



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WORLD POLITICS

# Sovereignty

AND

# Subjectivity

EDITED BY

JENNY EDKINS, NALINI PERSRAM & VÉRONIQUE PIN-FAT

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Jenny Edkins,  
Nalini Persram, and  
Véronique Pin-Fat



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# Foreword

*R. B. J. Walker*

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It is difficult to think of an account of modern politics that does not acknowledge an unavoidable relationship, a tension, or even a contradiction between claims about sovereignty and claims about subjectivity. The relationship is unavoidable because modern accounts of sovereign states and modern accounts of individual subjects are both precisely modern: both are crucial dimensions of the forms of cultural and political identity established in early modern Europe. It is also unavoidable because the relationship has been so obviously problematic, so clearly the source of the most difficult conceptual and practical dilemmas of modern politics. Indeed, modern politics might even be defined in terms of the multiplicity of struggles to establish an appropriate grounding for this relationship, and to refine and restructure it in response to all the demands and pressures of modernization and internationalization that have ensued since the early moderns managed to get a clear sense of what was at stake in the massive transformations of their age.

Sovereignty, of course, emerged as an expression of a new understanding of the character and location of legitimate authority, one that explicitly, even if rather ambiguously, challenged the transcendental authority of Christianity and the hierarchical orders of feudalism and empire. It expressed and legitimized a new form of political community extending in territorial space and separated from other communities also extending in other territorial spaces. Although the shift was long, complicated, and violent, and although it involved a reworking of established principles quite as much as a radical challenge to them, claims about the sovereignty of states enabled the early modern Europeans to establish the broad outlines of a recognizably modern political discourse. By the mid-seventeenth century, a Hobbes could articulate his paradigmatic account of the necessities of a sovereign authority in a way that more or less laid out the scope and limits of the modern state, opening up all the questions about governance, con-

sent, representation, liberty, ideology, law, and so on that we now understand to have been taken up by the illustrious canon of modern political thinkers from Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, and Mill onward. And not the least crucial condition under which Hobbes was able to articulate the necessities of such a sovereign authority was his stunningly simple assertion that the proper subject of politics, and the most basic component of the “state of nature,” was the free and equal individual, a character that had once been cast in Aristotelian traditions as, quite literally, an idiot, an unpolitical being. Like the sovereign state, this new modern subject (also framed in a language of spatial separations, of self and other, self and world, and thus as a profound challenge to the prevailing subordinations of rank, status, and quality) has come to seem entirely natural, inevitable, even as the apogee of all modern desires and possibilities.

The new modern world of spatially separated sovereigns and subjects having been constituted, the great problem became that of working out how it could be put back together again—how individual and collective, public and private, state sovereignty and popular sovereignty, and so on, could be reconciled. Hence all our conventional stories about the social contract; about nationalism, liberalism, and socialism; about public and private, state and civil society; about rights, representations, and democratizations. These are the stories of the great successes of modern politics, of the ways in which we have managed to reconcile our claims to be both free autonomous individual/collective subjects and yet also subject to the ultimate authority of that sovereign that expresses our true subjectivity. These stories present many variations on a theme. The Hobbesian problem of reconciling individual freedom with absolute authority through an account of liberty under the law has often shifted to problems of reconciling claims about state and nation, state and class, and state and minority/majority. Furthermore, the (Hobbesian) attempt to erect a law outside and above the individual to ensure compliance with sovereign authority has often shifted to a (Kantian) attempt to internalize the law of reason, to develop the autonomous rationality, the mature personality realizable within each individual so that it might act in accordance with some universal moral norm. Conceptions of both sovereignty and subjectivity have been transformed in all those ways that now make the paradigmatic formulations of the early modern era seem so archaic. Still, the relation between them remains at the core of modern political thought and practice, and it would be difficult to take seriously any account of modern politics that did not rest on some more or less coherent account of what this relationship should be.

In this context, the analysis of contemporary politics confronts two closely related problems. It is the convergence of these two problems, these two aspects of a broad challenge to the relationships established between

sovereignty and subjectivity over the past three or four centuries, that provides the setting for the chapters in this book.

First, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain many, if not most, of the conventional accounts of what the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity should be. The notion that one can counterpose a unitary subject, whether an individual or a collectivity, to a unitary sovereign state has frequently come to seem radically at odds with the multiplicities, fragmentations, overlappings, and contingencies of so many contemporary claims to political subjectivity. Theologies, genders, ecologies, markets, corporations, criminals, cultures, and movements have all served, in some circumstances and in contradictory ways, to undermine any notion of order that might make sense to a Hobbes or a Kant. Moreover, the sense of disorder they have enabled bears little resemblance to an anarchic struggle between liberal individuals in some state of nature; however it may be characterized, the contemporary “politics of difference” is certainly not a celebration of a proto-market society.

Second, many of the most difficult problems posed by the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity occur less in the context of those spaces of political action within the modern state than in relation to realms conventionally delegated to the theorists of political life outside the modern state, the theorists of international relations. The notion that we live in a world organized within and between sovereign states has begun to seem more simple-minded than ever. Questions about what it might mean to express some form of subjectivity, and legitimate authority, in relation to, say, the global articulation of production, information, or the circulation of capital; the dynamics of transborder ecosystems or cultural practices; or claims about global human rights, global governance, cosmopolitan citizenship, regional integration, or transnational regimes are not always easily answered in terms of discourses refined in relation to unitary communities living within sovereign states.

To get some sense of what is at stake here, it is helpful to remember that although the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity is at the heart of any reading of modern politics within the modern state, it is almost impossible to imagine it having any significance at all for any self-respecting theorist of international relations. To begin with, given that questions about subjectivity are usually posed in relation to the category of the singular individual, and that so much of the analysis of international relations emphasizes the structural determinations of a states system or a national interest in which individual actions can seem marginal at best, it is not difficult to understand the view that questions about subjectivity are marginal as well. More crucially, perhaps, this view is reinforced by the rigid demarcation between various “levels of analysis” by which the most influential

theoretical traditions have divided up the world of international relations: they do so not in terms of the relationship between politics inside and outside sovereign states but in terms of a hierarchy of, in order of priority, the determinations of the states system, the actions of states, and the actions of individuals (or at least the consequences of some sort of "human nature" understood mainly in terms of individual psychologies).

This formalized insistence on the more or less irrelevance of the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity in the realm of international relations is simply the consequence of the claim, crucial to the constitution of modern politics, that sovereignty and subjectivity can be reconciled only inside the sovereign state. But the resurgence of interest in the proper relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity now occurs increasingly in contexts in which this spatial delineation of distinct realms inside and outside the modern state makes less and less sense, whether in relation to empirical tendencies or to normative aspirations. Many political theorists have become lulled into thinking that most of the puzzles of a modern politics strung between the claims of subjectivity and those of sovereignty have been more or less worked out, at least in principle. Yet contemporary politics seems to be characterized by struggles in which this relationship is increasingly and disconcertingly problematic. Theorists of international relations have become used to thinking that nothing could be more irrelevant than questions about the relation between subjectivity and whatever goes on between states. Yet contemporary politics seems to be characterized by struggles in which questions about sovereignty and subjectivity have clearly spilled over into spatiotemporal realms that seem to defy any easy division between a politics inside and mere relations outside.

Many currents of thought and practice have insisted that the claims of modern sovereignty are insufficient to answer all questions about the character and location of political authority in contemporary circumstances. These currents have tended to refer to grand historical and structural forces, to global economies, for example, or new technologies bringing spatiotemporal compression on many dimensions. Many currents of thought and practice have also insisted that the claims of modern subjectivity are insufficient to answer all questions about personal and collective identities. They have tended to refer to quite different phenomena—to psychologies, aesthetic practices, or philosophical traditions. Such phenomena are easily made to seem entirely remote from the necessities of politics, and especially from the hard world of international relations. At most, many have claimed, such phenomena might be interesting insofar as they could explain how individual "personalities," "ideas," or "perceptions" can sometimes influence the making of foreign policy.

Given the fluidity of all those boundaries that the early moderns taught us to construct as sharp lines between self and other, this state and that

state, it is not surprising that these long-standing but largely distinct currents of thought and practice have begun to converge in the contemporary literature. They converge, as this book shows, not as a reenactment of banal psychologisms but as a consequence of contemporary reengagements with all those hard questions about who we are and what we can be that Hobbes and his successors thought had been answered once and for all in the twin absolutes of a unitary sovereignty and a unitary individual.

