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The Sovereignty Concept

Concepts and politics

The terms of political discourse are the words we use to talk about problems and possibilities in the political world, but they also are problems and possibilities in themselves. “Power,” “justice,” “equality,” “tyranny,” and so on are, first of all, intellectual puzzles without definitive solutions, in that any conceptualization of any of these terms will spark its own revision, refinement, extension, or counter-conceptualization when it inevitably is found to be inadequate to its object in some way. In turn, those contrasting concepts will spark new chains of revisions, refinements, and counter-concepts. Magnifying the undecidability of each political keyword is the fact that its conceptualization involves the use of other keywords (sometimes political, but sometimes philosophical, aesthetic, religious, or economic) that are intellectual puzzles without definitive solutions, too.

Take, for example, the classical liberal definition of freedom proposed by J. S. Mill in *On Liberty*. The individual is free to the extent that he can form his own thought and feeling, opinions and sentiments, tastes, associations, goals for action, and style of life. The only justifiable limits to this “sovereignty of the individual over himself” are that he must not harm other individuals and must share in the “labors and sacrifices incurred for defending the society or its members from injury and molestation.”¹ In short, the free individual can pursue his self-regarding interests without interference by others but is obligated to contribute to their collective security and refrain from injuring them. While at first glance Mill’s proposition seems straightforward, it has provoked in many inquiring minds, simply because they *are*

inquiring minds, a host of new questions about freedom and the other key terms on which Mill relies. What constitutes injury to another? Are any interests purely self-regarding? What is a self? Are sovereignty and freedom synonyms?

Every term of political discourse is not just an intellectual but also a political Pandora's box. People with clashing ideological commitments in the world also will clash over the meaning of the keywords they use to talk about the world and even may go to war because, to stay with our example, they value freedom but disagree in part about what freedom means and who is its proper subject. Thus, in a case in which one society tries to export the requisite institutions and habits of thought and practice to support freedom in some twenty-first-century revision of the Millian sense of that term, and another society denies that the individual self is sovereign, sees freedom's most significant subject as the collective culture, and defines freedom as national self-determination, not just conceptual debate but also political conflict may ensue. It is a weird and unfortunate fact of political life that if conflict does ensue, the relative material power of the two sides rather than the relative intellectual worth of their competing concepts will determine which idea of freedom is victorious.²

In a classic gem of an essay, W. B. Gallie characterizes aesthetic, religious, and political discourse as pivoting on concepts over which disputes are likely to erupt without the possibility of an "objective" or universally agreed-upon resolution. Concepts are essentially contestable if they are intellectually open ended, in the sense we noted above of being susceptible to further elaborations and revisions; internally complex, containing many ideational aspects; and inherently appraisive, in describing a phenomenon with an intrinsic value that can be over-ridden only by strong reasons pertaining to special circumstances, whether that value is positive (as according to Gallie's original formulation) or negative (once other scholars had expanded it).³ In *The Terms of Political Discourse* William E. Connolly explains how essential contests over political concepts occur and why those contests are themselves political.⁴ Those who use the same political

keyword may not agree on an entire list of its internal aspects, although they will agree on enough of those aspects to feel that their disagreements are about the same general idea. They may agree on the list of aspects but rank the importance of each differently. They may clash over the conceptualization of other keywords on which the definition of this one relies. They may place this value on different rungs of a hierarchy of all shared or partly shared positive values. Thus, our Millian individualist and champion of national-cultural self-determination both see freedom as a good and autonomy as a central internal aspect of the concept, while disagreeing about the sanctity of individual self-regarding interests, what a self is (self-authoring and atomistic or indelibly stamped by its membership in a larger social whole), and whether the value of freedom should be ranked higher than, lower than, or on the same level as the values of solidarity and cultural integrity. Because they have an overlapping sense of what “freedom” means and because they are both invested in it as a good, it will be impossible to resolve their conflict by giving the term “freedom” to one party’s concept and coining a new term for the other’s.

What also will be impossible is for scholars of politics to evade or resolve or transcend the essentially contested nature of political keywords in their own analyses of politics. The conceit of positivistic social science to stand outside the world it seeks to explain hinges on its ability to develop a vocabulary that is substantively uncontroversial, normatively neutral, with universally agreeable rules for the construction and application of terms. However, if scholars of politics wish to clarify and illuminate the world of politics, they at some point will have to draw on the everyday language of politics to describe that world, which means that they will have to use essentially contested concepts of politics in specific ways, defining “democracy,” for example, in the liberal democratic instead of right- or left-populist sense when they describe certain political societies as “democratic.” In doing so, whether intentionally or unwittingly, they ally themselves with actors who endorse that definition against others who do not. Hence, in addition to whatever political positions they may have in their capacity

as members of the political world that inform or seep into their work, scholars of politics will be pulled by the logic of essentially contested concepts into the world as they analyze it, instead of being able to dissect it from a god's eye point of view. If those scholars instead try to assume a scientific stance by devising a new language—say, a mathematical one—from which all internally complex, inherently appraisive, and open-ended concepts have been excised, their statements may achieve a veneer of value-neutrality, objectivity, and universalizability, but what they have to say with those statements will clarify little about the world as it is inhabited and understood by political actors and hence be of interest mostly to political scientists as a specialized professional group. I say “veneer,” because the superiority of value-neutrality for gaining insight into human affairs is itself a value position, pitted against, for example, a recognition of the inevitability of having a stake in those affairs and the superiority of having a stake that is self-conscious and self-reflective.

Political keywords are problems and possibilities in themselves not only because they are intellectually open-ended and politically contested but also because they are historical phenomena. Their internal aspects, associations, and even evaluative thrust undergo metamorphoses over time, both in response to and in anticipation of changes in practical circumstances. This is the point to which Raymond Williams is attuned in *Marxism and Literature* when he tracks the changes in the English word “culture” from its early connotation of the cultivation of crops to its later connotation of self-cultivation and learning, along with its competing connotation of a whole way of life. Magnifying this historical flexibility is the fact that the terms from which “culture” is distinguished change over time as well, although not always at the same pace or for the same reasons. Thus, as Williams recounts, “society” conjured up the idea of shared fellowship when “culture” conjured up crop cultivation but later came to signify that which is abstract, mechanical, industrial, and economic, over against which culture came to signify literature, the arts, meaning, values, and inner, subjective experience.⁵

Past inflections of keywords often remain sedimented in the present connotations of those same words. That the past leaves its traces on categories in the present means that the words we use in political life may, by evoking elements of a world that is disappearing or already has largely disappeared, prevent us from identifying and grasping the new lineaments of our own world. The capacity of everyday terms to attach the imagination to ossified forms of thought tied to evaporating forms of practice was one of Antonio Gramsci's worries about the effect of inherited ideas on a peasantry subordinated to landowning elites and the Catholic Church as Italy moved towards an industrial capitalist future. Although with a different political agenda, Michel Foucault flags the same antiquated potentiality of language when he declares that a preoccupation with "sovereignty" on the part of scholars of politics is a hangover from the age of monarchical rule that blinds them to new micro-modalities of modern power.

