

Sovereign Identities and the Politics of Forgetting

R.B.J. Walker

From all sides, contemporary politics seem to converge on questions about the problematic status of modern subjectivity. In a world of leaking boundaries, shifting horizons, and intolerable violence, it is more and more difficult to know who we are, let alone what we ought to do.

Questions about political identity are undeniably tricky. The usual categories and valorizations – of cultures and nations, of passions and Balkanizations – remain with us. Even so, a sense of novelties and accelerations is also pervasive. More significantly perhaps, contemporary struggles for particular identities occur in the context of reiterated claims about the forging of a common identity: of a sense of connection in some shared enterprise of production, distribution, and exchange, perhaps, or of modernity as a universalizing cultural condition, even of rights attributed to humanity as such.

Claims about some common identity convey a great deal about our capacity to imagine particular identities, for a common identity is precisely what we do not have, at least in any politically meaningful sense. Modern political identities are fractured and dispersed among a multiplicity of sites, a condition sometimes attributed to a specifically postmodern experience but one that has been a familiar, though selectively forgotten, characteristic of modern political life for several centuries. This specifically modern proliferation of spatially delimited identities has had sharp limits. The presumed anarchy among states has been an anarchy of the select few. But it is this proliferation, affirmed by accounts of the modern state as institution – container of all cultural meaning, and site of sovereign jurisdiction over territory, property, and abstract space, and consequently over history, possibility, and abstract time – that still shapes our capacity to affirm both particular and collective identities. It does so despite all the dislocations, accelerations, and contingencies of a world less and less able to recognize itself in the cracked mirror of Cartesian coordinates.

Whatever avenues are now being opened up in the exploration of contemporary political identities, whether in the name of nations, humanities, classes, races, cultures, genders, movements, or rights, they remain largely constrained by ontological and discursive options expressed most elegantly, and to the modern imagination most persuasively, by claims about the formal sovereignty of territorial states. As both principle and practice, as an expression of a specifically modern articulation of political identity in space and time, state sovereignty is something we can neither simply affirm, nor renounce, nor gaze upon in silent admiration. The Cartesian coordinates may be cracked, identities may be leaking, and the rituals of inclusion and exclusion sanctified by the dense textures of sovereign *virtù* may have become more transparent. But if state sovereignty is not what is at stake, and if not the anachronistic ambition to perfect its spatial autonomies in a condition of perpetual peace among nations, what *then*? It remains exceptionally difficult to renounce the security of Cartesian coordinates, not least because they still provide our most powerful sense of what it means to look over the horizon.

SOVEREIGNTY AND HISTORICITY

For most of this century, if not longer, social and political theorists have been predicting, describing, analysing, and advising policymakers about the emergence of global processes and even institutionalized global structures. They point to the increase in the number and significance of international organizations. They recognize how difficult it is to understand economic, cultural, technological, social, or political processes anywhere without some grasp of the international or global scale of the most important forces that affect people's lives. There is obviously nothing strikingly original about, for instance, an international division of labour, or global patterns of trade and communication. But in this century, and especially since 1945, the scale and vitality of globally organized structures have begun to raise questions about the character and significance of the state as the primary focus of political identity, community, authority, and power. Multinational corporations have global reach. Information can be flashed to all parts of the world simultaneously. What were once simply nightmares of species extermination have turned into plausible consequences of routine military policies. Whether expressed as cliché or statistic, as computer simulation or graphic image of a vulnerable planet spinning in cosmic drift, these vivid expectations of profound structural transformation and global integration have been absorbed into contemporary political discourse.

Unfortunately, the powerful sense of change apparent all around us is not matched

by an equally clear sense of how evidence of change is to be interpreted. Evidence is not in short supply, but neither is controversy about what it signifies. Analysts and even policymakers use terms like common security, interdependence, international integration, international regime, world economy, world order, or global civilization to suggest that rules of the game devised in relation to the structural dynamics of the European states system and a world of nationally organized economies offer only a partial or even seriously misleading account of contemporary trajectories. Even where they are more than surface rhetoric or subjected to close theoretical scrutiny and strict analysis, such terms are much more plausible as evocations of the unknown than as precise concepts. As gestures, they signal a widespread dissatisfaction with more conventional terminology and a constant search for more helpful ways to delineate events. Despite reiterated claims about the overriding need for more strictly empirical modes of investigation, many of the most pressing difficulties of interpretation involve gnawing problems of a more theoretical and philosophical character.

To begin with, it is impossible to speak about emerging global processes or the reconstruction of political identities without some sense of what it is we are supposedly moving away from: enter all those troubling questions sheltering under the rubric of the philosophy of history. Most specifically, it is necessary to engage with the politics of origins, with the fixing of a temporal moment as a source of power, authority, and ambition, and specifically with the tendency to treat claims about state sovereignty as the initial point from which all contemporary trajectories can be measured and controlled. Despite all appearances, sovereignty is not a permanent principle of political order; the appearance of permanence is simply an effect of a complex of practices working to affirm continuities and to shift disruptions and dangers to the margin. Nor can it be said that sovereignty is simply passé. It is true that to work with the principle of state sovereignty is to engage with deeply entrenched discourses about political life in which the analysis of contemporary structural change is often formulated as if sovereignty must be either permanent or defunct. But this is to work with philosophies of history that are themselves constituted through claims about sovereign identity. These discourses necessarily place firm limits on how we understand contemporary trends and future possibilities. They inscribe implicit limits in time to complement explicit limits in space.