These questions, of course, are daunting. The difficulty of raising them in the context of a discipline of international relations that still thrives on the most caricatured accounts of what the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity is supposed to be, and dares to claim a mantle of political realism or of scientific objectivity while doing so, is especially not to be underestimated. In this context, even raising questions about subjectivity, such as the insistence that sovereignty is a highly complex and variable practice rather than just an inert constitutional principle, is a considerable achievement. Yet, given that modern politics was initially constituted on the basis of a specific account of the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity, and that the subsequent development of modern politics has required the constant and strenuously contested renegotiation of this relationship, it is not surprising that so many contemporary scholars insist, as here, on the impossibility of any serious engagement with world politics without coming to terms with what such renegotiations could possibly now mean.

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—*The Editors*

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# The Subject of the Political

Jenny Edkins & Véronique Pin-Fat

*Women among themselves begin by laughing.*

—Luce Irigaray

“Subjectivity” has become a key notion in recent attempts to retheorize the political, particularly those deriving from feminist, poststructuralist, deconstructivist, or psychoanalytic thought. The picture of the rational Cartesian subject and the search for certainty is problematized. Such questionings of the subject and subjectivity are pursued far beyond that which is attempted by an “identity” problematic. Although “identity” is often seen as intersubjectively produced or, in other words, formed through social interaction, what is meant by this is sometimes no more than that a preexisting (but “uncultured” or prelinguistic) subject is socialized into particular cultural settings. In this view, identity then becomes something the subject acquires—and a subject may have many different identities, shifting from one to another either in the course of time or in relation to the different social groups or positions among which the subject may move.

In contrast, the postmodern subject is not only fragmented but irretrievably split. It is not just that the subject has to face a difficult and unsettling choice of a variety of subject-positions. In poststructuralist thought, the sovereign individual of phallogocentrism becomes the incomplete, impossible subject, and “sovereignty” is brought into question. There are no settled identities; the subject never achieves the completion or wholeness toward which it strives. It remains haunted by that which has to be excluded for subjectivity to be constituted in the first place. This subject has no respect for sovereignty or its linearities: that which is placed on the outside—the other—turns out to be on the inside after all. In the process, time itself is distorted. In this picture, the subject is always in the process of being constituted; there is no point at which, however briefly, the performance is finished. In some sense the subject does not exist: there is no present time in which that existence could take place in this looking-glass world. The subject only ever *will have been*.

We want to suggest that this notion of the subject involves a reexamination of what the political might be. The more fixed, normalized subject of modernity can be seen as assenting to political structures that are formed separately, once the subjects themselves exist. What we will argue is that retheorizing the subject implies opening up questions of the political and interrogating the role of sovereignty in particular. The relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity is complex. These two provocative notions overlap and are intertwined, returning to embrace and include each other, in ways that this introductory chapter and the rest of the book will explore, tease out, and eventually challenge. This challenge is long overdue, because the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity is an intensely political one. The inscription of particular forms of subjectivity produces and legitimizes the political arrangements of sovereignty. What is more important, the residues of this process of writing are erased, giving the appearance of already existing entities or objects and obliterating the production and operation of power. This inscription, or picture, holds us captive: as Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests, we think that we are “tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and [we are] merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.”<sup>1</sup>

The first part of the book examines how this inscription takes place through the manipulation of desire. It explores three notions of performativity (*coup de force*, masquerade, and act/impersonation) as processes that replay and reiterate sovereignty in different ways and for different (political) purposes. The second section of the book looks at how sovereignty can be subverted and challenged and yet reinscribe itself. The hybridization of identity, for example, does not displace purity but rather rewrites it. In the third section, the book returns to address the question that we explore in a preliminary way in this chapter: is there any alternative to the politics of sovereignty? It offers some openings toward a space where we might begin to locate another politics, a politics that does not evoke sovereignty. This involves another notion of the political.<sup>2</sup>

In the first part of this introductory chapter, we examine in more detail the move beyond the socialized subject. It is this move that enables us to explore how subjectivity and the social are inseparable and how this, it might be argued, implicates sovereignty. We trace the decentering of the Cartesian subject through a series of moves that pose subjectivity as spoken by language as much as speaking it, as produced by social action as much as taking part in it, and as ruled by unconscious as much as conscious thought. Next we examine the constitution of subjectivity in more depth, noting in particular how this involves the positing of a social or symbolic order. How this symbolic order is constituted and by what exclusions leads us finally to an exploration of how sovereignty and subjectivity implicate each other.