As Williams notes, however, residues of the past in our current terminology also can provide us with tools for identifying, criticizing, and staunching the human losses that those new lineaments entail. To cite a current example, the English keyword "the commons" once connoted forests, meadows, and fields available for use by everyone until that land was enclosed by rural aristocrats, gentry, and other improving farmers for private profit-making. Today, because of its residual references, "the commons" has become an evocative keyword for critics of the neo-liberal project of privatizing or "enclosing" all public or collective goods.⁶

Then again, as Williams also is right to note, the triumph in the present of some historical meaning of a term over other, partially discrepant meanings it had had in the past can blind us to possibilities of practice conjured up by those defeated meanings. Quentin Skinner, who agrees with Williams here, praises the intellectual historian for acting "as a kind of archaeologist, bringing buried intellectual treasure back to the surface, dusting it down and enabling us to reconsider what we think of it."⁷ Skinner cites, as an example, the contemporary hegemony of the classical liberal notion of liberty as a

sphere of action not blocked by external impediments. The notion of liberty as non-interference, which conceivably could be secured for the individual by autocratic political rule, conflicts with and helps obscure an older, neo-roman notion of liberty as non-dependence on the will, even the goodwill, of a superior power. The actualization of *this* idea of liberty invites a quest for the self-governance of citizens as the necessary condition of non-dependence. It is a contention of this book that once-experienced features of “self-rule” (in the not necessarily individualistic sense of “self”) were obscured once the idea of self-rule was swept under the sovereignty rubric.

The missed opportunities of defeated meanings aside, the historicity of political keywords gives our imagination, speech, and action a density of meaning of which any individual speaker and actor may or may not be aware, as the participants in the general assemblies of Occupy Wall Street benefited but may or may not have recognized the descent of their thought and practice from the French Revolution and the political theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. What happens to this enriching historical density of language in the event of drastic breaks in historical continuity? In the mid-twentieth century, Hannah Arendt believed that the rise of totalitarianism reduced all inherited Western political concepts to shards and fragments, forcing its survivors to dig through the rubble for conceptual insights that might be salvaged for use in a radically new but not thereby improved world. Today, many intellectuals wonder whether globalization represents another kind of concept-shattering historical break.

To see just how shattering this break might be, we need to make one last point about political concepts: they are formed not just in time but also in space. At least until now, political concepts always have emerged in and have responded to life in particular places, even if they sometimes purport to pertain to all places. The local derivation and reference of political ideas hardly means that they remain rooted in one spot. They can travel spontaneously, as Edward Said put it, from one place to another on the wings of speech and the written word, their connotations mutating as they go. Alternatively, these terms

can be imposed by a stronger society in one location on a weaker one in another, as an ideal template to which the social reality of that place is commanded to conform. Moreover, political keywords are geographical in that they can seem fitting and/or benign as long as one keeps one's sights focused within the limits of the place in which they were first created but unfitting and/or malignant once one expands one's vision to include the spaces outside those parochial borders. Those foreign spaces may prove simply to lie outside the purview of the concept in question, quite innocently ignored by it, as the space of, say, the North Pole was outside and ignored by the French concept of fraternity. Or, they may lie outside the concept in appearance but in truth be a creature of that concept, as Said claimed that the space of the Orient was a creature of the Western concept of the Occident. Finally, they may lie outside the purview of the concept but become a casualty of actions animated by it, as Indian Country lay outside the geographical limits of the space within which the concept of government by the people, for the people was applied at the birth of the United States, but was gradually vanquished by the expansion of U.S. sovereign power across the continent.

Are global communication technologies subverting the geographical specificity of political language today? Given how quickly concepts travel as a result of the instantaneous electronic message, not to speak of how frequently people physically move, taking ideas with them, from place to place, the distinction between the inside and the outside, or the parochial and the foreign, seems on the way to becoming archaic. More implacably than the world-straddling but region-differentiating power of Western imperialism that preceded and paved the way for it, globalization is knitting the world tightly together. The conceptual effects of that knitting-together process are as of yet unclear. On the one hand, the shards and fragments of inherited ideas from all the world's peoples might become available to all, invigorating, in unpredictable and heterogeneous new mixtures, diverse efforts to come to terms with emergent realities. On the other hand, a global political vocabulary may subject everyone in the world to the same pre-determined range

of possible thoughts and conceivable actions. But whether our future is multi- or univocal, “sovereignty” will not emerge unscathed. What will be—and should be—the fate of this concept, which long before the age of globalization had acquired the status of a nearly universal truth of exclusive political rule within a bounded territory, but which now is under universal strain?

The concept of sovereign power

After years of use as a relatively untroubled term of political discourse, “sovereignty” has come to agitate scholars of politics. In 1991 Nicholas Onuf explained the revitalized interest in this prominent but often taken-for-granted idea with respect to the international relations field.⁸ In a spin on the notion that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk, he suggested that the concept becomes fully graspable only after it comes to actualization in the universalized form of the developed modern state—which is the very moment before the state form starts to buckle under the pressure of new conditions and political requirements. What once had seemed a permanent and self-evident background feature of political life becomes, in the age of sub- and supra-national competitors to the nation-state’s agency and authority, a temporally limited and contingent question mark. As the sovereign state begins to lose even the semblance of the mastery over its affairs that impermeable boundaries around its territory once had been said to guarantee, political thinkers are provoked to inquire: When *did* sovereign power first emerge, what possibilities of thought and action are encouraged and inhibited by it, what should or will replace it, and, by the way, what exactly does “sovereignty” mean?

But other obstacles blocked a critical or even bemused attitude toward the concept in much of the twentieth century besides the fact that the modern state had not yet been hit over the head with challenges to its power and sufficiency. As a reflection of institutional realities in the West crystallizing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when

overlapping authorities over land and populations gave way to exclusive political authority inside a delineated space, the discipline of political science posited sovereign power as a central premise of modern ideal and empirical political life. Regions of the world that had not achieved sovereign control over their internal affairs or were not recognized as sovereign by other states either were considered by mainstream political scientists to be weak, dependent, and/or backward or were barely considered at all. Especially international relations realists took sovereignty for granted by commission, using sovereign states as their basic unit of analysis; especially normative political theorists took sovereignty for granted by omission, tacitly accepting sovereign states as setting the limits for the polities to which their principles of justice, citizenship, and community applied.⁹ In short, what was to become a strange puzzle to scholars of politics by the turn of the twenty-first century was assumed before then to be an already- or still-to-be achieved telos of political organization. Exceptions to this rule do not undermine it. For example, those international relations specialists in the 1960s who looked forward to the eclipse of conflict among Western sovereign states as a result of European integration could not and perhaps did not mean to foreclose the inference that national sovereign power would be ratcheted up and reconstituted at the higher, regional level. To take a very different example from the political theory field, Hannah Arendt, who unlike other normative theorists insisted on tackling not only abstract political ideals but also actual historical upheavals, identified, in her 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the crisis for the modern state posed by stateless and rootless populations; however, she saw this as a crisis for the *nation*-state, not the *sovereign* state.¹⁰ As we shall see, a decade later Arendt sent out brief but penetrating philosophical salvos against sovereign power, but they would not rattle the edifice of even the political theory field for almost another 30 years.

