible and credible (Abeles 1988). In the absence of a conceptualization of the deep importance of spectacle and performance in modern politics (see for example Wedeen 1999), Abeles’s analysis gets no further than pointing out an analogy.

The challenge seems to engage in a double movement: on the one hand to develop a deeper, more historically attuned and theoretically sophisticated understanding of the nature of modern sovereignty, including how it developed and morphed in the colonial encounter, and on the other hand, to chart and understand the de facto configurations of sovereignty both within and beyond the modern state and its constitutive idea of the rule of territory and people through a formal language of law, which by the mid-twentieth century had become the dominant horizon for political authority and imagination across the world.

Before engaging the question of colonial sovereignty, let us briefly sketch an outline of a stronger and more universal understanding of sovereignty, which we developed in more detail elsewhere (Hansen & Stepputat 2005). Let us summarize it in three theses:

1. The duality inherent in royal power and its promise to conjoin opposites—*celeritas* versus *gravitas* (Sahlins 1985), wild and fecund versus dry and contemplative (Bloch), or the natural and fallible body of the king versus the *corpus mysticum*, the transcendent body-politic (Kantorowicz 1957)—is also at the heart of modern sovereignty. Here it takes

the form of the tension between the sovereign in its ideal and transcendent form (nation, state, the people), which amounts to “empty places” that never can be fully represented (Lefort 1988), and their always transient and imperfect embodiment in a specific leader, party, movement, or institution. The essays in Bornemann’s recent (2004) collection on the “the death of the father” all address the failure of embodiment of the national community in a supreme leader. Modern sovereign power has both sublime and profane dimensions, and both modern and premodern political communities have two bodies: a fully human included into political-cultural life, and another biological body, potentially stripped of dignity and desymbolized as “bare life” (Agamben).

2. The origin of sovereign power is the “state of exception”—the suspension of rules and conventions creating a conceptual and ethical zero-point from where the law, the norms, and the political order can be constituted. This exception can be legal (see Schmitt 1985 [1922]), ethical (Agamben 2005), a Hobbesian “State of Warre,” or mythical origin of royalty. Yet, sovereign power is fundamentally premised on the capacity and the will to decide on life and death, the capacity to visit excessive violence on those declared enemies or on undesirables. Sovereignty is intrinsically linked to life as a biological force and to the body, either to the will to take life or to the willingness to disregard one’s body and one’s own life (Bataille 1991). The emaciated body of the hunger striker (Aretxaga 2001) or the blood of the jihadist martyr (Devji 2005) remains a powerful weapon in what Mbembe calls modern “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2003).
3. In spite of these fundamental continuities between archaic/premodern sovereignty and modern sovereignty,

the latter is marked by an unprecedented desire to become not merely a legal or symbolic reign but a comprehensive, effective, and totalizing form of detailed government of territories and their populations. Many of the disciplines of modern institutions, the technologies of government, and the technologies of the self characteristic of modern societies did indeed aim at creating an ostensibly depoliticized government in the name of scientific rationality and improvement of the life of citizens and populations (Burchell et al. 1991). These new bio-political regimes reconfigured rather than superseded sovereignty as a mode of power. Modern disciplines are driven by a powerful idea of defending, purifying, and protecting the new locus of sovereignty—society, the nation, the people, and/or the community—often defined in ethnic and racial terms (Foucault 2003). Modern techniques of government thus made possible much more exhaustive, ambitious, and effective forms of sovereignty, culminating in ethnic cleansing, in such systematic exterminations as the Holocaust, the invention of a new doctrine of mass extermination of populations in colonial wars (Hull 2005), in mass internments, mass incarcerations of “antisocial elements,” etc. Whereas Jean Bodin in the sixteenth century advised monarchs to reserve the “marks of sovereignty” exclusively for themselves (Bodin 1992 [1588]), the regime of modern sovereignty and its mirror image, the sovereign community, have made bodily marks, pigmentation, language, and dress the markers that decide whether a person is included in the polis/community as a political body (Balibar 2002) or whether a body merely counts as biological life subjected to the whims of the executive.

