I. The Politics of Sovereignty

As an essentially contested term, sovereignty is more interesting for the debates it provokes and the difficulties it evokes than for any agreement on its meaning (Ashley 1988; Walker and Ashley 1991). We can begin provisionally with Hinsley’s rather conventional account (Hinsley 1986). For Hinsley (1986, 26), sovereignty means the “idea that there is a final and absolute political authority in the political community…and no final and absolute authority exists elsewhere.” Following Hinsley, most conventional accounts imagine that the creation of sovereignty is an historical achievement of a particular type of culture (Gross 1968; Philpott, 2001). Questions of sovereignty, Hinsley argues, do not arise where political authority is seen to lie outside the political community. In theocratic and imperial rule, for instance, political authority unjustly rests outside the political community: a religious elite represents a sacred realm beyond the community or rule emanates from a center that imposes itself on peripheries.

The achievement of sovereignty, the transition from external to internal rule, occurs, we are told, at the end of the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century “Europe.” The religious wars end rule by Emperor and Pope over Europe, a transition solidified and formalized by the treaties that created the “Peace of Westphalia” (1648). These treaties acknowledged the autonomy of political communities from external rule, perhaps recognizing the first formal modern states and signaling the emergence of the modern state system. Sovereignty serves as the
bridge from empire and theocracy to the state system, from tradition to modernity. The conventional account considers this transition an achievement of no small consequence.

Hinsley notes that the insistence on internal sovereignty has implications for relations between states. While “internal sovereignty” suggests that final authority lies within the community, “external sovereignty” amounts to the claim that among states themselves there is no final authority; each state is an authority independent of other states. Sovereignty thereby constitutes states as existentially or ontologically separate – like billiard balls. In promoting their sovereignty states constitute themselves as discrete and independent entities. In so doing, however, they also accept a model of social life in which others outside can also exist as discrete and independent. The claim of one state to exercise final authority in its own community depends logically on extending the same right to other states (Hinsley 1986, 158). “External sovereignty” appears therefore as the outward expression of the inward articulation of sovereignty. In this way, other states participate in the creation of any one state: their acts of recognition create the sovereign statehood of the other. Without this recognition by others the claim to sovereignty by any state remains incomplete. Thus a kind of asocial sociality or weak society emerges between states – they can only constitute themselves as separate, independent, billiard ball like entities within a society of states that recognize each other as such. This configuration of states is social in that the creation of this society involves mutual recognition. But it is also asocial because such recognition constitutes states as existentially separate entities (Bull 1977, 8; Wight, 1977, 153; Onuf 1991).

Sovereignty and the theory of international relations this conventional account generates are not explicitly developmental theories. Nevertheless, it is increasingly
recognized that this conventional account of sovereignty locates itself squarely within a developmentalist or modernist discourse (Walker 1993; Manzo 1991; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004). The consolidation of internal political authority, the de-legitimization of external rule, the move towards a community’s self-determination, the recognition that other communities must be given the same right to self-determination, the understanding that the life of sovereign states is lived within a society of formally independent and equal states – all this is envisioned in contrast to an other that has not yet found the modern values of equality, freedom, and self-determination. These pre-sovereign others include the earlier pre-modern societies of Europe, as we have noted, but also the still pre-modern societies of non-Europeans. But of course it is only a matter of time and tutelage before these pre-modern societies become modern.

Tentatively accepting the conventional claim that sovereignty involves resting final authority within the community, we might ask a question often overlooked in an era dominated by “globalization” talk: what purposes and values justify this internal authority? Why is sovereignty valued? Our answer also is often overlooked: the purpose of sovereignty is to express and realize the cultural, historical, or ethical principles that make a state a particular kind of state. State leaders and state populations expend tremendous energy on projects – hydro-electric dams, nuclear capability, excellence in sports competitions, maintenance and projection of an artistic, cultural, or philosophical heritage – that they hope will actualize the images they want to project for their states. The assertion and projection of sovereignty would be pointless and without content if the community did not wish to express some particular difference (Jackson 1990, 266; Blaney and Inayatullah 1994). It is particular differences that each state wishes to have
recognized and affirmed. Sovereignty expresses the value of particularity and difference against the implied sameness of “empires of uniformity” (Tully 1995). This is the moment of difference.

The logic of sovereignty pushes us to acknowledge, then, that all those who develop a sense of community or nationhood deserve the rights and responsibilities of formally equal states. We know that this logic has not yet been fully embraced as can be seen by the tremendous force that currently constituted states use to defeat the plethora of secessionist movements that invoke the principle of sovereign statehood to justify their cause. However, the logic of sovereignty seems to push us to legitimize these secessionist movements as well as to accept that the world could be and perhaps should be demarcated into smaller and more discrete units (Weitz 2008). We know that some multi-ethnic states (e.g. Yugoslavia, USSR) have been reconstituted as multiple, separate sovereign states and that the number of formally independent states has steadily, if slowly, increased over the last 300 years or so. Ever more units are seeking to express their particularity.