Second, to speak about emerging global processes is to engage with a realm of conceptual rarefaction. The languages available for discussion of life within states seem to be exceptionally rich. Most prevailing ideologies and political aspirations can – and do – take established ways of speaking about statist forms of political community for granted.

By contrast, conventional languages that refer to relations between states are conspicuously barren. This is largely because the character of international relations has been understood as a negation of statist forms of political community, as relations rather than politics, as anarchy rather than community. This pattern of affirmation and negation, presence and absence, identity and difference, or universal and plural is visible again in the sharp distinction between theories of political life within states and theories of relations between them. The conceptual rarefaction that greets any attempt to speak of political identities other than those affirmed by the modern state is a specific effect of the metaphysical resolutions that the principle of state sovereignty works so effectively to sustain. Silence is thereby affirmed in space, in the realm of otherness beyond the authentic political community of the state, just as it is affirmed in time through philosophies of history that forget the conditions of their own possibility.

By contrast with the concepts of state and nation, the principle of state sovereignty has received relatively little analytical attention, even though it has become indispensable to our understanding of what a state, nation, or political identity can be. Indeed, the lack of discussion can be attributed largely to the presumption that sovereignty, state, and nation are more or less interchangeable terms. This presumption is less and less plausible, not only because it conflicts with empirical evidence but also because it has become more and more obvious that it effaces our understanding of the historically constituted character of political life, and of the specific articulation of spatiotemporal relations we have come to treat as the *a priori* condition of all political existence. To distinguish between these terms is also important because they directly inform the contemporary meanings of other crucial concepts, such as power, authority, community, and obligation.

The modern principle of state sovereignty has emerged historically as the legal expression of the character and legitimacy of the state. Most fundamentally, it expresses the claim by states to exercise legitimate power within strictly delimited territorial boundaries. This claim now seems both natural and elegant, although it continues to generate familiar and seemingly intractable problems.

Most significantly, perhaps, the principle of sovereignty stands in an ambiguous relation to the claims about power and authority. On one hand, there is a strong tradition, associated with Thomas Hobbes and John Austin, among others, which insists that sovereignty is to be equated with supreme power. On the other hand, it has also been conventional to follow Hans Kelsen and H.L.A. Hart in equating sovereignty with political authority. Despite the evident difficulty of attempts to reconcile power and authority within the modern state, however, the most common understanding of state sovereignty

continues to presume that terms like sovereignty, state, power, legitimacy, and supreme authority can be treated more or less as synonyms.

It is because of the presumed convergence of such concepts, for example, that it has been so easy to string certain names together as another (sometimes loose) canon of textual reference: Bodin, for whom sovereignty referred to the supreme power over citizens and subjects, unrestrained by law; Hobbes, and the conceptualization of the sovereign Leviathan within a determinist/rationalist metaphysics, one that definitively fixes a conception of the sovereign state in direct opposition/identity to the sovereign individual; Austin, for whom the sovereign obeys no superior and receives habitual obedience from a specific society; Kelsen, for whom sovereignty consists in a logical role as the supreme norm or source of validity within a legal system; the Wimbledon case, which refers to the state that is subject to no other state and exercises full and exclusive powers within its jurisdiction; George Schwarzenberger, for whom sovereignty signifies either supremacy over others (omnipotence) or freedom from control by others (independence); Max Weber, who defines the state as having a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in a given territory; and Carl Schmitt, for whom sovereignty involves the capacity to decide on “the exception that legitimates the norm.”¹ The canon may admit a certain degree of controversy about relations between power and authority or the sovereign state and the sovereign people, but that controversy is invariably narrowly delimited. Not surprisingly, the most perplexing problems associated with the concept of sovereignty arise precisely when this convergence on a monopoly of power and legitimate authority in a specific territory is challenged, whether on the basis of externality (by other competing sovereignties, which, by definition, are not supposed to be in the same place at once) or of hierarchical conceptions of authority (against which the exclusive claims of sovereignty were articulated in the first place). Also not surprisingly, these problems tend to become more pressing in the context of theories of international relations, where the secure confines of territorial jurisdiction cannot be taken for granted.

Despite the ambiguous relationship of state sovereignty with concepts of power and authority, and the untidy realm of impinging jurisdictions and hegemonic practices, sovereignty has been subjected to continuing attempts to give it precise definition. Most would-be definers have fixed upon claims of monopoly. A few, more bemused by the ambiguities of power/authority or the empirical slipperiness of hegemonies and competing jurisdictions, have concluded that no clear definition is possible at all. In either case, however, and like the construction of a canon of classic theorists of sovereignty, the very attempt to treat sovereignty as a matter of definition and legal principle

encourages a certain amnesia about its historical and culturally specific character.

The principle of state sovereignty contrasts sharply with concepts of state and nation in this respect. It is obvious enough that the concept of state has developed historically in response to the rise of industrial societies, and thus to the interaction between state institutions and particular socioeconomic processes. Nationalism also is usually grasped as a historical occurrence, one linked particularly to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Claims about history are also usually indispensable to claims about nation. By contrast, claims about state sovereignty suggest permanence; relatively unchanging territorial space to be occupied by a state characterized by temporal change; or a spatial-cum-institutional container to be filled by the cultural or ethnic aspirations of a people. Governments and regimes may come and go, but sovereign states, these claims suggest, go on forever.