COLONIAL POWER, GOVERNMENTALITY, AND MODERN SOVEREIGNTY

The colonial world was not a stage whereupon a fully formed cultural idea of “realist” Western sovereignty clashed with, and superseded, other forms of ritual or sacred sovereignty. The colonies became the site where European powers tested and developed their techniques of government. It was here that the notion of the natural sovereignty, and the right to rule, of the “civilized,” Christian, white nations emerged over several centuries (Pagden 1995). The colonial world was therefore a twilight zone of multiple, indeterminate configurations of power and authority. It was in part a zone of exception and lawlessness (Thomson 1989), allowing for unrestrained violence and exploitation, in part a realm believed to be ruled by excessive despotism that at times was emulated in order to indigenize colonial rule (Cohn 1983, Apter 1999) and at other times that served as an imaginary canvas on which liberal arguments of the necessity of rights and the rule of law in the West could be made (Grosrichard 1998). This peculiar articulation of different registers of sovereign power in the colonial world is fundamentally important to any understanding of the character of postcolonial states and political formations in postcolonial societies.

Colonial domination developed slowly, tentatively, and unevenly. Most of the early colonial enterprises in Asia and Africa were from the outset in the hands of private trading companies, privateers, and semiofficial armies and naval forces. Although acting in accordance with a royal charter, or in the name of their sovereign, they were in reality forces in their own right. Accountability, risk taking, and also the prudence of military actions and civil administration by these companies were often hotly debated in Britain and the Netherlands in the eighteenth century (see Sen 2002). At the center of these debates was the question of which standards of government and punishment should apply

to the colonial world: those of “civilized men” or those of the native rulers? The colony constituted a zone of exception in a double sense: both as not being directly under the sovereign power of the Crown or the republic and as being “beyond the pale,” an alien world whose populations were not accorded full humanity or membership of a community of civilized men entitled to *habeas corpus* and other rights of the subjects of European powers. As a result, colonial sovereignty was generally marked by an excess of violence and much harsher forms of punishment than were administered in the European world at the time (for a general argument along these lines, see Arendt 1968; for South Asia, see Chandavarkar 1998, Hussain 2003).

In India, for example, the local jurisprudence and forms of punishment administered by local princes and courts were generally seen as both ineffective and inconsistent (Cohn 1983). The East India Company decided to erect public gallows and open new prisons across the colony. The frequent use of capital punishment intended to create an all-important aura of fortitude and rigor that remained a cornerstone of British rule in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The protracted campaigns against the infamous Thuggees in central India in the 1840s were indeed part of a general effort at disarmament of Indian society. But they also had performative functions designed to demonstrate the British ability and will to both rule and reform with a firm hand (van Woerkens 2002). Similar considerations applied to colonial Malaya where the native Islamic courts were seen as too inconsistent to provide a coherent structure of justice and civil order. Only after a thorough reconstruction and codification that introduced more rigorous punishments were these local courts allowed to play an integral, if minor, role in the overall administration of justice in Malaya (Peletz 2002). Similar rationalizations took place with the formation of personal law codes across India. Codification and systematization of local jurisprudence subsequently became the cor-

nerstone of the institutionalization of legal pluralism in most of colonial Africa in the twentieth century (Moore 1978, Gluckman 1965, Chanock 1998).

In the Dutch Indies and in French Indochina, colonial governments were faced with an ever-growing population of “mixed race.” Causing not merely a problem of classification and appropriateness, these populations were regarded as a potential threat to the moral cohesion of the Dutch and French settlers. Those in power also feared that the mixing of races undermined the stature and prestige of the colonial masters in the eyes of the natives. The systematic encouragement of emigration of white women to the colonial world at the end of the nineteenth century aimed at strengthening the racial community of colonists which, in tune with the dominance of scientific racism at the time, was seen as the very basis of colonial sovereignty (Stoler 2002).

Until the end of the nineteenth century, colonial enterprises in Africa were mainly of a simple and extractive nature, first based on the slave trade and later on extraction of minerals and timber. As in Asia, but employing much more random and excessive violence, these enterprises were mainly private and only loosely associated with European states through royal charters (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1977, Sen 1998). This “private indirect government” (Mbembe 2001) operated in what, in every sense of the word, was a state of exception—in areas outside the control of any state and using methods and levels of violence that would have been unacceptable in most other parts of the world. If Leopold’s Congo is the most widely known example (Ewans 2002), the massacres at Maji-Maji and the crushing of the Herero revolt in South West Africa and the massacres in Rhodesia in 1899 are other cases in point. The slave trade was sanctioned and encouraged by European states, but the actual operations were run almost entirely by private companies. These companies operated with near-complete impunity, attacking some existing states and

kingdoms on the Atlantic coast, collaborating with others, and in the process transforming these states into predatory slave economies wreaking terror and disorder upon populations deep into the interior (Meillassoux 1991). As has been characteristic of state formation in much of the world, these entrepôts, privateers, and maverick entrepreneurs became included into the colonial states or became their enemies as bandits or pirates, when these began to firm up in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Gallant 1999). Similar oscillation between inclusion and assertion of autonomy applied to many of the mission stations across Africa. While spearheading a civilizing mission and thus supporting the overall goals of colonial rule, missions in outlying areas were very often in conflict with the colonial administration over issues of punishment and harsh rule of their flocks (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991).