Yet the pole of sameness does not disappear; sovereignty involves elements of both sameness and difference. Recognition as sovereign state requires fulfilling conditions that involve sameness: proper respect towards and control of state boundaries, a government that effectively responds to its people, rule of law, commitment to modernization, etc. Here, falling behind on such standards (of civilization) places a state lower in the international hierarchy as a backward, underdeveloped, or third world state, or perhaps as a quasi-state, a failed state or a rogue state (Gong 1984, 2002; Grovogui
Thus, it is within the modern conditions of sameness that the particular difference of a state must be cultivated and realized.

II. The Political Economy of Sovereignty

Given this context of sameness and difference, we add the further claim that having a particular state agenda that differentiates one state from others is a necessary but insufficient condition of sovereignty. Creating a particular kind (the moment of difference) of modern state (the moment of sameness) sovereignty relies on specific projects imagined by states that require financing; that is, actualizing and particularizing sovereignty requires wealth. How will the state acquire this wealth?

Actualizing sovereignty forces us to think about sovereignty in relation to wealth acquisition. Specifically, it requires us to place state sovereignty in relation to a capitalist global division of labor. Difficulties emerge immediately. In part, these difficulties are due to the tension between two expressions of modernity, the tension between the society of sovereign states and the capitalist global division of labor. If the logic of sovereignty is to particularize the states-system into particular units, the logic of capitalism is expansive and integrative. To paraphrase Adam Smith, wealth is limited by the extent of the market; the more intensive and extensive the division of labor, the greater the production of wealth. The inherent dynamism of capitalism brings all people and social relations under its own laws in the name of increasing wealth.

Historically, the capitalist division of labor has operated such that some people and places have specialized in high value, technologically innovative, high profit
industries while other people and places have supplied the raw materials and raw labor (the capital cities versus the rural hinterlands; north-west Europe versus eastern and southern Europe; Europe versus its colonies). While there is a certain amount of dynamism in this process – core areas do not always remain part of the core, e.g. Portugal and Spain, nor do peripheral areas always remain peripheral, e.g. Japan, South Korea, Singapore – this dynamism has not been so great as to altogether erase the historical legacy. Many contemporary states still produce the same commodities that their colonial masters assigned to them within a global division of labor. For example, Cuba still produces sugar, Ghana cacao, Honduras bananas, Chile copper, and Malaysia rubber, tin, and palm oil. To the degree that these states must depend on western centers for capital, for technology, and for consumer demand, their ability to create wealth and fund their particular state projects rests outside their borders.

Using Hinsley’s language to describe capitalism, we might say that for many states, especially Third World states, final authority rests in a capitalist division of labor. Final authority, that is, remains external to each part; the whole and its purpose (the production of wealth) provides each part (each firm, state or region) its function (Levine 1978, 168-81). To the degree that states and regions operate as concrete, functional parts of a global division of labor, they respond to a logic that is both outside and above them (Strange 1992; a point made also by dependency theorists and world systems theorists; see Dos Santos 1970, 231; Sunkel 1969, 1973; Amin 1974; Wallerstein 1991). If so, as such states make policy, they must remain sensitive to the role its regions and firms play in the global division of labor. Not doing so can result in a failure to accumulate wealth, an inability to complete state projects, and a diminished capacity to express their
particularity (difference) and their modern sovereignty (sameness). Actual sovereignty, then, is tied to the capacity to generate wealth, a capacity often largely external to typical Third World states.

The non-economic logic of sovereignty is meant to work in the opposite direction: each part of the international society is formally equal; function is never at issue (the function of each part is simply to become itself – within a modern context); and final authority, rather than being external, is supposed to reside within. For states aspiring to sovereignty but immersed in the least advantageous positions of the global division of labor, the compulsions of global capitalism appear as a direct threat to their sovereignty. In this way, we can see policies of “import substitution,” “self-reliance,” and “de-linking” as often desperate efforts by Third World states to assert their sovereignty in the face of the pressure of global capitalism (Cardoso 1972; Bull, 1984; Murphy 1984; Slater 2004). Even if such states have formal political sovereignty, they do not have economic sovereignty.

So far we have made sovereignty and the division of labor opposing principles, and in a way they are. But they are both aspects of modernity. Specifically, sovereignty and the division of labor are expressions of a singular political and economic order, namely an international society of “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie 1983), or what we call the “culture of competition” (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004, ch. 4). The culture of modernity treats states like independent artisans in a kind of state of nature. Independent artisans have no need to labor for others; with their own labor and their own tools, they generate wealth by and for themselves. In this “culture of competition,” each state is thought to be responsible for producing its independence and actualizing its sovereignty.
with the wealth it generates through its own means -- via production or exchange with others.