Then, too, in the post-World War II period, the divide between the capitalist and communist blocs was more salient for intellectuals on all points of the political spectrum than the divides among sovereign or

aspiring sovereign states, even though the conflict between capitalism and communism could be viewed as one type of sovereignty contest. Thus the most controversial concepts at the height of the Cold War were not “sovereignty” and “sovereign power” but “totalitarianism” (its application to communist societies endorsed by the right and center, repudiated by the left), “exploitation” (its application to capitalist societies endorsed by the left, repudiated by the right and center), and “equality,” “justice,” and “freedom” (endorsed as values by all parties, but conceived in clashing ways).

Quite apart from the roles played in obscuring perplexities of sovereign power by the naturalization of the sovereign state, political science disciplinary strictures, and a bi-polar division of the world, specific ideological camps had and continue to have their own reasons to avoid those perplexities. For traditional conservatives, the sovereign state was a muscular necessity to be, not interrogated, but revered, obeyed, and fought for as the strongest bulwark against social disorder and a threatening outside world. Libertarians, in contrast, harped on the danger posed to individual freedom by national government as the commanding power in society, even though that government was needed to defend individuals from foreign commanding powers. But far from being driven to critique sovereign power itself, libertarians pitted against the idea of the sovereignty of the state the more fundamental principle of the natural sovereignty of the individual. For free market liberals in general, the geographically limited sovereign state was seen as an aggravating brake on (if also a necessary instrument of) the geographically limitless search for private profits, while the sovereign individual was the uninspected first premise that justified the right of every individual owner of property to do whatever he, and later she, wanted in that search. For many philosophical liberals, sovereign state power over domestic society, properly organized and restrained, was thought to protect the private rights that, as Mill had asserted, were prerequisites of the freedom or sovereignty of the individual. The interests of any particular liberal state over against other sovereign states, however, were too embarrassing to contemplate

except by liberal advocates of global governance, given the incongruity of national interests with the principle of the equal value of all individuals everywhere.

Until it was eclipsed, the Marxist left mimicked, in an upside down way, the moral universalism of philosophical liberals and the economism of free market liberals on the sovereignty question. On the one side, the solidarity of all the working people of the world was seen as the denouement of history, not the permanent division of human loyalties along nation-state lines. On the other side, clashing modes of production were more important than clashing state powers, *capitalist* countries the preoccupying enemy, not capitalist *countries* in the form of sovereign states. There was, to be sure, one world-historical upheaval that kept sovereignty on the left's radar screen through at least the 1960s: the anti-colonial struggle for national independence in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. As nervous as they were about nationalism in general, most Marxists would have concurred with Daniel Philpott's later claim (if not with the idealist arguments he makes in support of it), that the achievement of sovereign independence by colonized peoples was historically progressive, completing the universalization of the modern sovereign state form.¹¹ Much like the contradiction between state sovereignty and liberal individualism, the contradiction between state sovereignty and Marxist internationalism was real, but especially with respect to the political emancipation of the Third World, it had to be carefully tiptoed around.

A few decades later, and with an entirely different mindset, the poststructuralist left denied outright the preeminence of sovereign power in modern life. Following Michel Foucault, poststructuralists asserted that the micro-operations of normalizing power in institutions and discursive practices dispersed throughout society produced individuals with desirable proclivities, habits, and traits that minimized the need for a centralized coercive power to keep unruly subjects in line. In tandem or overlapping with technologies of "governmentality" in state and society through which whole populations were ordered

for their own good and individuals remade as self-regulating, responsible private selves, normalizing power was declared to have replaced literal monarchical power and to have trumped the importance of the metaphorical monarch in the form of legal prohibitions against specific kinds of acts.

Poststructuralists charged those who still thought of political power in sovereign terms with being hobbled by outdated political imagery. Ironically, however, by pointing to modalities of power that they believed had made sovereignty largely passé, they helped bring the concept out of commonsense use and into the critical limelight. World-shattering empirical events and circumstances at the turn of the new century also catapulted sovereign power to the fore, and, against poststructuralists' initial claim, exposed that power as a contemporary problem, not an anachronistic one.

Clearly, the most significant of these events and circumstances was the growing impact of globalization on the modern state form to which Onuf was partly referring. This was the impact of speeded up global communications and transportation; large-scale, long-distance population migrations triggered by civil wars, natural disasters, and the collapse of local economies; boundary-crossing ecological problems; transnational social movements, especially those championing universal human rights; and the evident need for new kinds of political institutions to cope with the rest. Most important, it included not only the expansion of capitalism beyond the boundaries of the nation-state (a process that began in the age of European imperialism) but also the ability of global capital to set the parameters in which all nation-states were forced to function. As a result of globalization, even strong states seemed to be on the cusp of losing control over their borders, their natural resources, their ability to generate wealth for their own people, their ability to sculpt the identity of those people, and their use of power to further their distinctive national ideals.

A more staccato series of events underscoring the perplexities of sovereign power to the opposite effect was the collapse of Soviet-style communism and the rise of new ethnonationalist movements in the

old Soviet empire. The quest for independent statehood by ethnic groups that had been submerged in a multinational political unit at first seemed to confirm, especially to enemies of communism, the division of humanity into distinct ethnic groups with a natural aspiration for freedom and the sovereign state as the institutional actualization of that freedom. The problematic character of that aspiration and actualization, however, quickly became apparent, especially in the former Yugoslavia, another broken-up multinational communist state. The orchestrated violence against Bosnian Muslims by Serbian nationalists, followed by the orchestrated violence against Rwandan Tutsi by the Hutu Power movement in central Africa, suggested that ethnonational sovereignty might have its logical end point not in freedom but in discrimination, persecution, even genocide. That a struggle for sovereignty could signify freedom for one group and obliteration for another was intimated by other ethnonational conflicts that finally caught the world's eye in their own right rather than as surrogates for the capitalism/communism conflict.

Two other political responses to contemporary conditions have exemplified and amplified a related conundrum of popular sovereignty. The first response is the hostility of nativist majorities toward immigrants, minorities, and aliens in both Western and non-Western countries. This raises the question of whether popular sovereignty—an expansive democratic ideal when set against the foil of monarchical sovereignty and an exuberant democratic ideal when set against the foil of an impersonal liberal legal system—is also a negative, exclusivist ideal as soon as there is a reason to ask who counts as belonging to “the people” and who does not. The millions of people moving around the world in search of work, asylum, or a refuge from political violence most recently have provided that reason. The hostility of privileged citizens (privileged *because* citizens) to deracinated foreigners also raises the question of whether sovereignty as the power to decide who will inhabit the “life” and “death” zones of citizenship and statelessness is an expression not merely, as some critics propose, of a modern form of “monarchical” sovereign power (i.e. power wielded by the

prince, the state as a separate institution over society, or the executive branch of government acting above the law),¹² but also of democratic sovereign power (i.e. power exerted via strong popular sentiment).¹³

The conundrum of an exclusivist popular sovereignty is intensified when we turn to a second popular response to current conditions: the claim to counter-sovereignty made by those at the mercy of exogenous economic, political, and military forces that threaten to dominate or destroy their way of life. This claim has been leveled most recently by native peoples fending off sovereign state power and/or international capitalist imperatives, weaker countries attempting to protect themselves from the imperious demands of stronger ones, and popular movements wishing to reshape their governments without outside interference. Human rights advocates and other progressives condemn the sovereign power of xenophobic majorities and defend the aspirations to sovereign power of vulnerable peoples, but what exactly makes the exclusivism of privileged citizenship a minus in the ledger of democracy, and the exclusivism of penetrated indigeneity a plus?