Even as modern forms of government were imported and implemented in the colonial territories, their effects were always uneven and extraordinarily dispersed. Many different forms of sovereignty coexisted within the colonial territories. The colonies were never governed as intensely and with the same devotion to registering and monitoring its subjects as was the case in Europe—not even in settler colonies such as Kenya and South Africa. Substantial parts of the colonized populations lived under native rule—chiefs, rajas, local regents—which enforced brutal labor and penal regimes under the supervision of the colonial state. In much of Africa, a major part of the rural population lived under such regimes (Mamdani 1996); in India, about one-third of the territory and population in the subcontinent lived under indirect rule until 1947, and in Malaya, most of the rural Malay population was governed by the Malay aristocracy throughout the colonial period.

Agamben's interventions have forced many social scientists to rethink generally the relationship between sovereignty and the disciplinary modalities of power explored by Foucault (for a good discussion of this, see

Cohen 2004, Das & Poole 2004). Sovereign power exists in modern states alongside, and intertwined with, bio-political rationalities aiming at reproducing lives and societies as an ever-present possibility of losing one's citizenship and rights and becoming reduced to a purely biological form. This insight is even more pertinent and important in the colonial and postcolonial world where bio-political rationalities were always predominantly configured around maintaining public order and governing communities and collectivities rather than individual subjects. Although the deployment of a Foucauldian optic in the analysis of colonial rule has produced major insights (Chatterjee 1993, Mitchell 2002), it is obvious that however interesting and compelling it is to explore the mentalities and blueprints of colonial officials, such analysis tells us relatively little about how government and sovereign power was configured in practice and in everyday life. Colonial states were indeed "ethnographic states" that employed scientific data collection and categorization to generate a governable reality amenable to interventions, as Dirks noted in the context of India (Dirks 2001) and Chaikov noted in his analysis of both the imperial and Soviet paradigms of knowledge and rule in Siberia (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003).

These designs and intentions should not blind us, however, to the fact that the reach and efficacy of colonial states was uneven and often severely limited. This limitation was especially true of border areas in which local elites and freebooters often enjoyed effective autonomy (Nugent 1999, Sivaramakrishnan 1999). The incompleteness, tentativeness, and fragmented nature of colonial states and the excessive forms of violence they frequently visited on their subject populations have structured postcolonial states in profound ways. A fast-growing literature on the culture of different postcolonial states seeks to historicize specific states, to set them in their wider context, and to get beyond universalist notions of state functions. Many of these studies have sought to conceptualize and document

the consequences of sovereignty moving away from being rhetorically invested in the state and the law to being invested in new entities in the postcolonial situation—the nation, the people, “society” as such, the national economy (see for instance, Coronil 1997, Fuller & Benei 2000, Tarlo 2003, Goswami 2004). Other works have attempted in creative ways to shed light on how both elite and popular ontologies of power—as something hidden, magical, fetishised, realist, or ultimately violent—intersected and clashed in everyday encounters between the postcolonial state, its subjects, and other sovereign powers (Siegel 1997, Taussig 1997, Navaro-Yashin 2002).

The fetishization of sovereign power is by no means limited to societies beyond the West, however. This was forcefully noted by the exiled German philosopher Ernst Cassirer in his critique of Nazism (Cassirer 1946) and explored anthropologically in a range of recent publications (Verdery 1999, Meyer & Pels 2003). The historically complex and often unsettled configurations of sovereignty in many postcolonial societies—and we include Latin America in this category—have given rise to a complex range of informal sovereignties. The tentative rule and local despotisms of these forces often structure the lives of ordinary people more profoundly and effectively than does the distant and far-from-panoptic gaze of the state. We turn now to this body of work.

BENEATH THE PANOPTIC GAZE: INFORMAL SOVEREIGNS AND OTHER OPAQUE POWERS

As Durkheim (1933) noted, the production of state authority, and the law as an expression of its sovereignty, is dependent on the production of an unlawful underside of the state. Thus, a murky, secretive underworld of pirates, bandits, criminals, smugglers, youth gangs, drug lords, warlords, Mafiosi, traitors, terrorists, *en fin* of outlaws and liminal figures seems to persist and mutate despite state laws and powerful institutions entrusted with the

responsibility of eliminating them. The persistence of this underworld is true of highly developed and powerful states and even more pronounced in much of the postcolonial world in which multiple and segmented sovereignties was always the reality for large sections of the population.