Sovereignty implies then a kind of property right in the territory of the state. As Charles Beitz (1991, 243) explains, “The requirement of respect for a state’s domestic jurisdiction functions as a kind of collective property right for the citizens of the state – it entitles the state to exclude foreigners from the use or benefit of its wealth and resources except on terms that it voluntarily accepts.” The community has a right, says Beitz, to use its territory and its resources to pursue the self-image it is trying to project. By claiming this right, a state also establishes the right of other communities to reserve their resources for their own purposes (see also Kratochwil 1986, 1995). States, in the culture of competition, realize their purposes by means of the wealth they generate within their own territory and by means of resources acquired in exchange with others.

Acquiring wealth is treated as a “private” (intra-national) matter, involving the voluntary action and transactions of formally independent states. However, the idea of independent artisan states engaged in the activity of producing themselves as particular state hides the historical role of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. It hides how the capitalist global division of labor creates not independent artisan states but rather localities whose function is usually to produce a narrow range of crops or products. In liberal modernity or this culture of competition, the principles governing the acquisition of wealth appear as pre- or asocial relations disconnected from colonial history.

Perhaps we can say that communities both are and are not sovereign in this global context. On the one hand, states are indeed formally equal and independent with seemingly symmetrical rights and responsibilities. The achievement lauded by the
conventional view of sovereignty seems hard to deny, at least in part. On the other hand, communities within the global division of labor are *not* self-generating sovereigns. Although we often imagine that the sovereignty of the First World was self-generated, we can only do so if we ignore that the wealth claimed by such states was and is the product of a global producing structure – a structure in which the First World plays a decisively dominating role (Blaut 1993). Similarly, Third World state’s inability to create wealth on a scale supportive of actual sovereignty cannot be seen as an individual failure independent of the overall *opulence and poverty* generated by the capitalist structure of production. Our point is not that capitalism merely transfers wealth from one region to another – a version of “trickle-up” that inverts Smith’s “trickle-down.” The dynamics of capitalism and world history surely complicate such a simple picture. Rather, our point is that states and regions play different functional roles in a historically evolving global structure of wealth production. States (or regions) that provide raw materials and inexpensive labor continue to occupy a subordinate position compared to those states that claim larger shares of world wealth based on the newest technology and on knowledge-based production processes. When we consider the historical and global social context, states and regions appear not as independent producers, but as functionally and hierarchically differentiated products of the global division of labor, as colonizer and colonized, as cores and peripheries.

Confusing formal sovereignty with its actual existence is central to a liberal international society, to a modern culture of competition. This confusion prompts several questions. Do we regard the differences that particular states represent, guard, and promote as valuable? Is the other’s difference merely a difference to us, or can it also be
made a difference for us? If we opt for the latter and accept that the other’s difference is valuable for us, then we must find ways to ensure the other survives and thrives. We would need to give up the fiction that states are independent actors performing labor functions, the value of which is properly evaluated by world markets. We would not be able to simply accept market outcomes; we would need to alter the culture of competition in ways that secure the material possibilities for actualizing and particularizing sovereignty. Instead, we tend to go along with the conventional account and tolerate the fiction of independent self-production that makes the formal equality of sovereign states sufficient. The conventional account pushes us to endorse the results of market processes that create and sustain an oligarchically organized international society.

In such a world, the ability to actualize sovereignty is contingent. For Third World states, in particular, the formal recognition of sovereignty conjoined with a peripheral role in the capitalist global division of labor results in a failure to achieve meaningful sovereignty. Thus, sovereignty for Third World states appears as a contradictory and self-defeating practice.

Moving beyond this truncated version of sovereignty requires a vision of states not as quasi-independent billiard ball-like entities but instead requires a vision that is more thoroughly historical and social. Our more thoroughly social conception of sovereignty alters the conception of boundaries. More precisely, such a conception alters our usual understanding of the inside and outside of states. In the conventional account, sovereignty constructs “self” and “other” as equivalent to the inside and outside of the state. Others have used the language of “hard shell” or the ‘state-as-absolute-boundary” to express this idea (Herz 1959; Ashley 1989). In contrast, when we include the
historical legacy of colonial relations, a political economy history in which First and Third Worlds are co-constructed, the hard shell seems more permeable (Wolf 1982; Abu-Lughod 1991; Barkawi and Laffey 2006). Absolute boundaries blur into overlaps in which the distinction between inside and outside is increasingly difficult to maintain. The history of imperialism defies the claim that boundaries act as property rights for states. Rather than simply using the resources within their own boundaries to secure their projects, states also have forcibly removed other’s resources or have “exchanged” for those resources without due compensation. When we acknowledge colonial history the boundaries associated with sovereignty are neither simple nor absolute; are, instead, complex and porous.