This suggestion of permanence makes the concept of sovereignty appear to be comparatively unimportant in contemporary social and political thought, even though it is the crucial constitutive principle of modern political life. Moreover, this affirmation of permanence is enhanced by the paradox that the principle of state sovereignty as a claim to particularity is most frequently expressed in a universalist manner. All states are now assumed to be able to claim sovereignty; sovereignty has become the most basic norm of the international system, however much this norm may be qualified in practice by messy patterns of hegemony and interdependence.

Yet like the concepts of state and nation, the principle of state sovereignty did not appear out of thin air. Though it has become the initial ground of all constitutions of state, it was itself constituted through complex processes which, despite libraries of scholarship, we still understand only imperfectly. Though it continues to inform our familiar world of common sense and political realism, it was once bizarre and radical, even nonsense.

As a historical construct, the principle of state sovereignty has been clothed in a widely accepted story. This story generally begins with tribes; progresses to the Greek city-states; becomes complicated with the age of empires, especially in the case of Rome; becomes muddled with the strange geography of European feudalism; flares into life with the emergence of the Renaissance and the early-modern struggle for autonomy from empire; then becomes increasingly refined as the principle of sovereignty is codified, and as the state meshes with the organization of capitalist economic life, on one hand, and with the fusion of cultural and social differences into national solidarity on the other. As a story, it is not clear whether it will just go on and on, in which case boredom is tempered with a sense of tragedy; or whether it will come to a sudden – glorious or catastrophic – end when patterns of fragmentation give way to those of integration.

This story is both conventional and controversial, and it is important to remember the usual objections to it. First, it is said to celebrate a reading of history centred on the West, thus buying into the broader tale of progress, modernization, and the rest. While it may be true that states systems have existed before, and that familiar patterns of interaction and conflict can be traced comparatively, it is also true that the sharp delineations expressed by the modern claim to state sovereignty have little precedent. Superficial references to Thucydides, Kautilya, or Machiavelli typically obscure much more than they reveal in this respect.

Second, the story presents a statist reading of the history of sovereignty and the state. It builds on and reproduces the claim to a great tradition of Western political theory, a tradition at whose core are all those writers from Plato and Aristotle to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel, and beyond who celebrate the *polis*, the centred political community, as the model of proper political life. To the extent that more cosmopolitan traditions have been considered relevant, for example, it is only because they have been adapted to the particularistic ambitions of statist communities – witness the brilliant reconciliation of state and geometrical reason by Hobbes, or state and rational history by Hegel. In this reading, the historicity of states is frequently ignored altogether, an ignorance that is further encouraged by the construction of a mythic antitradition of theories of international relations to complement the mythic tradition of theory about statist community.

Third, though consistent with the principle of sovereign equality or with understandings of the state as an embodiment of an abstract general will, national interest or national insecurity, the story detracts from the great historical, geographical, and sociological variety of state forms. Certainly the dry codifications of so much legal history provide a significant contrast with attempts to develop a historical sociology or political economy of the state, although they readily confirm currently popular analogies with utilitarian accounts of rational action by possessive individuals in a capitalist market.

Fourth, the precise timetable of the emergence of state sovereignty is contested in the literature. Some writers focus on the late fifteenth century and the emergence of a recognizably coherent system of states. Here the Franco-Spanish struggle over Italy in 1494 or Columbus's meeting with the Americas in 1492 becomes symbolic. Others focus on the formalizations of legal theory symbolized by the Peace of Augsburg (1515), the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), and the writings of Vattel. Others, like F.H. Hinsley, stress later dates on the grounds that only in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries are there clearly cohesive nation-states in the modern sense, or a clearly cohesive states system, such as was defined

by the Congress of Vienna of 1815; or that only in the twentieth century does the principle of sovereign statehood become universalized with the ending of formal colonialism.

Finally, the state appears in the conventional story as a formal and almost lifeless category, when in fact states are constantly being maintained, defended, attacked, reproduced, undermined, and relegitimized on a daily basis. The conventional story combines with a legalistic reading of the state to mystify the minute rituals through which states are constantly made and remade. Again, appeals to state sovereignty serve to maintain the high ground of timelessness (*epistème*) against the flux (*doxa*) of time, and to confirm the existence of the state as something “out there,” separate from the ordinary experience of people’s lives.

Taken together, such objections suggest that the principle of state sovereignty is rather more interesting than it has been made to appear, whether through attempts to provide a clear definition, to resolve fundamental contradictions between power and authority, or to reproduce conventional accounts of the history of state sovereignty. It is more interesting, not least, because the conventional story of state sovereignty can be given slightly different readings in relation to the historically situated discursive spaces that are themselves defined by the principle of state sovereignty. As a historical achievement, the principle of state sovereignty affirms a particular reading of history. As a demarcation of political space/time, state sovereignty prescribes three distinct places, each with its own account of temporal possibility, in which to think about political space/time. Attempts to construct a history of sovereignty have varied according to whether it is examined from the perspective of life within states, or of relations between states, or in terms of some broader enterprise in which the distinction between inside and outside is subsumed as one – highly problematic – aspect of the dynamics of some more inclusive form of world politics and human identity.

Both the presence and the possibility of something that might usefully be called world politics or human identity flatly contradict the understanding of political identity affirmed by claims to state sovereignty. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely the possibility, and in some respects the presence, of some kind of world politics and common human identity that has continued to produce an account of the world as a spatially demarcated array of political identities fated to clash in perpetual contingency or to converge somewhere over the distant horizon at a time that is always deferred. This paradox continues to be the primary condition governing our ability, or inability, to think about struggles for political identity in a world in which it has become exceptionally unclear who this “we” is.