Anthropologists have increasingly insisted that this underworld and its shadow networks cannot be understood without reference to their specific relations to states and hegemonic discourses of social order (e.g., Nordstrom 2000, Parnell & Kane 2003). They have described how illegal organizations often work with the “studied ignorance or tacit consent” of the authorities (Schneider & Schneider 1999), how state officials receive bribes in their “dirty togetherness” with criminals, or how they have vested interest in upholding zones of exception where illegal groups operate with impunity. State institutions may even forge “unruly coalitions” (Verdery 1996) with illegal groups that control territories or populations where the state does not have the capacity or will to exercise its sovereignty. In an attempt to characterize the wide range of illegal/state relations, Smart (1999) talked of a “continuum of persistence” of illegality, ranging from tranquil conviviality to open challenges of state sovereignty.

Historically we find examples of informal sovereignties at agricultural, highland, and sea frontiers where “military entrepreneurs” operated in a highly ambiguous relationship with states in the making, such as the Lords of the Marches in Lebanon (Gilsenan 1996), mestizo settlers at the Northern Mexican frontier (Alonso 1994), or *gamonales* at the highland frontiers in Peru (Poole 2004). From a world-system perspective, Gallant (1999) argues that the phenomenon is associated with primitive accumulation and the extension and intensification of markets, with armed groups and individuals sometimes assisting and sometimes resisting central state authorities. Poole (2004) insists that the *gamonales* cannot be interpreted as autonomous sovereigns operating in and of themselves beyond the reach

of the state. They helped, represented, and abused people in their area of influence while also representing the state and the law, as well as the transgression of law. Thus, they personified the two sides of state making: the law and the violence on which it rests, employing both the “law making” and the “law preserving” violence, to use Benjamin’s (1978) famous distinction.

Turning to the issue of informal sovereignty in the present, we find that the use of illegal and often violent practices by local strongmen, staunch bureaucrats, vivid politicians, businessmen or vigilantes is widespread. As they operate with impunity within their “jurisdictions” they become a law unto themselves, in a sense representing a legacy of colonial indirect government. The question is what the sources and attributes of informal sovereignty are, and whether such practices may be meaningfully characterized as sovereign practices being exercised within, beside, or against formally sovereign states?

Hobsbawm’s (1969) social bandits constitute a celebrated ideal type of outlaws who base their quasi-legitimate rule on the perceptions of state law as being unenforced or immoral, unjust, arbitrary or in other ways out of tune with reality. In some aspects, Mafiosi, gangs and, other “violent entrepreneurs” (Blok 1974) have fulfilled vital state functions such as the provision of security, credits, and conflict mediation. In postcolonial and postsocialist states, arbitrary laws and bureaucratic procedures that increase unnecessarily the transaction costs of exchange and production have served to explain the extension of protection rackets and criminal organizations that control, but also enable the working of transport systems, trade, and other sectors using patronage and predatory practices. However, as Schneider & Schneider (1999) warned us, this functionalist view comes very close to the self-perceptions of these predatory organizations.

While effectively challenging the state’s monopoly of violence, these organizations are

engaging in sovereign practices themselves, as argued for example by Humphrey (2004) in her analysis of transport entrepreneurs in postsocialist Ulan-Ude. Drawing heavily on Agamben’s insights, she identifies “localized forms of sovereignty” that are “nested” within “higher sovereignties” but nevertheless “retain a domain within which control over life and death is operational” (p. 420). In the early 1990s mafia-like organizations took over control of transportation after a period of violent accumulation and boundary marking, but the structure stabilized and gave room for “ways of life” of taxi entrepreneurs. As long as they paid their tributes to the organization they could even experience a certain “*joie de vivre*” (p. 434). However, they do not have rights within the system and risk being excluded or just abandoned without access to urban survival. As the system works, its dynamics are generated more by the rationales of the way of life and the fear of abandonment than by the fear of violent repression and exclusion.

Similar fragmented systems of authority are found all over the postcolonial world where local strongmen occupy strategic positions between state institutions and the population. One such example is found in metropolitan squatter areas and slum cities, where proper land titling never has been undertaken and where access to entitlements is contingent on having a well-connected patron who can channel claims and applications (e.g., Parnell 2003). In many cases, such local slumlords, strongmen, and quasi-legal networks have been de facto sovereigns from colonial times. They have at times been tamed and incorporated into governmental structures and have at other times been nodes of opposition to the state (Adelkhal 2000, Hansen 2001, Plissart & de Boeck 2006).

