

Sovereignities: Contemporary theory and practice

Raia Prokhovnik

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This is a formidably sophisticated work that makes a major contribution to the study of ‘the political’ – not just to the long-running debates on sovereignty. In fact, the point of the book is to argue that sovereignty is not cut-and-dried, as you might have thought, and as the cutters (legal theorists) and driers (IR realists) would like. Rather Prokhovnik argues that it has a ‘plurality of conceptualisations’ and is open currently ‘to positive reconceptualisation’ (p. 1). The last chapter takes up the challenge in a theoretically complex and historically rich discussion of how a particular ‘complex confederal’ reconceptualization of sovereignty would serve the EU better than the proto-constitutionalism that is faltering so miserably at present (pp. 202–206).

One of the many impressive things about Prokhovnik’s discussion is the smooth and seamless integration of the best new work in sovereignty-studies from IR theory (Bartelson, Huysmans, Rob Walker) with mainstream and specifically European theory (Bellamy, Pagden, Neil Walker) via ‘classical’ sources (particularly Spinoza) and ‘modern greats’ (such as Kelsen, Raphael, Schmitt, Mouffe and Connolly, to name but a few). The post-structuralist philosophical sophistication is lightly handled – sovereignty is both political and unpolitical, a ‘mystery’ rather than a flat contradiction; metaphors that come to constitute an object, then disappear as metaphors. We do not pause unduly on these matters.

On Prokhovnik’s reconceptualization, then, sovereignty is well beyond ‘ruler sovereignty’ and is instead a master conception, necessarily outside politics (which itself has contested and contingent boundaries), and it functions as the main way of setting ‘the sphere and condition of politics itself’ (p. 150). Although the arguments and implications are detailed and complex, and therefore not easily summarized in a review, I can say that the burden of the book is that sovereignty has political dimensions that are outside the usual frames of constitutional and international law and conventional/realist IR theory (p. 163). Prokhovnik’s claim is that these political dimensions – anything from social norms to abstract undecidability – can be fruitfully interrogated within political theory and the philosophically sympathetic realms of IR in order to draw out the past forms and future potential of rethinking sovereignty.

To some extent, though, the discussion has the defects of its virtues. It is a phenomenal literature review, but I am slightly tired of watching the argument unfold through quotation and paraphrase. I would rather have an argument



appear in an author-driven way, and then look to the notes to see where debts are due, and supportive quotations marshalled. Also, there is apparently going to be a companion volume, identified as Prokhovnik (2008), *Sovereignty: History and Theory*, to which the reader is referred. But I am rather in the dark how exactly this other volume is going to work, and what enlightenment I missed in the present discussion by not having it with me yet. My guess is that it will be a more focused and detailed critique of specific landmark authors in the sovereignty story, whereas the present volume presents an independent argument, and indeed an important one about the nature of the beast itself.

There are relatively few illustrative examples along the way in the book's four initial chapters, where the abstract work is done. But as different conceptualizations of sovereignty, and a myriad of detailed theories whirl by, I confess I longed for some colourful exemplifications amid the finely tuned philosophy and highly nuanced positioning.

The 'Sovereignty in Europe', Chapter 5 (bracketed off in a self-contained 'Practice' section) is built on a colourful architectural metaphor: 'Less is more'. Prokhovnik has written an excellent excursus on the phrase (pp. 192–194), taking in notable architects by name and working through exactly why architecture, in the first place, and 'less is more', in the second place, are suited to expounding her reconceptualization of sovereignty. She moves on to detail the EU's current fumbblings over constitutionalism, and how this 'post-state' is seeking to define itself *vis-à-vis* its member states, its citizens, nation-states, international bodies, great powers, the UN and so on. Prokhovnik shows how not to do this – and how to do it better – making clear the trade-offs. Combining this with a scholarly discussion of theory and practice in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century United Provinces of The Netherlands, the discussion is really memorable. Sadly, though, I got little sense of exactly which political constituencies and powers could rally to the 'less-is-more', complex confederalism that Prokhovnik formulates and defends so persuasively, given current political investments in thinking of sovereignty only in discourses that are state-centric and constitution-centric.

Prokhovnik's efforts to shift this impasse are themselves testaments to the power of 'the political'. As she says, 'Starting with politics makes sovereignty look much more comprehensible' (p. 155).

Reference

Prokhovnik, R. (2008) *Sovereignty: History and Theory*. Exeter Imprint Academic.

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