Once state sovereignty is defined as a centring of power/authority within a given territory, the way is open for emphasis on other things, like justice and law, freedom and social progress. In this context, concern with sovereignty is expressed in three primary forms: as the procedures of defence and diplomacy required to maintain the geographical frontier – the outer limit – of a society; as a technical legal problem, especially in the construction of constitutional and institutional politics; and as a concept always in uneasy motion between power and authority, and thus between state and civil society, or state and nation. This latter form has been of particular interest to political theorists. For although the concept of sovereignty provides a constitutional account of the state as somehow (abstractly) synonymous with society, there remains the difficulty of determining exactly how the relationship between power and authority is to be specified or achieved in practice, a difficulty that has provided one of the core themes of European political thought since the age of social contract theory. Thus attention shifts to other dilemmas, notably those concerning the cultural or national content of the space contained within state boundaries and the precise democratic procedures that might permit some convergence of sovereign state and sovereign people. The claims of state sovereignty themselves recede into the background, into the silence of received wisdom and legal convention. All that is needed are the appropriate constitutional and institutional arrangements to ensure a practical continuity over time and the clear affirmation of a spatial limit beyond which democracy and nation cannot trespass: matters that can be left safely in the hands of lawyers and soldiers as the twin guardians of sovereign enclosure. Though the weapons may be pointed out, the effects are clearly felt within.

Viewed in this internal context, the problematic character of the principle of state sovereignty takes two primary forms. The first involves continuing tensions between power and authority and between sovereign state and sovereign people, tensions that have come to be resolved either through binary distinctions between state and civil society or through unitary claims to national identity. While these resolutions continue to be of crucial importance as pressing aspirations in many places, they also continue to be put in doubt by the continuing recourse to various forms of authoritarian state and the demands of an increasingly global capitalist economy. From this direction, claims about state sovereignty have come to be identified not only with the increasing strength of the state measured in terms of the state's capacity to coerce civil society, but also with an increasing weakness of the state in relation to the global structures in which it has become embedded. Though socialism has come to be seen as the most vulnerable of modern political



doctrines, it is far from clear that the classic aspirations of liberalism or nationalism are any better founded in this respect.

The second, and closely related, form concerns the extent to which the concept of political community embodied in the principle of state sovereignty is compatible with the economic, social, cultural, and political processes in which people now participate. Two subthemes can be loosely distinguished here. On one hand, there are renewed assertions of various cosmopolitan claims. Some of these claims attempt to reassert the priority of people as people over people as citizens; hence, for example, the popularity of ideas derived from traditions of natural law and Enlightenment universalism in contemporary discussions about universal human rights. Others suggest that as a matter of empirical fact, people have become not only the subjects of sovereign states but subject to forces that are beyond the control of state authority, whether in terms of territorial reach or instrumental capacity. The threat of universal annihilation in nuclear war or ecological collapse is symbolic here. Many of the most crucial issues of our time seem to be beyond the scope of our understanding of democracy if democracy is understood in terms of the claims of sovereign states. On the other hand, there are also assertions of claims to some kind of local community. The limited diversity of a system of nation-states, for example, seems increasingly inadequate to contain the contemporary profusion of ethnic and cultural identities. Similarly, neither unitary nor federal institutional arrangements seem able to maintain the single-minded allegiance either of particular locales or of some social movements.

Whether in relation to fears of authoritarianism and a crisis of legitimation or to claims about the increasing salience of both global and local processes, the established routines of democratic theory and nationalist aspiration must become increasingly tenuous once the guarantees of state sovereignty lose their credibility. Rather a lot hangs on whether the assumptions and silences of received wisdom and legal convention can remain relatively undisturbed, and on whether we can remain convinced that there is a here here as well as a there there.

SOVEREIGNTY FROM THE OUTSIDE

Relations between states are conventionally understood as the negation of the community presumed to be possible within the sovereign state. Whether characterized as politics without centralized authority, as international anarchy, or as a more or less mechanical (automatic rather than political) system, international relations are defined both by the presence of sovereign states as primary actors and by the absence of a sover-

eign power/authority governing the system itself. Consequently, there is always a double elaboration of the argument that international relations are necessarily a matter of potentially – in the last instance – unlimited power and conflict. This double move is visible, for example, when different analytical traditions explain international relations primarily in terms of the behaviour of states or in relation to the structure of the international system. On one hand, states are presumed to act autonomously, according to their own self-interest, as in the (neo-Weberian) tradition which identifies the pursuit of some mystical national interest as an assertion of power or will, and thus as a decisionism about national values. On the other hand, the international system is claimed to have no overarching authority through which conflicts of interest can be resolved. Hence there is the possibility of explaining international relations according to the operation of certain systemic or structural principles (balance-of-power theory), as well as of justifying the tragic legitimacy of war as a mechanism of system change.

In this world of sovereignty/lack of sovereignty, of supposedly autonomous states in an unregulated contest of wills, sovereignty is both constitutive of the system and a problem to be overcome. The problematic nature of the concept of sovereignty has thus remained on the active agenda of those concerned with international relations in a way that remains rather alien to those concerned with justice, freedom, community, and progress within states, where sovereignty has become normalized or at least reduced to the conventional modern routines of state building or national liberation.