Finally, sovereign state power has been exposed as a contemporary problem by a single catastrophe inflicted on the mightiest sovereign state in the world, not by another state, but by a small, international group of militants who were sovereign, at least until that instant, over no one and nothing. On the one hand, the viability of sovereign state power per se and the international system resting on it seemed to come unhinged in a single day, while the vicarious pleasure that many people around the world felt at the spectacular political violence of 9/11 could be seen as a popular reaction against the aim of a single country to become a global Leviathan. On the other hand, the response of the United States executive branch—its declaration of an endless preventative war against terror, its waging an actual war against a weak sovereign state as a substitute for its shadowy antagonist, and its indefinite detention of enemy combatants, torture of prisoners, extra-legal surveillance of aliens, and policing of citizens exercising their individual rights of free speech and association—was unnervingly

reminiscent of a tyrannical version of absolute monarchical rule, which liberals thought they had vanquished long ago and poststructuralists assumed had been supplanted by subtler power modalities.

Then again, in combination with the violence of masterless men in weak states, terrorist attacks on strong states could not help but prompt some to wonder whether “monarchical” sovereign power was in fact preferable not only to the absence of state power but also to the presence of liberal constitutional constraints. Once popular sovereignty had become what Edmund Morgan has called the reigning modern fiction of Western politics, only right-wing authoritarians went as far as to counter to it not simply the hidden fact of elite rule but the overt ideal of the absolute power of a single leader.¹⁴ After 9/11, Anglo-American liberal democracy flirted with a watered-down version of the same decisive single leader ideal.¹⁵ The declaration of an indefinite state of emergency, suspension of the law, and assumption of executive prerogative were either passively or actively consented to by many political officials, intellectuals, and ordinary Americans, who, being complicit in the attempt to resurrect “monarchical” sovereign power, could not have been viewed as simple victims had that resurrection been entirely successful.¹⁶

In sum, sovereignty has emerged in our time as a highly complex and often incongruous knot of problems. There is the problem of the modern state’s sovereignty over a bounded territory that is still the premise of institutional politics but is increasingly out of synch with economic, environmental, social, cultural, moral, and political forces, both local and global. There is the problem of the bleeding of searches for sovereign self-determination on the part of either threatened majorities or oppressed minorities into projects of sovereign domination. There is the problem of how to assess the exclusivist tendencies of popular sovereignty as a democratic ideal of rule and indigenous sovereignty as a weapon of the weak. There is the problem of “monarchical” sovereign power as an always latent possibility in politics that can and some say should be activated even in liberal democracies in response to catastrophic events and dangerous

enemies. There is, finally, one other problem that has vexed many contemporary scholars of politics. What happens to sovereign power as it drains away from the modern state, to the extent that it does drain away? When it flows out of the nation-state, does it flow into some other container? Does it reappear as the deterritorialized, fractured, and networked powers of inter-linked global cities, transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and supranational institutions, as Saskia Sassen and John Agnew assert?¹⁷ Does it become the diffuse quality of a world-straddling empire, with no outside, no unified center, and a logic that is inclusivist, not exclusivist, as Hardt and Negri contend?¹⁸ Is capital itself an emerging global sovereign, as Wendy Brown suggests in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*: a sovereign that is no longer decisionist or centered on the friend/enemy distinction but still is “perpetual, absolute, and unifying” and “the source of all commands”?¹⁹ Or is sovereignty dissolving altogether as a meaningful category of political life? And if it is, should we celebrate or regret its death?

Sovereign longings

Even those who anticipate a “post-sovereignty” age would hardly be as foolish as to deny the appeal of the sovereignty idea for much of the world today. To be convinced of that appeal for those who have actually enjoyed membership in a sovereign state as well as for those who still aspire to it, one need only cast a glance at the prickliness of each European state at any specific resolution of the European debt crisis that could be imposed upon it, the anger of Pakistanis at U.S. military incursions on their soil, even the jealousy with which the governor of Texas fends off what he sees as federal infringements on his state’s sovereign rights, not to speak of all the bloody struggles for sovereign control over various corners of the earth.²⁰ A longing for sovereign power clearly continues to haunt contemporary politics, but what exactly incites and explains this longing?

For one of the timeliest answers to that question, let us take a closer look at the core argument of *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. In this text, Wendy Brown represents the current obsession with building walls around, between, and within nation-states as a performance of sovereign potency in front of an audience of anxious citizens to make up for the state's actual loss of potency in the face of global capitalism, religiously sanctioned political violence, neoliberal privatization, and unstoppable cross-border flows of money, people, information, environmental catastrophes, and crime. If fenced-off territory was the pre-condition for the emergence of the early modern sovereign state, obsessive walling is a doomed defensive reaction against the late modern collapse of those fences. And because ever more barbed wire, concrete barriers, surveillance systems, and armed border guards are needed to repel what cannot be repelled, walling threatens to turn domestic political society from a home into a "penitentiary" for its increasingly insecure inhabitants.²¹ Sovereign political power, in short, deteriorates, but in a self-mystifying way, as states indulge in the theatrics of wall-building so that vulnerable human beings may identify with their pseudo-strength and majesty.

Given her focus on sovereignty as the power to "delimit, protect, and repel"²²—in short, to provide human beings with security from threats—it is apt that Brown turns to Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* for insight into the psychodynamics of sovereign fantasies. Defining "illusion" as a belief founded on a wish, Freud explains the belief in God as a reaction against infantile helplessness, a wish for an omnipotent father who can protect his human children from alien natural and social forces, and who must be more fearsome than any actual father in order to be more fearsome than any of those forces but who also must be moved by parental love. If Brown echoes Karl Marx and Carl Schmitt in seeing the sovereign state as a secularized version of the religious illusion (although, as Marx once reminded us, the "political illusion" at least has the virtue of being closer to reality than its religious counterpart), she echoes Freud when she posits the desire for the sovereign state as a desire for a fearsome yet loving protector.

Brown's account of the investments of individuals in sovereign state security captures an important aspect of the longing for sovereign power today. However, it over-shadows other equally important aspects.

The first over-shadowed aspect appears fleetingly in Brown's list of the paradoxes of sovereignty. Brown rightly states that the concept signifies an a priori authority and a generated authority, the foundation of law and a power not subject to the law, absolute monarchical power and popular self-rule, a majesty that depends on the state's theological derivations and a majesty that frees itself from religious authority, domination within the nation-state and anarchy among states, the state's independence *vis-à-vis* other states and its dependence on them for their recognition of its independence. The play of domination and freedom in almost every entry in this list proves this political concept to be curiously double-valued, unlike political concepts that are unambiguously positive or negative, including "freedom" and "domination" themselves. Brown explains the longing for "negative" sovereign domination as the securing of the subject from outside threats, but why has sovereign power also been longed for as the "positive" route to and substance of freedom?

