

Book Review

Dieter Grimm. *Sovereignty: The Origin and Future of a Political and Legal Concept*, Belinda Cooper, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). 167 pp. ISBN: 978-0231164252. \$25.00 paperback

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Sovereignty remains one of the most complex and hotly contested words in the political theory lexicon. The question of what constitutes sovereignty has taxed theorists for generations. And the problem of who or what is sovereign has, historically, been one of the most important political issues of modern times. But it is not just theorists who have grappled with these questions; practitioners have faced intractable difficulties in understanding the exact nature of sovereignty. The fate of both the American and French revolutions depended on a redefinition of sovereignty. Without explaining who possessed it, it was impossible for revolutionaries to take control of vast territories and hugely stratified populations. In these two cases, sovereignty was both a tool of control and a story political leaders told their constituents about how power works.

Given the contingent nature of the idea of sovereignty, it is essential that any discussion of it should bring together the historical and theoretical dimensions of the term – and this is very much what Dieter Grimm has tried to do in this short book. His pithy and dense analysis covers a vast canvas and provides an even-handed overview of the main issues. In particular, he strikes the right balance between description and analysis. This is not really a textbook; it is more of an essay. It offers a map of the territory rather than an in-depth treatment. This was a wise choice as it makes the book accessible to a wide range of different audiences. A word, too, for Belinda Cooper's excellent translation, which is limpid and stylistically satisfying. She renders Grimm's prose into English in a way that retains the clarity of his ideas and the strength of his argument.

In keeping with the book's basic premise, Grimm's approach to sovereignty is squarely historical. He wants to remind readers of the "contextual nature and the adaptability of the concept of sovereignty" (p. xiii) and, to this end, divides his analysis into three parts. The first focuses on the early modern emergence of concepts of sovereignty before and after Jean Bodin's seminal *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566). Drawing on the work of Quentin Skinner and others, he traces the development of the concept through the

Wars of Religion and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The second part explores the rise of “popular sovereignty” in the French and American revolutions. The focus here is on how sovereignty was refashioned to fit with the modern nation-state and how it was adapted for use alongside mass political movements that appealed to an egalitarian idea of the people. In the third part of the book, Grimm turns his attention to the internationalization of sovereignty. From the Treaty of Westphalia to debates over the Schengen Zone in the European Union, sovereignty has been a key dividing line, separating those who believe in the primacy of national sovereignty from those who believe in the importance of some kind of supranational solution to international relations.

These three short sections are bookended by an introduction and a conclusion in which Grimm lays out his own position and provides clues for decoding the present situation. From this, it is possible to identify two clear assumptions that underpin his narrative: first, that sovereignty does not make sense without statehood and is therefore intimately related to the foundation of the modern state; second, that sovereignty remains a useful concept, despite the profound changes that are taking place within the European Union. The historian in Grimm wants us to believe that, since sovereignty has adapted itself on numerous occasions to different historical contexts, it can continue to adapt itself to a more inter-connected, transnational and globalized world. This seems a fair point and his overall argument his convincing.

Grimm’s framework, however, prevents him from dealing with one area that has had a crucial impact on how sovereignty is constructed: ideas of imperial and post-imperial sovereignty. While Grimm is right that the emergence of sovereignty coincided with the emergence of the modern nation-state, he does not say that this was a rather unusual form of political organisation limited to Western Europe at the time. Elsewhere in the world, the dominant form of political organisation was the composite empire. From the Ashanti Empire in West Africa to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Europe, not to mention the various European colonial empires of the eighteenth- to the twentieth-centuries, the vast majority of the world’s population was under imperial rule until the twentieth-century. But does this mean that sovereignty cannot be used to understand the structure and functioning of empires?

The answer to this is clearly no. Empires also created forms of sovereignty, usually of a hierarchical nature. Under the Ottoman Empire, different layers of sovereignty operated depending on how far away you were from the imperial ‘center’ in modern-day Turkey; in the British Empire of the nineteenth-century, colonial administrators created limited forms of sovereignty for princely states in India; and the French exported ideas of horizontal popular sovereignty across North and West Africa from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

Moreover, the unravelling of empires throughout the twentieth century was vital in bringing about the conception of sovereignty we live with today. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires in the First World War unleashed a particularly virulent idea of national and ethnic sovereignty that transformed Europe. Likewise, the period of decolonization after the Second World War saw postcolonial nation-states cling tightly to their sovereignty because of former domination, while imperial powers elaborated new forms of sovereignty to explain away the amputation of colonial territory.

Surely, then, we need to include imperial sovereignties as part of an analysis of where the concept has come from? As the American Revolution demonstrates, (anti-)colonialism was a vital catalyst for the development of ideas of popular sovereignty. And, similarly, one could argue that contemporary anxieties over borders and the dilution of sovereignty in Europe stem from a postcolonial mind-set, in which European states have been forced to contend with the paradox of a Europe that has become more “open” and a non-European world that is far less interested in ideas of supranational sovereignty. Nowhere is this more apparent than in recent clashes between the European Union and Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping, two leaders whose conception of sovereignty differs sharply from the one Grimm discusses.

Right at the end of his book, Grimm concedes that sovereignty is not simply a European or American question and that, beyond the European Union, there are alternative ideas of sovereignty that seem far removed from current debates about “post-sovereignty” (pp. 122–23). This is a start. The next step is to integrate fully a non-European story into the heart of Grimm’s analysis, with a view to making an already stimulating essay into a truly global reflection on how states can and should wield power.