This double move also gives rise to the most basic theoretical problems associated with the principle of state sovereignty in this context, for it is unclear just how the principle of sovereign autonomy is compatible with the requirements of participation in a states system. At one extreme, one can argue that the states system is apolitical, that it is simply an automatic arrangement in which structural mechanisms respond to the assertions of autonomous states, as with attempts to apply mechanistic or utilitarian metaphors to international relations and with positivistic conceptions of international law. At the other extreme, one can suggest that the states system constitutes a kind of society to which states are somehow obligated, so that the principle of sovereignty is understood to be compatible with emerging norms of international law. In this case an understanding of sovereignty as the locus of autonomous decisions requires considerable qualification, and an insistence that participation is in fact a condition of the possibility of autonomy rather than a threat to it. It is reaffirmed, however, in the Kantian aspiration for a perpetual peace, for a more positive resolution of the demands of particularistic autonomy with those of universal reason, which earlier writers had assumed could only

result in the possibility of domestic peace and the inevitability of external war.

In view of the abstract quality of Kant's proposed resolution, the tension between international anarchy and international society frames a wide field of practical dilemmas in which claims about state sovereignty have come to seem especially problematic. These can be grouped under at least five headings, all of which are now quite familiar to students of international relations:

1. Continuing general debates concerning:
 - a) the constitutive principles of international law and the extent to which the law is binding in the absence of decisive centralized authority;
 - b) the relationship between international law and *droit interne* (monism and dualism), particularly in view of claims about how international law effectively reduces the decision-making power of the modern state; and
 - c) the relationship between the principle of sovereignty and a variety of cosmopolitan claims about, for example, natural law, universal human rights, and species identity.
2. Problems arising from interpretations of sovereignty as implying a rigorous autonomy, especially in the context of processes of formal decolonization, and concerning:
 - a) principles of domestic jurisdiction and nonintervention;
 - b) specific disputes over particular territories; and
 - c) the criteria for statehood and recognition for small states, divided states, and so on.
3. Problems arising from the relationship between the principle of sovereignty and the claims of a society of states and resulting from:
 - a) the de facto hegemony of great powers (vertical and in relation to omnipotence); and
 - b) established norms of international law, regimes, or interdependence (horizontal and in relation to independence).
4. Problems arising from the increasing significance of territorialities beyond existing claims of sovereignty and involving:
 - a) the law of the sea;
 - b) space law; and
 - c) speculative claims about a global commons or planetary habitat.
5. Problems arising from the institutionalization of structures that somehow transcend state sovereignty, including:
 - a) formal constitutional arrangements, as with the European Community or United Nations; and

b) de facto arrangements, as with multinational corporations and the complex relationships referred to under the term *dependency*.

Where much if not most of the conventional literature on state sovereignty in the context of international relations has placed greatest stress on (1) and (2), more recent concerns stress (3), (4), and (5). And as we engage with these more recent concerns, it seems more and more difficult to believe that here is indeed here and there is still there. Like the routines of modern political theory, accounts of international relations can still assume that inside and outside can be easily distinguished, but this is an assumption that is now very difficult to take for granted.

SOVEREIGNTY DEFERRED

These two ways of reading state sovereignty, from the inside and the outside, are both readily familiar and seemingly exhaustive. Indeed, they seem to express the decisive demarcation between inside and outside, between self and other, identity and difference, community and anarchy that is constitutive of our modern understanding of political space. They affirm a clear sense of here and there. Here we are safe to work out the characteristic puzzles of modernity, about freedoms and determinations, the subjectivities and objectivities of a realm in which we might aspire to realize our peace and potential, our autonomy, our enlightenment, our progress, and our *virtù*. There, we must beware. The outside is alien and strange, mysterious or threatening, a realm in which to be brave against adversity or patient enough to tame those whose life is not only elsewhere but also back then. Knowing the other outside, it is possible to affirm identities inside. Knowing identities inside, it is possible to imagine the absences outside. These routines, too, are familiar. They affirm the codes of nationalism and patriotism, the play of sanctimony and projection, the implausibility of strangers in a world of friend and foe, and the impossibility of any real choice between tradition and modernity.

Yet as I have sketched the puzzles generated by claims about state sovereignty both inside and outside, it is possible to get a sense of the significance of temporality, of the extent to which these puzzles of geopolitical space have changed or become more pressing over time. Here we run into a further familiar problematic in which claims about modernity as a culture of spatial chasms – between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, words and things, subjects and objects – clash with claims about modernity as a process of historical acceleration, of modernization and development, of all things solid melting

into air. Many have argued that such processes of temporal development imply the eventual erasure of old spatial demarcations.

Nevertheless, many of these demarcations seem rather persistent. Contemporary accounts of political life – perhaps unlike contemporary accounts of social and economic life – remain impressed by the resilience of boundaries, by the sheer difficulty of imagining a politics beyond the horizons of a sovereign space. For where would one look? What could it mean to transcend the horizons of the sovereign state? To claim sovereignty is already to know what lies beyond, for there can be nothing beyond the horizon of that absence. The absence itself might become even darker, the horrors of war might become even more barbaric, but the important horizon is the one between it and home, between the terrors of international violence and our peace, order, and good government. The obvious alternative is to bring the outside in, to speak of a global space, to act in the name of a planet or a humanity, to engage in the characteristic erasure of difference through an affirmation of the same. The domestic analogy, the notion that a human community can be envisaged as a grandiose statist community, it can be said, must no longer be refused.