The second over-shadowed aspect has to do with the beginning, not the end, of sovereign power's trajectory. Brown remarks in passing that sovereign power "is identified with settled jurisdiction, not with settling it,"²³ but a new power must eradicate whatever power existed previously in a space in order to become sovereign over that space. To focus solely on either the operations or the decline of sovereign state power in its already settled space is to elide the violence of its founding as well as later erasures of that violence from collective memory that encourage the longing for sovereign power by casting its origins in a rosy glow. The foundational violence of sovereignty is not merely of historical interest with respect to the birth of the modern sovereign state form. It reappears at the birth of every new state, the territorial expansion of state authority, and political revolutions in established states—none of which has been consigned to the dustbin of history by the waning of sovereign power as of yet.

Finally, too singular focus on the fantastical quality of sovereign state power in the context of the twenty-first century obscures the ways in which sovereign power is fantastical in any context. As Brown notes, Freud defines an illusion as a belief founded in a wish. He reminds us that illusions “need not necessarily be false—that is to say, unrealizable or in contradiction with reality,” providing the example of a middle-class girl who is under the illusion “that a prince will come and marry her.”²⁴ Princes exist, and so does marriage, but it is highly unlikely, although not impossible, that princes will marry “girls” beneath their station. The analogy suggests that sovereign power has existed in the form of the modern state, as has the protection enjoyed by the state’s subjects, but it is highly unlikely, although not impossible, that the state can provide the same protection in the future. But while the longing, ambition, and struggle for sovereign power are undeniably real, what if sovereign power itself is always a chimera? Freud defines “delusion,” in contrast with “illusion,” as a belief at odds with reality, in the way that (my example this time) a boy is deluded who is thinks he is talking to a mermaid. However, Freud admits that some illusions are so improbable that they resemble delusions, and he sometimes uses the two terms interchangeably in his metaphorical diagnoses of the illnesses of social and political life. His suggestion of beliefs that oscillate between illusions and delusions gives us license to ask not only “What is the wish at the center of the desire for sovereign power?” but also “To what extent does not just a specific historical circumstance but life itself make that wish impossible to fulfill?”

Before we can answer this question, we must tackle a more preliminary set. What is sovereign power imagined to be? Who is considered its rightful possessor? What goods is it believed to supply, and who is deemed the beneficiary of those goods? If we consult the tradition of Western political thought, where the theory of sovereignty originates, we will find, perhaps unsurprisingly, that answers to these questions after the rise of the idea of modern democracy break in important ways with answers before yet also contain a strong residue of those earlier answers. More surprisingly, as this book will try to show, the

discrepancy between the longing for sovereign power and not just a particular historical reality but reality *per se*, as well as the dangers inherent in that discrepancy, is exaggerated, not ameliorated, when the concept of sovereign power is democratized.

Classical monarchical sovereign power

Two of the greatest pre-democratic theorists of sovereign power are Jean Bodin, the sixteenth-century “father” of the concept of absolute monarchical sovereignty, and Thomas Hobbes, who in the seventeenth century grounds monarchical absolutism not in a pre-existing social hierarchy but in the natural equality of all human beings.

Sovereign power as Bodin construes it is the absolute and perpetual power to command, which he rather chillingly describes as follows. To be sovereign is to have the power to give the law to subjects but not be subject to that law, to give the law to subordinates without their consent, to make law that is “nothing but the command of a sovereign making use of his power.”²⁵ It is to be the lord of everything and possess everything in governance, to rule in the image of God, to recognize nothing but God that is greater than oneself. From the sovereign prerogative of law-making, all other prerogatives of sovereignty are extrapolated: overriding or repealing or clarifying the law, attaching rewards and punishments to the law, making peace and declaring war, instating and removing high officers and magistrates of state, levying taxes on subjects but exempting those one pleases, hearing appeals in the last instance, pardoning persons who deserve to die, accepting fealty and homage, coining money and regulating weights and measures, having rights to the sea, compelling a change in language in society, and enjoying the title of majesty.

While Bodin acknowledges that a select group (an aristocracy) or a whole people (a democracy) can be sovereign, he sees monarchy as the form of commonwealth that best instantiates the unitary and centralized nature of sovereign power. Thus the most fitting possessor

of sovereign power is the single person of the Prince. The good that sovereign power supplies is in large part a good for him. We can infer that good from the keywords with which Bodin associates the concept of sovereignty: greatness, lordship, majesty, authority, grandeur, mastery, being the highest human source of command and prohibition. In a nutshell, the good of sovereign power for the Prince is such recognized superiority that he can impose his will on society without encountering inside that society the legitimate or effective opposition of another human will.²⁶

Remarkably, however, to anyone looking at things from a post-eighteenth-century perspective, sovereign power does not supply the Prince with the good of freedom. Bodin not only fails to exult in the sovereign freedom of the monarch; he rarely links freedom and sovereignty together. The concept closest to “freedom” on which he regularly draws is “liberty,” but this refers to the rights and privileges not of the Prince but of particular subjects, estates, churches, and other non-state institutions. As for the Prince, because he is the image of God, he must model his laws “on the law of God” and make sure that those laws have justice as their end. The Prince may be “answerable only to God,” but he is more “strictly bound than any of his subjects” to obey the laws of God and nature.²⁷ Far from enjoying freedom in the sense of doing whatever one wants or even doing whatever one wants as long as one does not injure others, and far from enjoying freedom in the different sense of being self-determining instead of being at the mercy of forces outside one’s control, Bodin’s Prince occupies a defined place, albeit the highest human place, in a great hierarchy of places, each hemmed in by its requisite restrictions and obligations. In addition to being compelled to obey the will of God, who is the “highest sovereign,” the Prince is compelled, as a monarch, not a despot, to respect the private liberty of his subjects. He cannot take away their possessions at his pleasure, he cannot tax them without their consent, and he is bound by all the just private contracts and promises he has made with other persons. The good of sovereign power for the Prince is thus the unmatched and unquestioned superiority of his will over every other

human will, not a free range of desire and action. The combination of its superiority and moral substance explains why sovereign power has, as a second beneficiary, the Prince's subjects, for whom its good is a just and peaceful social order.

Although Hobbes endorses the ideal of absolute sovereign power and monarchy as its most perfect institutional form, he is aligned in the egalitarian premises from which he deduces this political conclusion more with the democratic theorists who come after him than with theorists of monarchical absolutism who come before. His first premise is the principle of the natural liberty of every individual to use his own power as he chooses to preserve himself, with a natural right to everything that he sees as a means to that end. The free pursuit of those things brings these individuals insecurity, conflict, and the threat of early death, because three other egalitarian premises also hold true: that every man is roughly equal in mental and physical capacities, or, by uniting with others, could become equal to one who is momentarily superior; that every man is driven by restless and infinite desire, especially the desire for power to gain everything else that he desires; and that every other man represents a force to fear, either as a competitor for the same object of desire or because he may have desires that clash with one's own, as a man whose desire for territorial aggrandizement might clash with another man's desire for a tranquil and secure little home. While the combination of desire and fear prompts all men to "love Liberty, and Dominion over others," the natural equality of men guarantees that no one can enjoy the fruits of either good for long. Hobbes's solution to the ills of the state of nature is an artificial Commonwealth or State with the punitive power to secure a commodious life for all by forcing each of its members to act according to the golden rule, "*Do not that to another, which thou wouldest not have done to thy self.*"²⁸ States may be established by the joint consent of individuals, as in Commonwealths by Institution, or they may be established by the violent force of a single man or group, as in Commonwealths by Acquisition, but in both cases the essential impetus to and operations of sovereign power are exactly the same.