Toward the end of this part of Chapter 1, before we outline the contribution subsequent chapters will make, we pursue the entanglement of sovereignty and subjectivity further and pose the question of whether there is an alternative to sovereignty. Does the political as such necessarily involve sovereignty as a nodal point, or can other signifiers take its place, leading to alternative structures of authority? More radically, perhaps, is it possible to talk of politics without the fixity such an authorizing concept imposes? We conclude by arguing that it is only without a "sovereign" that a rethinking of the political is possible.

### THE SUBJECT DECENTERED

The Cartesian subject was produced in response to a sense of loss and a search for certainty amid the confusion of a newly decentered post-Copernican world. The resolution of doubt for René Descartes was to be found in rational, conscious thought. Since then, as Richard Ashley reminds us, "modern discourse has invoked the heroic figure of reasoning man who is himself the origin of language, the maker of history, and the source of meaning in the world. . . . Reasoning man . . . is the modern *sovereign*."<sup>3</sup> The challenge to this notion of sovereign subjectivity has occurred through a series of decenterings that have successively loosened its anchorages in language, action, and thought. The first decentering contested the concept of language as no more than a medium for the expression of thought. Ferdinand de Saussure contended that rather than linguistic signs being produced by the allocation of names to preexisting objects, the association of signifier and signified that they embodied produced objects at the same time as naming them.<sup>4</sup> Language constituted the world in particular ways. More significantly for the present discussion, since signifier and signified were arbitrary, meaning arose only from the linguistic system as a whole, and words acquired their value through associations. Language as system, however, preexists, and hence is beyond the control of, the speaker. In addition, words spoken are not determined in their meaning, since meaning arises from associations that vary with the context and the listener.<sup>5</sup> In an important sense, then, we do not speak language; language speaks us.

The sense that language was out of control, and that thoughts could not be "expressed" as such, was only the first challenge. The next was to thought itself, with the notion of the unconscious.<sup>6</sup> If it was necessary to posit the existence of a realm of thinking that was not only unconscious (and hence inaccessible) but that operated in an entirely different manner from that of consciousness, then the picture of reason as central to subjectivity was shattered. The status of thought as originary was also contested by the view that social being precedes and to an extent at least determines

consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The whole edifice of philosophy and political thought was argued to be no more than a superstructure resting on the foundations of an economic base defined by its mode of production. Political ideas and aspirations were seen as reflecting and constrained by, rather than leading to, economic and social change. The subject was not in charge of history but subjected to (and by) historical processes.

After these several decenterings, what is left? The picture of the rational, conscious, autonomous individual has vanished. In its place, what we have is a subjectivity that is bound up with the social or symbolic order. The constitution of the subject and the social order seem to implicate each other. This leads to the picture of the poststructuralist subject as not only a decentered subject but an incomplete, impossible subject that only ever *will have been*.<sup>8</sup> How does this relate to our contention that subjectivity and sovereignty depend upon and contain each other and that this is a fiercely political relationship? Before we can address this question, we need to elaborate how the impossible, split subjectivities we describe are constituted, thus giving an account of how the social order is posited and how sovereignty as a nodal point is crucial in this process.

### *Subjectivity in Social Order*

As we have seen, pictures are beguiling: they hold us captive. The certainty they offer bewitches our desire. We seek to convince ourselves of the existence of “reality” by trying to trace the outline of objects over and over again. As Wittgenstein points out, this is a trick of our language. We appear to be dealing with the essence of a real object, but what we are doing is tracing the frame through which we see it. In the case of the subject and subjectivity, something similar occurs. From a Lacanian perspective, the human subject is condemned to endlessly search for an imaginary wholeness or unity that it will never attain. This search can be traced to the imaginary relationship between the individual and its surroundings, which is inaugurated in the mirror stage. It is at this stage that the (mis)recognition of the self as autonomous agent occurs. Later, the subject is interpellated into the social or symbolic order through a process that takes place in terms of language but involves a similar (mis)recognition. This interpellation, or hailing, constitutes the subject at the level of the symbolic: the subject becomes that which occupies a certain place—as citizen, consumer, intellectual—in the social order. The role of desire in this process is crucial, but this desire takes the form of a questioning of the desire of the Other, the social order. The subject seeks a place in the social, a place that will confirm its existence as subject. It does this by asking what the social order wants of it, what is required. In other words, “The original question of

desire is not directly 'What do I want?' but 'what do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?'"<sup>9</sup>