And in any case, when could a breach of these horizons be achieved? Again, it might be possible to envisage a straight-line trajectory to some global community understood as a state writ large, but the trajectory is more likely to drop sharply into patterns of contingency once the lines of domestic jurisdiction are crossed. The domestic analogy, always so tempting, always so natural, reappears as a grim warning about confusing the universalizing aspirations of one state with the distinctly undomesticated character of life on one planet.

Thus the principle of state sovereignty not only suggests how it is necessary to defend the borders but also how it is necessary to think about borders, about the delineation of political possibility in both space and time. It not only distinguishes between two spatial realms, each with their own characteristic mode of temporality, but also projects those temporalities into nonspaces, into imaginary realms where contradictions might be resolved in principle but which can never be reached. Or at least, they can be reached only if all difference is erased, if the homogenizing spaces of modernity are extended in all directions. Yes, we are all neo-utilitarian rational actors, say some. Yes, we must all become Kantian moralists, say others. But, the sceptic is likely to murmur, while observing new patterns of violence and exclusion on a global scale, even heaven on earth will require its own dark counterpoint in hell.

Simply put, then, the principle of state sovereignty expresses a historically specific articulation of the relationship between universality and particularity in space and time. As such, it both affirms a specific resolution of philosophical and political options that must be acknowledged everywhere and sets a clear limit to our capacity to envisage any other possibility. As both resolution and limit, it enters into the practices of states, the categories of those who analyse states, and even the aspirations of those who would like to dispense with states. As a practice of states, it is easily mistaken for their essence. As a category of analysis, it is easily treated as the silent condition guaranteeing all other categories. As source of inspiration, it affirms that the only alternative to it is a return to the same, albeit on a larger – global – scale.

As an articulation of the relationship between universality and particularity in space and time, however, it is far from simple. The resolution of all philosophical and political options is not only elegant, but also densely textured. Three moments of this resolution are crucial and continually reinforce each other.

With the collapse of feudal hierarchies and the delineation of the flat Euclidean spaces of modernity, political life was confronted with its own variation of the puzzles that had perplexed late mediaeval theologians, notably those concerning the proper relationship between the finite and the infinite, and consequently those concerning the relationship between the claims of people in general and those of the citizens of particular places. Despite all the one-sided references to the tragic demands of international anarchy, the modern states system offers precisely a way of responding to both claims simultaneously: one system, many states; one Europe, or Christianity, or modernity and many (European, Christian, or modern) peoples, cultures, nations, and jurisdictions. Like all the grand dualisms of modern thought, of course, this one is rife with incipient monisms: the priority of national interests or the priority of international society; explanations of state behaviour or explanations of international structure; the possibility of international order or the inevitability of international conflict. As with all those other great dualisms, also, familiarity may have bred contempt but has not made it any easier to escape their tenacious grasp.

This primary resolution is replayed in twin discourses about life inside and outside the state. Within any particular constituent of the states system, within the secure confines of particular states, it becomes possible to aspire to the universal. Indeed, as with most of the classic texts of modern political thought, it is possible to almost forget about the particularity of the community that is shown to be capable of reason and justice, democracy

and liberty. Those marginal references to external troubles that manage to find a small place in the canonical texts of political theory have to be taken up by others, by theorists of international relations, who in turn easily lose sight of the extent to which their depictions of international disorder are coloured by the positive aspirations that are deemed to be legitimate within states. The effectiveness with which the principle of state sovereignty marks a distinction between political life inside and mere relations outside the modern state is still felt in the double reification of the two canons of political thought, the canon of presence and the canon of absence, the serious theory of established political community and the depressing theory of guns, bombs, lies, and the occasional butter.

This double resolution of universal and particular inside and outside is initially made possible by a sharp distinction in space. But this distinction in space also permits a distinction in time. Inside, the spatial consciousness that informed early-modern contract theory gradually gave way to theories of history. The architectonics of *Leviathan* gave way to the dialectics of *Geist*. But if progress could be articulated within, it has remained notoriously scarce without. International relations remain a discourse about contingency, about barbarism and violence and war. The future can only be deferred. The present is destined to return. The political theorists may have their hidden hand and their optimistic teleologies, but theorists of international relations always remember Augustine, and shape their doctrines of realism as a peon to a temporality without hope of redemption.

One system and many states; the possibility of universality inside and the violent play of particularities outside; a spatial order in which history can unravel as it should and a spatial disorder in which contingent forces can only clash as they must. As a response to the puzzles of unity and diversity, presence and absence, and space and time, the principle of state sovereignty says all that is to be said, indeed all that can be said, about the character and location of modern political life. All contradictions are resolved, and they are resolved with great elegance and style, with an apparent simplicity that masks the density of metaphysical achievement.

But it expresses a particular conception of elegance and a specific sense of style, and its metaphysical achievements have become both more visible and less convincing. Its grand motif of straight lines retains a certain charm, and an enormously powerful grip on the contemporary political imagination, but we are no longer so easily fooled by the objectivity of the ruler, by the Euclidean theorems and Cartesian coordinates that have allowed us to situate and naturalize a comfortable home for power and authority. The difficulty of thinking about contemporary political identities comes not only from the profusion of

struggles and uncertainties which have become even more obvious with the thawing of Cold War structures, but also from an increasingly widespread sense that the metaphysical achievements of the principle of state sovereignty have less and less political relevance. Lines drawn in the desert sand bespeak the nostalgia of those reduced to force, to the self-righteous virtue of those who violently inscribe a here here and a there there. They say little about the *virtù* required to comprehend the wiles of approaching fortune, let alone the uncertainties of a new world order that will not lie still.