The individual forfeits his will to the Sovereign to safeguard him from the threats that other men pose, by promising to obey the Sovereign's law except where it would destroy his life. In return, he has the liberty to do what he has the desire and ability to do wherever the law is silent.

In the state of nature the individual aspired to a commanding will but could not attain it. In political society he gives up the aspiration. On the other side of the command equation, in political society Hobbes's monarch possesses almost all the sovereign prerogatives that Bodin's does, and many that he doesn't, including the power to determine what is just and unjust. Hobbes's monarch not only is unbound by the laws he makes for society; individuals, estates, and institutions have no rights and privileges that do not derive from him. At points in the text, he does not seem to be subordinated to any supra-human authority, even though he might cloak his own authority in the guise of the divine. All of this might suggest that the monarch is not only sovereign but also absolutely free in Hobbes's sense of the term, acting according to nothing other than his own will and facing no obstructions in his way. And yet there would be something very odd about portraying the aim of monarchical power as sovereign freedom. What was a flesh and blood Prince for Bodin becomes much more of an institutional device for Hobbes, "an Artificiall *Soul*" of an "Artificiall Man," with no passions or pleasures of its own that could be furthered by the unlimited freedom to pursue them.²⁹ Indeed, sovereign power exists solely to prohibit men from giving *their* passions free reign, by covering them with an umbrella of positive law that makes effectual the eternal laws of nature, including the imperatives of mutual accommodation, equity, humility, promise-keeping, and so on, so that each man, in obeying the law, can trust that all other men will be punished if they do not do the same. Moreover, while Hobbes sometimes suggests that the laws of nature are simply prudential dictates of reason, he sometimes suggests that they are moral laws designed and bestowed on man by God. In either case, the monarch himself is "as much subject, as any of the meanest of his People" to those same natural laws, and

his positive laws must function to give earthly potency to them.³⁰ If, then, as a natural and universal human attribute, “liberty” plays a larger initial role in Hobbes’s theory than in Bodin’s, where it is the limited product of traditional right, Hobbes no less than Bodin refrains from equating liberty with sovereign power, which he posits instead as a separate, opposed, and circumscribing force.

What does it mean to dream of sovereign power as Bodin and Hobbes understand the term, given that it does not mean to dream of sovereign freedom? It could mean to wish to possess such superiority of will over all other human wills that one can impose on them one’s vision, whether divinely inspired or not, of a just and peaceable social order (and how many of us have not had *that* fantasy from time to time!). Alternatively, it could mean to wish to inhabit a just and peaceable social order, compliments of someone else’s superior will.

Is this desire for an absolute but benevolent authoritarianism an illusion compatible with reality—or is it utterly fantastical? Certainly, history is full of tales of powerful rulers who maintain a kind of peace, and possibly a kind of justice, by imposing order on whole populations. But what turns out to be a chimera is not simply, as every student of politics is taught, a perpetual and absolute power that does not eventually corrupt the human being who wields it and undo whatever justice he or she had installed. The chimera is, more fundamentally, the idea of a power that is perpetual and absolute, for this idea entails that the wills of all other human beings can be not merely cowed but permanently crushed. If Nietzsche is right that where there is life, there is will (and surely he *is* right), then sovereign power, which requires live subjects, is destined to meet up eventually with resistance, disobedience, defiance, and even aggressive bids to counter-sovereignty, whether out of anger at specific substantive injustices wrought by sovereign power, resentment at the sovereign’s monopolization of will-power, or conviction that any monopolization of will-power is unjust. Indeed, it is one of the self-defeating traits of sovereign power that it often sparks desires for counter-sovereignty even among those who originally had not seen the world in

sovereignty terms. But whether or not those subjected to sovereign power come to desire sovereign power for themselves (instead of, say, the right to live in non-sovereign communion with the world or have a voice equal with all other voices in public affairs), the stubbornly resilient quality of the human will, in combination with the shifts in circumstance that inevitably bring ruin on all ambitions to permanence, makes power over the wills of others always an incomplete and ephemeral achievement.

Sovereign freedom

In hindsight, it is predictable that sovereign power would become associated with freedom *as opposed to* domination once resistance to monarchical power was mounted in earnest. By “monarchical power” I mean not only the power of a king who rules over individual subjects in his territory but also, following Hobbes’s allusion to imperialism, the power of a whole people that, however it is ruled itself, rules another people elsewhere always as their monarch.³¹ In the case of literal monarchical power, the association between sovereignty and freedom developed in Europe, from the seventeenth century on, as rising elites who had been pressing their literal monarchs for an expansion of their liberties begin to cast their eye on their monarchs’ thrones; as popular classes, once called by elites onto the stage for a silent role in politics as “the people,” began to covet the privileges and growing political power of those elites; and as royal power and traditional social hierarchies were finally overthrown in popular revolutions or fatally degraded by democratic reforms.³² In the case of metaphorical monarchical power, the association between sovereignty and freedom intensified in the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, as European powers were ejected from their overseas colonies by movements for political independence or national liberation, as nationalities in disintegrating multinational empires clamored for their own sovereign states, and as oppressed minorities in nation-states struggled against national

majorities for political autonomy. Most recently, that association has reappeared wherever popular masses demand national sovereignty against foreign interfering powers and popular sovereignty against domestic dictators and corrupt ruling elites.

In short, attaining freedom from monarchical power, which in real life proved more oppressive than Bodin and Hobbes theorized, has seemed to people in many centuries and many regions to be synonymous with wresting the prerogatives of sovereign power for themselves. To command instead of being commanded, to possess an effectual will instead of meekly bowing to a master, to control the conditions of one's existence instead of being at the mercy of alien forces, to shine with the dignity of a sovereign self instead of living in the shadow of another's grandeur, to corral the state to serve one's own needs and interests instead of being exploited or neglected by those who monopolize state power: these desires have proved so compelling that, except for a few intellectual skeptics, sovereignty today is widely seen as the prerequisite and inner substance of a freely lived life. The modern association of sovereign power and freedom in fact has become so ingrained that it crops up in the thinking of those nostalgic for monarchical absolutism such as Carl Schmitt, who sees the highest virtue of sovereign power as the ability to break with the torpor of bureaucratic routine, decide the exception to the law, and partake in the "miracle" of free action.³³ The sovereignty/freedom nexus is even tighter for those who, on behalf of the sovereign freedom of the individual, reject sovereign state power in *either* its popular or monarchical form.

If in practice the idea of sovereign power metamorphosed into sovereign freedom as part of complicated and prolonged historical processes, in theory the metamorphosis most famously occurs in a more punctuated way, in a few passages of a single eighteenth-century text.³⁴ Against Hobbes and other absolute monarchists for whom the human race is "divided into herds of cattle, each with a master who preserves it only in order to devour its members," Jean-Jacques Rousseau poses the central question of *The Social Contract*: "'How to

find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before.” His answer still reverberates throughout the world today. To be free in political society, human beings must be equal members of “an artificial and collective body,” who “take collectively the name of a *people*, and call themselves individually *citizens*, in so far as they share in the sovereign power, and *subjects*, in so far as they put themselves under the laws of the state.” No less faithfully than Hobbes, Rousseau follows Bodin in defining sovereign power as the capacity to command and not be commanded. Against Bodin, Rousseau asserts that a “people, since it is subject to laws, ought to be the author of them.”³⁵ Against Hobbes, who posits, at least in sovereign power by institution, the people as authors of all the sovereign does but sharply separates sovereign agency from the individuals who author it and are subjected to it, Rousseau secures the freedom of each man in political society by apportioning to him an equal share of authorship of sovereign power, the exercise of sovereign will, and the obligation to obey the laws that the popular sovereign makes.