III. Threat and Sovereignty

A more thoroughly social sovereignty implies a challenge also to the idea of the state as a unit of protection. As John Herz (1950, 157) tell us, human affairs are organized in an anarchic fashion where “a plurality of otherwise interconnected groups constitute ultimate units of political life, that is, where groups live alongside each other without being organized into a higher unity.” This situation of anarchy produces the famous “security dilemma:”

Groups of individuals living in such a[n anarchic society] must be, and usually are concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Striving to attain security from such attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on. (Ibid.)
According to Herz (1959, 13 and 40), states are led thereby to construct themselves as “units of protection” – “fortifications and fortresses” encircling an “expanse of territory.” This “fortress state” is presented against the familiar background of a formal and self-generating sovereignty; the state produces itself as a fortress with its own efforts and its own resources. The hard shell is the material basis of what can be acknowledged by other states as “independence, eternal power, sovereign jurisdiction” (Ibid., 41).

With a more thoroughly social conception of sovereignty we can shine a new light on the security dilemma. Acknowledging Herz’s claim we can say that interactions between communities may always involve some threat to a valued way of life. The other’s difference provides a critique of and alternative to what a state may think of as a settled mode of life. Such a threat may lead communities to use their borders to arrest or mediate the other’s influence – whether such an influence comes through ideas or goods. Such cultural, economic, or security oriented protectionism may or may not be necessary. We might respond to Herz by noting that the historical evolution of the global division of labor suggests the social interpenetration and co-construction of all communities by all others and all states by all other states. This dynamic, continuous, and pervasive co-construction confronts and challenges the liberal idea that a self-generating sovereign community can lie secure within its own borders. In this more social and more dynamic image the distinction between inside and outside blurs and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish self and other—external threats from internal fears.

One problem with our analysis so far has been the enormous and un-due weight we have placed on the word “community.” We have spoken as if finding a community and deciding what counts as a community were a straightforward matter. Indeed, we
have merely deferred awkward questions by using the word “community.” No community, we can say with some confidence, is ever wholly homogeneous; each must have multiple sub-cultures within it (Smith 1995; Chatterjee 1993). Some of these internal cultures or voices might be dominant, some recessive, some perhaps stake out a middle ground within this continuum. The process of constructing a “community” out of a heterogeneous mélange is likely to have involved some combination of power and force, mediations and negotiations, and agreement and acrimony (Anderson 1983). The internal dynamic of any community is always ripe for the dominance of one voice, the maintenance of a pluralistic status quo, or the disintegration of the community into multiple communities.

“Community and sovereignty thus share an unstable dynamic. Both are terms that “freeze” or reify a dynamic process. On the one hand, sovereignty de-legitimates the oneness of empire (even as it demands oneness in meeting the standards of the sovereign state system). It insists that the international society be marked instead by difference and by a self-determination that is somehow internal to a community. It implies that there will be multiple “units of meaning” and that the differences between these units serve as experiments and experiences for all other members of the international society.

On the other hand, we must ask: Does this process go on forever? If not, where or when does or should this process stop? Can each and every “community” or “group” that lays claim as a “unit of meaning” have a right to act as a sovereign state? If so, we can expect to have thousands of states. If one is wholly committed to the purposes and logic of sovereignty, then one must commit to the disintegration of current states into ever-greater numbers.
However, even at its historical advent in seventeenth century Europe, sovereignty did not work like this. The commitment to the disintegrative and difference-affirming logic of sovereignty was resisted. From the beginning the norm in modernity is the multi-ethnic state. However much we seem to need to forget, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, and England began as and remain multi-ethnic or multi-national states despite rigorous nation-building efforts. From the beginning state leaders and state populations have resisted what they saw as destabilizing secessionist movements. The result is a process that, while it acts to spur some sub-sovereign communities to proclaim and actualize their own sovereignty, also spurs sovereign powers to act as imperial lords within an already constituted sovereign zone. This frozen but unstable quality of sovereignty strikes us as one of its central historical features.

The tension created by an acceptance of difference and its simultaneous rejection corresponds accurately, we believe, to the current human condition. We are eager to use sovereignty as a wedge against the pretensions of those outside who would deny our difference through their (sometimes unwitting) imperialism. But we hesitate to offer the same defense to those who might experience a similar onslaught but this time by a sovereign state, whose policies seem to arrest difference within a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, or multi-religious state.

This tension can be seen as an illogical and convenient hypocrisy by those trying to protect their interests – whether these interests are political, economic, strategic, or cultural. Or it can be seen as an earnest fight between two equally compelling principles: one that stresses the resources over the dangers available to us when a thousand
differences are allowed to bloom; another that asserts that oneness, even a forced
oneness, is still to be preferred to the fear inducing anarchy of a thousand differences.

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