Neither nostalgia nor self-righteousness have ever been sufficient to prevent metaphysical collapse, and their capacity for political mobilization is sometimes sweet but always short. Despite the immediate appeal to a common sense that will insist that there is indeed a here here and a there there, it is unlikely that any analysis of contemporary world politics – of the world economy, of nuclear strategy, of communications technologies, of cultural inclusions or social exclusions, of refugees or tourists, of investments, ecologies, markets, or literatures – will now avoid some mention of how this once uncommon sense is not quite right. The clean lines of state sovereignty, it will be said, are less impressive than the startling velocity of contemporary accelerations. Temporality can no longer be contained within spatial coordinates. Given the history of thinking about concepts of space and time since Isaac Newton stopped underwriting the guarantees for modernity, this should not be surprising. But given the extent to which modern political thought has depended on the claim that temporality can and must be tamed and shaped by the spatial certainties of sovereign states, it is undoubtedly quite perplexing, even threatening.

To understand the elegance of the resolution of all philosophical and political options by the principle of state sovereignty, at least to the satisfaction of the modern imagination, is to understand how we do find it possible to think about the struggles for political identity that seem so pressing all around us. The usual categories and valorizations express all the usual answers to questions about who this “we” is. This “we” shifts rapidly back and forth between an invocation of humanity in general and an admission of the parochial ground from which the claimant to humanity speaks. We may aspire to be a good citizen and an exemplary expression of the species. Alternatively, we may resist claims about the species that are issued as the conceits of hegemonic powers by privileging the particular struggles of national citizenship or liberation. And as nationalist or globalist, we can know who we are through knowing where we are. Dislodged from the Great Chain of Being and pitched into the empty spaces of modernity, we claim autonomy and identity as particulars – individuals and nations – ever in search of reconciliation with the universal, or ever resigned to the unhappy condition in which reconciliation is known to be

impossible. Though many complaints have been issued about the impossibility of *this* rendition of the available alternatives, the silent reifications of the principle of state sovereignty testify to *its* hegemony both over what it means to aspire to some other identity and to resist the identities constructed by hegemonic powers.

REARTICULATIONS OF POLITICAL SPACE/TIME

Once upon a time, the world was not as it is. The patterns of inclusion and exclusion we now take for granted are historical innovations. The principle of state sovereignty is the classic expression of those patterns, an expression that encourages us to believe that either those patterns are permanent or that they must be erased in favour of some kind of global cosmopolis. It is possible to understand how this claim to resolve all contradictions works. The claim, most of all, is not simply there. Its fixing of unity and diversity, or inside and outside, or space and time is not natural. Nor is it inevitable. It is a crucial part of the practices of all modern states, but they are not natural or inevitable either.

And yet, states have become (second) nature, and come to seem inevitable. We have inherited not Machiavelli's sense of the sheer difficulty and contingency of state formation, but Hobbes's sense that there can be no solution to the difficulties and contingencies of modern life without the eternal presence of the sovereign state. Of course, it might be argued that this is because the world is indeed made up of clean-cut parcels of territorial jurisdiction, because the claims of state sovereignty accurately reflect an empirical reality which we have only to recognize and acknowledge. Though some may be convinced that this must be the essence of a realistic politics, others are more likely to be persuaded to believe in the purely formal and even utopian quality of state sovereignty given the messy picture that can appear through other constructions of the empirical evidence. Even – or perhaps especially – large states are liable to experience sovereignty as a tremendous problem rather than as a simple given. Even the most self-satisfied states exert enormous energies sustaining a sense of national identity and integrity. At best, theories of international relations predicated upon the claim to state sovereignty involve an extraordinary degree of oversimplification and wishful thinking. In this sense, they offer an explicitly normative account of how the world must be, a way of constructing empirical evidence on the basis of prior assumptions about how lines are to be drawn through messy appearances and contested subjectivities. The practices through which these lines are drawn, and by which “profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry,”² I have argued, are much more interesting than the substantive claims that these practices have made so familiar.

Through these practices, it has become possible to present once highly controversial claims as unproblematic assertions. The ontological density of the principle of state sovereignty can be turned into vacuous claims about an international anarchy. Max Weber's struggles with the rationality/irrationality of modernity, with the problematic status of autonomy in a world torn between Kant and Nietzsche, can be turned into the banalities of the claim to "political realism" that continues to govern accounts of the necessities of a world of self-interested states. The achievement of a horizontal space in which modern individuals can realize their sovereign identities within the sovereign state can be turned into a mere typology of pseudohierarchical levels, into a hierarchy of "man," "state," and "international system" that can neither reach to a transcendent eternity nor admit the possibility of a temporality that might erase its privileged spaces. Rendered as unproblematic assertions, the categories of modern theories of international relations work to affirm the discourses of the modern state and to render any alternatives to the state as trivial, utopian, and irrelevant.