Against the backdrop of actual monarchical regimes, the elimination of the divide between the subject and object of political power was such a breath of fresh air that the dangers in associating sovereign power with freedom were difficult for many critics of monarchy to see. Most of the worries that surfaced about what Etienne Balibar has called “the perilous leap to popular sovereignty”³⁶ concerned not sovereign freedom but the General Will. Rousseau believed that, to enter political society as an equal member of the sovereign body, each individual had to exchange his “natural liberty” to act on instinct, impulse, and appetite for moral reason, “which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom.”³⁷ It is only, however, when each citizen wills the General Will or what he believes is the common good, instead of willing what is in his interest as a private ego, that the

laws that are made by the sovereign people as a whole will confirm the freedom of the individual instead of restricting or denying it.

Early on, elites who made use of the rhetoric of popular sovereignty suspected the General Will of being a class mechanism by which the property-less would trample over propertied interests. Later, liberals denounced its totalitarian threat to unique individuals with diverse opinions, multiculturalists disclosed its repressive implications for plural social groups, and agonistic democratic theorists pointed out its impossibility given the dynamic and fissiparous character of political life. In fact, however, the idea of a general will—that which one wills when one puts aside one's special individual or group interests to think of the good of society as a whole, including the good of oneself as a member of that whole—has much more going for it from a democratic perspective than the idea of sovereign freedom. To will what one believes is good for all, not just good for oneself as a separated entity, may be merely a hypocritical exercise of disguising one's self-interest as the general interest or dressing up one's circumscribed life conditions as the superior way of life that everyone else should be forced to endure. But it also may be, very differently, an exercise in empathetic identification with a wider network of sentient and even non-sentient beings. As such, the General Will is humanly capacious. When it contests rather than expresses sovereign power, it also can be admirably courageous. For its capacious quality, think of Western environmentalists' will to curtail their own commodity consumption out of a concern for the fate of the planet as a whole. For its courageous quality, think of the spontaneous general wills of the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Syrian peoples during the Arab Spring uprisings—general wills that were unprotected, un-sovereign challenges to monarchical sovereign power “from the street.”

To aspire to sovereign power as the route to freedom is quite another, more self-referential and, for all other wills, much less appetizing thing. That such an aspiration could belong to an entire people instead of a would-be autocrat seems relatively unimportant from any outsider perspective. Certainly an entire people that desires sovereign freedom

ought to be, from such a perspective, at least as unsettling as a single individual who desires sovereign power in the classical Bodinian or even Hobbesian sense. This is true partly because no individual can do too much harm without large numbers of others behind him, while large numbers can do a great deal of harm without an autocratic leader. But it is more importantly true because a people that attained absolute sovereign freedom (if sovereign freedom proves to be something that *can* be attained) would be, unlike Bodin's and Hobbes's sovereign monarchs, entirely unrestricted, not only in how it acted but also in what it willed, by any kind of law superior to itself that could impose justice on its relationships with others. Ironically, the worst case relation of popular sovereign freedom to outsiders is an upside down image of the worst-case relation of the classical monarch towards those thought to be beyond the protection of even God's law. In the case of the classical monarch: "God, the highest sovereign, commands me, as his servant and your master, to persecute heretics and kill unbelievers." In the case of popular sovereign freedom: "if there is no God, everything we wish to do to you is permitted."

To be fair to Rousseau, his theory establishes all sorts of hedges against many of popular sovereignty's dangers to those outside the parameters of "the people." These hedges include a universal law of justice accessible to natural reason; the human sentiment of compassion for others that is rooted in an animal capacity for pity; the prescription of a small, self-sufficient, materially modest polity that would have no economic impulse to aggress against other regions; and a call for the tolerance of other peoples with different religious beliefs. But Rousseau mainly was preoccupied with how a self-governing people could be made out of independent individuals and how relations among individual members of a single people could be both just and free, rather than with what the consequences might be of one people's sovereign power for individual strangers, ethnic minorities, and other peoples, not to speak of other species of being, especially if his theoretical hedges around popular sovereign freedom collapsed in practice. In this respect, at least, Edmund Burke came closer to acknowledging practical realities when

he remarked that while sufferers from monarchical cruelty at least can “assuage the smart of their wounds” with the “balmy compassion of mankind,” those “subjected to wrong under multitudes” are “deprived of all external consolation” and seem “deserted by mankind.”³⁸

It has been tempting for many democrats to evade the dangerous consequences of sovereign freedom by distinguishing between two types of sovereign power: a “bad,” dominative type that is exercised by, to borrow a phrase from Tom Nairn, big battalions, and a “good,” emancipatory type that is exercised by small battalions. Internationally, this “big bad/small good” distinction lines up with the difference between rich states and poor ones, neo-imperialist powers and weaker regions, and actual states and states that exist only in the political imagination of some downtrodden group. Domestically, it lines up with the difference between upper classes and popular masses, amoral dictators and oppressed subjects, arrogant ethnic majorities and persecuted minorities, and settler and indigenous races. On the border between the international and the domestic, it lines up with the difference between chauvinistic citizens and stateless populations. But if I might borrow another phrase that Nairn used with respect to nationalist movements: are there *really* black and white cats here, or are all cats spotted, without exception?

For a perceptive answer to this question, let us turn to Hannah Arendt’s essay, “What is freedom?” Here Arendt traces the roots of the idea of sovereign freedom to the Augustinian notion of free will, or a will that wills only what the self wills it to will, which in Augustine’s case meant the will to direct desire to things of the spirit instead of things of the flesh. According to Arendt, the identification of freedom with the will’s capacity to determine its desires eventually migrates from the inner psychological realm of a self’s spiritual struggle with itself to the outer secular political realm, where it metamorphoses into the “pernicious and dangerous” idea of sovereign freedom as a self-determining will “independent from others and eventually prevailing against them.”³⁹ Conversely, it is only after secularization—in the maximal sense of the liberation of the human subject from

divine authority or the minimal sense of its liberation from a divinely imposed human authority—that the subject can see itself as having not merely freedom of the will but sovereign freedom. The self who is liberated from divine authority is free to desire and will and do exactly what he wishes instead of what some metaphysical entity dictates that he *should* desire and will and do. The self who is liberated from a divinely invested human authority can command himself politically as he sees fit, being no longer morally compelled to bow down to a human superior, even if he chooses to bow down to what he sees as his sovereign God. In either case, however, the secular self enjoys sovereign freedom only theoretically. In practice, he can determine himself freely only if he gains control of all the worldly conditions that otherwise would condition or limit him.