Such persons command discretionary powers deciding when to punish illegalities and when to make the customary exception from the law. The figure of the criminal is often faceless or assumes a spectral and yet enormously powerful form as reported by

Siegel (1998) from Jakarta. In other cases, the criminal figure can be well known and highly visible, operating between the zones of illegality and legality, deploying rumors of his violent past or connections to powerful and hidden underworld forces to style himself as a heroic protector of communities and common people. Not only are such figures central to the regulation and adjudication of everyday life, but police departments, civic administrations, and political parties must also rely on them to govern and regulate life in slums and popular neighborhoods (Hansen 2005).

The interpretation of *de facto* sovereignty as being related to the exercise of violence with impunity resonates with numerous ethnographic descriptions of ruthless men (seldom women) of force, particular individuals or groups with the reputation of being unpredictably, arbitrarily, and excessively violent. As Gilsenan (1996) notes, “at the extreme such men were said to show a sovereign pleasure in violating others by deed or word arbitrarily, gratuitously, ‘just like that’ without any reason but their own personal will and pleasure” (pp. xi–xii). The apparently immanent attributes of such individuals, Gilsenan argues, were crucial and personalized elements of people’s experience of power at the Lebanese frontier. The narratives of these men’s force and violence depicted the foundational violence of the current social order and contributed to the constitution of social relations of contest and domination.

Such narratives of ruthless and violent individuals and organizations develop around key performances of sacrifice or heroism at the expense of “savages” or outcasts at the frontiers, the violent suppression of rivals, or the depuration of traitors from within the political or moral community in question (McCoy 1999, Jensen 2005). Similar to nationalist narratives, they may be analyzed as constitutive of solidarity and identity in the Durkheimian vein or as being nurtured by the anxieties of contamination, impurity, and blurred identities (Appadurai 1998).

Another strand of analysis focuses on the role of secrecy and magic in narratives of invincibility and unrestrained “wild” power. Leaders have often been associated with ambiguous, occult forces that may harm as well as benefit others (e.g., West 2005), but the mastery of occult forces is seen as not only reinforcing but also subverting existing power structures (Geschiere 1997). Thus, guerrilla forces in Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, and Liberia were seen as having access to the power of spirits (Lan 1985, Richards 1996, Ellis 1999); today, vigilantes in Nigeria are described in popular discourse as magically empowered superheroes who can mobilize symbolic registers of the unknown and supernatural (Smith 2004); in Caracas the spirits of renown dead criminals are seen to possess the bodies of the living in a spirit cult (Ferrandiz 2004); and as Taussig (1991) famously showed in the case of the rubber economy at the Putomayo River, narratives of the supernatural powers of the Indians inspired acts of excessive violence in the “space of terror” mirroring and appropriating these powers for the men at the frontier.

As commonly noted, imaginations of occult forces seem to be particularly salient in contexts of rapid change in which power relations are unclear or incomprehensible, such as the current phase of globalization and modernization (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). Whereas these forces lie beyond the jurisdiction and powers of state institutions, communal or popular bodies engaging in everyday policing—by default or through outsourcing arrangements—will often have to deal with rumors of witchcraft and sorcery.

Particularly in postcolonial or postsocialist states, we find the phenomenon of “nested” or “outsourced” (Buur 2005) sovereignty. Whether the effect of an inherently limited capacity for law enforcement or the conscious definition of zones and times of exception where state law is suspended for practical purposes, we find state officials or their substitutes engaging in *de facto* exercise of sovereign practices in the interstices

of laws and formal procedures, between the real and the legal. “Free-fire zones” or “zones of transgression,” for example, are found at international borders and metropolitan areas where paramilitary groups or semiprivate death squads engage in cleansing operations beyond formal accountability (Scheper-Hughes 1992). As several authors suggest, the excessively violent practices commonly used in authoritarian states such as Brazil and Nigeria are being reproduced by vigilantes and clandestine security organizations in formally democratic states (Linger 2003).