Through these practices, too, it has been possible to stop thinking about other claims to political identity. For a discipline preoccupied with the diversity of peoples, for example, the study of international relations has shown very little concern with processes usually grasped under the category of culture. On one hand, the diversity of cultures has been reduced to the diversity of nations. On the other, cultural practices have been reduced to questions about "values" which can be either opposed to the eternal truths of "power" or equated with the hegemony of rational action under modernity. It is here that the similarities between theories of international relations and the crudest forms of reductionist Marxism have been particularly striking. For all its ambition to explain the world, the modern theory of international relations remains intensely parochial, and not just because it has been developed primarily in relation to the interests of hegemonic states. If culture is read through the principle of state sovereignty, it can only refer to the diversity of national cultures. If culture is read through a geometry of territorial exclusions, through a metaphysics of identity here and a nonidentity there, it can only refer to an absence of community, a relativity of values and a clash of different ways of life; unless, of course, some convergence theory can chart a way through to an eternal peace and a kitsch Kantianism can solve the riddles of culture once and for all.

Similar problems beset attempts to understand international relations theory as an explicitly gendered practice and to suggest how an alternative feminist theory of international relations might be constructed. There is no doubt at all that a feminist critique of international relations theory is required, and required urgently. But after pointing to the

obviously gendered character of this discipline, it is far from clear what a feminist theory of international relations must involve. Leaving aside the considerable variation and controversy inherent in any contemporary claim about feminism or gender, a feminist critique of international relations theory must necessarily come to terms with the crucial gendering of political identities – the universal man – that informs the privileged principles of modern political life, and not least the principle of state sovereignty.

There is obviously little point in attempting to add gender to a discipline while simply taking for granted the gendered concepts through which that discipline has been constructed. A feminist critique of international relations theory must also be a critique of modern politics, of the fixing of possible identities as a binary choice between a citizenship and a humanity. At least to the extent that feminism itself is understood as a politics of identity, rather than as an apolitical essentialism or an extrapolation of classical liberalism, it can hardly afford to take this choice as the condition under which other ways of being human can be explored. As a politics of identity, the critique of modern theories of international relations must give way to an ambition to understand the gendered character of contemporary world politics. This ambition *must* involve a suspicion of the ethnocentrism and modernist hubris of theories of international relations, for these are precisely conditions under which it has been possible to read women – among others – right out of the script.

The pattern is familiar but not always easy to see. Through the separation of theories of international relations from those of an international political economy, it has become possible to ignore categories of class in favour of those of state and nation; so national chauvinism always triumphs over class solidarity, and national interests always heal the wounds of class division. Through the rituals of “national security,” it has become possible to link all forms of human insecurity to the military defence of the state, despite the fact that states have become increasingly important sources of contemporary insecurity and increasingly unable to provide security from environmental collapse and economic maldevelopment. But again, while the problematic character of contemporary accounts of human security or assumptions about a simple rift between politics and economics has attracted considerable critical commentary, the implications of the critique are perhaps even more profound than most of the critics are prepared to admit. If an alternative account of human security is needed, for example, it will have to arise from some understanding of who it is that is to be made secure. And if it is important to understand class divisions in order to explain contemporary patterns of violence and inequality, then it will have to be an analysis that is usurped neither by categories of state and nation nor by some abstract account of a humanity beyond power.

Whether in relation to culture, class, or gender, to the demands of security or the possibilities of equity, a critique of modern theories of international relations, and thus of the principle of state sovereignty that has set the conditions under which those theories could be articulated, must lead to very difficult questions about principles and aspirations that presuppose a nice tidy world of Cartesian coordinates, at least as a regulative ambition. How is it possible to articulate a plausible account of identity, democracy, community, responsibility, or security without assuming the presence of a territorial space, a sharp line between here and there, the celebratory teleologies of modern political life within the great universalizing particular, the modern state? How is it possible to engage with aspirations for emancipation knowing that so many of those aspirations have merely affirmed a parochial particularity masquerading as universal? How is it possible to engage with others without relapsing into the rituals of identity and nonidentity, affirmation and denial, the great battle between the righteous and the barbarian that is so deeply inscribed in the constitutive discourses of modern politics?

The principle of state sovereignty affirms the specifically modern conditions under which such questions can be answered. Many continue to affirm that modernity offers the *only* conditions under which these questions can be answered. But while states are still with us, their borders offer no theoretical or practical guarantees. Given contemporary rearticulations of political space/time, it is unlikely that contemporary struggles for political identity can afford to be so apolitical, or that attempts to make some sense of emerging forms of politics on a global scale can blithely continue to affirm categories that explicitly deny the possibility of a world politics. The politics of becoming otherwise will have to be a politics that challenges the modern framing of other as Other, the framing expressed, reproduced, and legitimized by the spatial distinction between political theory (or sociology, or any other modern discipline that simply takes the bounded political community of the political theorists for granted) and international relations (or anthropology, or any other discipline that works to affirm an outside against the constitutive identities of an inside). There is certainly no possibility of becoming otherwise if that account is assumed to provide an accurate portrayal of where we are now. As the discursive strategies through which we have come to believe in the natural necessity of that historical claim become more and more transparent, however, we might at least be spared the interminable self-righteousness of those who know what we cannot be because they are so sure of where we are. I would count this as a considerable achievement.

NOTES

This essay is adapted, with permission, from the final chapter of R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

1. These last two names, an intentional transgression of the conventional canon, are intended to serve as a reminder of the extent to which codifications of state sovereignty in international law often have been cleansed of references to the statist power politics with which they are nevertheless indelibly associated. See especially Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (1922; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); and Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77-128.
2. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 212.