What makes the idea of sovereign freedom a delusion in Arendt's eyes is not the truth of the existence of a supreme spiritual power or an earthly sovereign power anointed by it. It is the very different truth that "not man but men live on the earth."⁴⁰ Under the condition of human plurality, the identification of freedom with sovereignty implies either that no one in the world can be free, because no one has control over all the other wills that might otherwise affect him against his will, or that only a single self can be free as a result of having crushed the capacity for freedom of every other human being. Against the absurdity that freedom is either a mirage or a synonym for tyranny, Arendt discards the idea of sovereign freedom altogether. She re-conceptualizes freedom as worldly and political, not a function of the psychological state of the individual and the determination of its will. She hinges freedom not on the absence of any pressure on the self from other selves, but on the release of individuals from a narrow social enclosure to a more expansive "common public sphere," where they are able "to get away from home, to go into the world and meet other people," inserting themselves in the wider world "by word and deed."⁴¹ She describes freedom as the capacity of anyone (not just Schmitt's modern monarch) to begin something new, to partake in the miracle of action by interrupting automatic processes such as

the cyclical maintenance of biological life, the repetition of custom, bureaucratic routine, or seemingly inevitable chains of causes and effects. Consequently, freedom grows in the world to the extent that a greater and greater number of individuals can start something new that can be responded to by other individuals each in his or her distinctive way; it shrinks in the world to the extent that a smaller and smaller number can dictate the responses of others to their own initiatives. The fact that total control over others is impossible to achieve explains why “the famous sovereignty of political bodies has always been an illusion.” The fact that those who dream of that impossibility must use coercion against the wills of others to try to make their dream real explains why that illusion, or delusion, can be maintained “only by the instruments of violence.” In short, sovereign freedom defeats freedom on two counts. The self that aspires to it must seek to deny others the delights of free action and chain *itself* to the implacable imperatives of an unrealizable project. Therefore, “if men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.”⁴²

Arendt’s “anti-sovereignty” conceptualization of freedom as the capacity to begin something new but not to determine what happens afterwards has been dismissed as elitist and abstract.⁴³ Its real drawback, however, is the concept’s one-sided emphasis on new beginnings at the expense of patterns that have congealed out of new beginnings, making up a style of existence to which one has become attached.⁴⁴ This drawback will be obvious to anyone who ever has been forced by others to forfeit not only deeply satisfying practices and social relations but also a particular landscape in the way it has been collectively shaped and used. Thus we would do well to expand Arendt’s idea of freedom to incorporate not just the capacity for new beginnings but also the capacity to perpetuate a beloved way of life, for as long as it *is* beloved, on the condition that it does not demand the participation of those who do not enjoy it, does not exclude those who do, does not foreclose the possibility that differently enjoyable ways of life may be lived elsewhere, and has not established itself by destroying a different way of life that has met those same conditions. The benefit of understanding

freedom in terms of the twin capacities of beginning and perpetuating can be seen as soon one tries to imagine a life in which one is constantly beginning something new but never able to enjoy any recognizable pattern of life, or in which one is constantly repeating familiar patterns without ever being able to escape them.

While equally valuable, the capacities for breaking with and preserving the given differ in other ways than their substantive difference. Creativity is more often associated with the individual person, and the enjoyment of a way of life with the collective, even though it is individuals who do the enjoying and collectivities that are most dramatically jolted by new beginnings—sometimes so dramatically that the collectivity mutates or disintegrates as a consequence. Then, too, domestic sovereign power usually poses the greater threat to the capacity to begin something new, and foreign sovereign power the greater threat to familiar patterns of existence. Finally, the desire for collective counter-sovereignty, often although not always manifested in the desire for control of a state and territory, is more likely to be felt by those whose way of life is threatened by a foreign or at least culturally alien sovereign power than by those whose creative ventures are threatened by a domestic or native sovereign power, perhaps because the security that one's own sovereign state promises dovetails with the capacity to preserve what is and clashes with the miracle of action. For all these reasons, the question of whether successful counter-sovereignty struggles can avoid the pernicious consequences of winning sovereign power is most pertinent for those who are defending their freedom in the collective, preservative sense of the term.

Heinz Lubasz once drew a strict line between sovereign power and the total domination of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes.⁴⁵ Arendt's "What is Freedom?" suggests that they are, to the contrary, points along the same continuum. Although she does not differentiate them explicitly, we can infer from her line of argument three impulses to domination that infect every search for freedom as the capacity to act "with final authority" and "irresistible power"⁴⁶ over against a competitor or antagonist. The first is the impulse to self-domination.

We have seen how Rousseau believed that the self must achieve mastery over its own appetites and instincts instead of being mastered by them, in order to become a self in sovereign control of itself. But the more pertinent point for us is that a self that is initially, to steal another phrase from Freud, polymorphous perverse—open to the entire world in its potential identifications with others—must hammer itself or be hammered into a self whose identifications are more restricted and exclusive, before it can have a reason to wish for sovereign freedom as opposed to and over against something that it sees as not-itself. With respect to the wish for the sovereign freedom of the human species, the self must identify with the human species in distinction from and over against all other varieties of being, be they mineral, vegetable, animal, or metaphysical. With respect to the wish for national sovereign freedom, the self must identify with a single people in distinction from and over against all other peoples. With respect to the wish for individual sovereign freedom, the self must identify with a single self—itself—in distinction from and over against other individuals. In sum, the search for sovereign freedom can be initiated only by a self that has already cut potential ties of identification with other entities in the world, or has had its ties cut by others, for it is only then that those other entities become alien beings over against which the self believes that its sovereign freedom must be fought for and won.

The second impulse to domination that animates the search for sovereign freedom is the self's drive to dominate everything outside itself in the physical space that it inhabits, for every embodied self (whether individual or collective) will be pressured and limited by the alien objects it habitually encounters and so will be unable to attain sovereign freedom unless it masters them. This includes mastering, within its habitat, brute-physical objects, other living species of being, and other human subjects who are seen as alien to the self, or who see the self as alien to themselves, or both.

The third impulse to domination that animates the search for sovereign freedom is the self's drive to dominate other objects (especially objects that are other subjects) outside its place of habitation, because,

at a greater distance, those objects also represent, whether as a looming presence (such as another state) or a missing absence (such as a needed resource), a potential pressure or limit on the self. Only by controlling the whole world, in the end, can the self be assured of commanding without being commanded by any other will, determining the content of its own will, and acting according to that will without external obstruction.

The impossibility of sovereign freedom under the condition of human plurality, as well as the degeneration of self–other relations to which every attempt to make the impossible possible testifies, has not prevented desires for sovereign freedom from working their black magic on modern politics. The cases featured in Chapters 2 and 3 illustrate that black magic’s deleterious effects on freedom in our expanded Arendtian sense of the term. Chapter 2 considers how “the greatest experiment on earth” to institute popular sovereignty and individual freedom against the grain of royal power and fixed social hierarchies was contingent on the violent erasure of life worlds that had been no less popularly and freely enjoyed. Chapter 3 considers how a struggle to free a religious minority from “the greatest persecution on earth” by allotting that minority sovereignty over a new corner of the earth precipitated another persecution.

These case studies do not pretend to be definitive histories of their subjects. Instead, they are efforts to reveal, through highly distilled portraits of two of its many empirical manifestations, the paradoxical logic of a modern political idea. Both in deference to the political theoretical agenda of this book and because the concept of sovereignty is entangled with other key concepts, we will open our first case with a spotlight on “foundational violence” and close our second case with a requiem to “national self-determination.”