The past decade of simultaneous state decay and democratic reforms of security and justice sectors in the wake of armed conflicts in some areas has turned the attention of anthropologists toward issues of everyday security, community policing, communal and popular justice, and private security companies (e.g., Ruteere & Pommerolle 2003, Gore & Pratten 2003, Buur & Jensen 2004). Studies suggest a wide range of relationships from tight control and regulation to complete autonomy that goes much beyond a simple state-society divide. Furthermore we may see the outsourcing of everyday policing less as a sign of weakness of the state than as a way of incorporating segments and zones where state sovereignty never was effective, and where low-cost forms of policing poor neighborhoods are developed. But the new (or rather re-emerging) policies of outsourcing sovereignty are also a sign of the increasing importance of market forces in regard to practices of informal as well as formal sovereignty.

CONCESSIONS, FIRMS, AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE MARKET

The trading company, the concession, and the royal charter were the main vehicles for early colonial expansion. Later, privately owned enterprises were of equal importance in the consolidation and administration of the colonies. In the Caribbean, the planter soon emerged as the preeminent symbol and daily adminis-

trator of colonial economy and terror. On the plantations and estates from the Caribbean to Sri Lanka, Fiji, and Malaya, the planter was the crucial node in the colonial administration: the sovereign of his land who either literally owned the bodies of his labor force or held workers in such tight control and wielded such influence in the colony that colonial officials rarely found it opportune, neither politically nor economically, to intervene or to protect slaves or indentured laborers (Mintz 1989).

This de facto outsourcing of colonial sovereignty had deep and enduring effects in areas dominated by European settlers or plantation economies. Populations were kept separated along ethnic and racial lines, and economic power continued to be held by very small elites controlling vast tracts of land and vast pools of labor. This historical predicament laid the ground for a range of different conflicts—from violent oppression in Haiti (Trouillot 1995) to the isolation and vulnerability of the “estate Tamils” in Sri Lanka (see Daniel 1996) and the deep racial and cultural divides of present day Fiji (Kelly & Kaplan 2001), to mention a few examples.

The emergence of “special economic zones” devoted to labor-intensive production or tourism across Asia in the 1970s and 1980s represented in some ways a return of the concession in a new form, and an outsourcing, or maybe “grading,” of sovereignty (Ong 1999). The difference was, however, that these zones and their interaction with the rest of society were often controlled rather effectively by the states in which they were located. Some states, particularly in Africa, were unable to control mining, oil, and timber companies, and the proliferating development and NGO sector, mainly because many states were already parceled out and their resources effectively privatized by military elites and leading members of the political elite (Bayart et al. 1999). In Zimbabwe, the theme of sovereignty has dominated campaigns against white settlers seen as alien and exploitative and as remnants of the colonial regime. The plundering

of the state by the political elite and the takeover of private white-owned farms by war veterans and youth brigades still loyal to Mugabe have explicitly been organized as assertions of popular sovereignty—the protection and communal retaking of the ancestral land from the private control of the settlers (Worby 2003, Moore 2005).

Because the nation-state is no longer the privileged locus of sovereignty—always doubtful in much of the postcolonial world—sovereignties are found in multiple and layered forms around the world. Outsourcing of vital infrastructural services and security operations to major corporations, and an almost-religious belief in the self-regulating forces of the market, is at the heart of America's new imperial adventures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere (Harvey 2005). In the age of the great concessions Western rulers believed that military and trading entrepreneurs would ultimately serve the interests and consolidate the sovereignty of the king or state that had certified and encouraged their pursuit of private accumulation. Similarly, today substantial tasks—from protecting the Green Zone in Baghdad to overseeing the rebuilding of the Iraqi infrastructure—are outsourced to companies based in the United States or in “friendly” nations (Klein 2004). Across the world, major development projects funded by developed nations in the West

and in East Asia are operated and implemented by private contractors and NGOs, often with multinational personnel, on behalf of sovereign nation states. International agencies are tied into coordinating mechanisms and contracts with military agencies and private contractors in a rapidly developing “security-development network” (Duffield 2001).

Whereas sovereign power has always depended on the capacity for deployment of decisive force, it seems that the control over territory and bodies that marked the nation-state model of sovereignty is now supplemented by a powerful drive to control the “legal contract”—the modern-day concession that empowers private companies to carry out state functions. It echoes Sassen's (1996) suggestion that the most decisive form of citizenship within states, and internationally, now belongs to firms and market forces, rather than to individuals or groups of citizens. This emerging and complex configuration of sovereignties calls not only for historical analogies but also for new anthropological studies and critical reflection on how the circulation of capital, that ubiquitous fiction we call “the market,” is an evermore powerful sovereign force: magical and redemptive (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000) but also unpredictable and pitiless in its punishment of those who fail to perform or those who fall behind.

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