A particular, nonlinear notion of time is involved in these processes. At both the imaginary and the symbolic level, the process operates retroactively. As Jacques Lacan describes it:

What constitutes me as subject is my question. In order to be recognised by the other, I utter what *was* only in view of what *will be*. In order to find him, I call him by a name he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me. . . . I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realised in my history is not the past definite of what *was*, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what *has been* in what I am, but the future anterior of what I *shall have been* for what I am in the process of becoming.<sup>10</sup>

This question from the subject constitutes it as subject by positing the existence of a social or symbolic order. The subject poses the question: what does the symbolic order want of me? The subject then *becomes* the object of the desire of the Other—the symbolic order. In other words, the subject is constituted as that which (it appears) answers the desire of the Other—it becomes what (it supposes) the Other wanted. It answers to a "lack" in the Other. It does this by taking on or assuming certain mandates or roles—subject positions—within the symbolic order. However, this process is never complete, and the subject is faced with what Slavoj Žižek calls an unanswerable question of why he or she has a particular mandate, which is always contingent and, therefore, arbitrary. There is more to the subject than the role of citizen, consumer, or intellectual. As such, there is always a nonsymbolizable surplus. The subject remains split or fragmented since it is constituted around a fundamental impossibility.

What is crucial for our argument here is that subjectivity and the social order are constituted *together*, the social order being the frame within which subjectivities are placed. The social order only comes into existence by our positing it in advance, assuming that it already exists, and in doing this we are ourselves constituted as subjects. The next step in our argument is to explore further how (what we call) social reality is constituted; this will then enable us to make the connection between the social order and sovereignty.

### *Sovereignty and the Imposition of Meaning*

We have shown that the subject is of necessity incomplete, or impossible. It is always in process; it never fully comes to presence but is structured around a lack. This lack arises, first, from the gap between the real

and the imaginary in the mirror phase and then from the gap between the imaginary and the symbolic, or social, during interpellation. Like the subject, the symbolic, or social, order is similarly constituted around a lack, one that in this case appears as a constitutive antagonism.<sup>11</sup> This antagonism appears in a variety of guises in different social orders, but it is always there and cannot be removed. A society without antagonism cannot exist: social reality can never be complete or whole. However, for life to go on the lack must be concealed and the concealment hidden. This is accomplished by the production of social reality.

In order for what we call social reality to be constituted, meaning has to be imposed. This is achieved through the “master signifier,” a signifier that stands in the place of the constitutive lack or antagonism at the heart of the social order. Without such a signifier, the social order cannot constitute itself; the sliding of meaning cannot be arrested. This signifier is the embodiment of lack; it enables us to account for the gap between result and intention. The act of imposing meaning, halting the movement of free-floating signifiers, is an authoritative act, “a non-founded founding act of violence” that recalls the violence of the founding decision in the work of Jacques Derrida.<sup>12</sup> At this moment, the symbolic order comes into being, the decision is taken, and the law is founded. The violence that is implicated in this process then disappears: in the history of what happened, what was brought into being with this foundational act is narrated as always already inevitable. Once the decision has been taken, the moment of decision disappears, though not entirely without trace.

We are now in a position to suggest how sovereignty and subjectivity implicate each other. As we have seen, subjectivity can only exist, or rather, be constituted, in relation to a particular social or symbolic order. The social order itself is brought into existence, supposed or posited, in relation to a particular signifier, which covers the hole or lack in the social or symbolic order and provides a nodal point around which meaning is articulated. In modernity, one of the signifiers that performs this function is *sovereignty*. The concept of sovereignty is central to discourses of politics and the international. It informs conventional notions of what political power might be: the relationship between sovereign and subject within the absolutist kingdom, or the sovereignty of a government over the lives of its citizens in the modern nation-state. Sovereignty also plays a foundational role in discussions of international autonomy: the sovereign state is a bounded unit in the international system. This centrality testifies to its place as the master signifier around which a particular symbolic order is constituted.

“Sovereignty” as a master signifier is not free and autonomous here but stands implicated and embroiled in questions of “subjectivity.” The authority of the master signifier derives only from its position in the social order—which itself derives only from the subjection of the subjects that evoke it. It