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### The Topology of Sovereignty

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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

# The Topology of Sovereignty

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N. Caspersen (2012). *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System*. Cambridge: Polity, 210 pages. ISBN 978-07456-5342-6 Hbk.; ISBN 978-0-7456-5343 Pbk.

D. Natali (2010). *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 158 pages. ISBN 978-0-8156-3217-7 Hbk.; ISBN 978-0-8156-3217-7 Pbk.

T. Risse (ed.) (2011). *Governance Without a State? Policies and Politics in Areas of Limited Statehood*. New York: Columbia University Press, 297 pages. ISBN 978-0-231-15120-7 Hbk.; ISBN 978-0231-52187-1 Ebk.

The dust-jacket of the edited collection by Thomas Risse bears the word state crossed out by a diagonal line; in the style of placing words ‘under erasure’ that peppered some writings by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. There is no explicit reference to Derrida’s writing strategy in any of the chapters in this book. But they negotiate some of the issues that Derrida wrestled with (metaphysics of presence and absence, categories and binaries).

The collection has emerged from a research project, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) at the Freie Universität Berlin (and partners elsewhere in Germany and at the European University Institute in Florence). This gives it coherence – set out in an opening chapter by the editor. Risse clarifies that the concept of ‘limited statehood’, ‘needs to be strictly distinguished from the way in which notions of “fragile,” “failing” or “failed” statehood are used’ (p. 3). He is wary of the way that such notions place the (Western) state as strong, which becomes a

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*norm* against which states elsewhere are judged. This produces an analytical hierarchy. Risse argues against this, pointing out, that for example,

limited sovereignty is by no means confined to the developing world. For example, New Orleans right after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 constituted an area of limited statehood in the sense that U.S. authorities were unable to enforce decisions and to uphold the monopoly over the means of violence for a short period of time. (p. 5)

So this leads to a key point, which can usefully serve as an axiom for wider discussion:

The social science debate on governance implicitly or explicitly remains wedded to an ideal type of modern statehood – with full domestic sovereignty . . . . From a global as well as a historical perspective, however, the modern Western nation-state constitutes the exception rather than the rule. (p. 28)

Having recognised this however, the book only goes so far in shaking up the hierarchy that places Western states as the ideal type. Others have pushed the argument further, pointing out for example, that it reproduces colonial hierarchies between civilised and uncivilised and/or misrecognises the way that variations in forms of sovereignty and the making of territory in places described as limited sovereignties are produced out of global processes and flows, rather than being a straightforward disconnection from them.<sup>1</sup> The first chapter on ‘Governance and Colonial Rule’ probably does the most to interrogate colonial issues and consider their legacies. In this Sebastian Conrad and Marion Strange cite a valuable literature from history and postcolonial studies. Amongst other chapters meriting close reading are ‘New Modes of Security: The Violent Making and Unmaking of Governance in War-Torn Areas of Limited Statehood’, where Sven Chojnacki and Zeljko Branovic argue that “in contrast to the conventional wisdom, we assume, first, that security can in fact be provided without the state or even its rudimentary structures’ (p. 89). They consider different aspects of security (whose security?) and agents involved in its making. In so doing, their chapter touches on the already large literature on Private Military Companies (PMCs). However, what struck me as more original was their account of markets for security. An encounter between the dismal science and critical work on security, territory and sovereignty becomes a compelling account of how “the state apparatus [in all its variety and ‘limits’] and . . . international recognition” become resources that firms, armed groups, militias and insurgents negotiate: “As highly profitable systems these markets may achieve stability for certain periods of time.” (p. 110). Although it is focused on ‘developing countries’ cases, the chapter by Henrik Enderlein, Laura von

Daniels and Christoph Trebesch on ‘Governance in Sovereign Debt Crises: Analyzing Creditor-Debtor Interactions’ is also rewarding. Yet the issues it considers are much broader than its focus. Between the 1980s and the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, debt and sovereignty were most often discussed with reference to the South. However, it is worth recalling that some East European communist states became indebted to Western banks and financial institutions in the 1980s. In some cases, notably Poland and Yugoslavia, this had big consequences for political and economic life. The relationship of this to limited sovereignty is complex however. The profound limitations on sovereignty (the so-called Brezhnev doctrine) in the Eastern bloc were altered by other – different kinds of limits – that came with indebtedness to Western institutions. Today, European integration, NATO and complex financial shenanigans in the Euro zone reconfigure forms and limits to sovereignty in Europe. I am unsure how well this complexity can be captured by reference only to limits or degrees of sovereignty. The extreme complexity and variations in forms and modes of sovereignty seem more than just shades of gray. An appropriate way to think of this might be to consider layers or topologies<sup>2</sup> of sovereignty that fold and stretch in different directions (producing territory) as well as being variegated. This connects with the historical patterns that Conrad and Strange’s chapter considers and that also inform the final chapter in *Governance Without a State?* Many others have excavated these historical geographies of sovereignty/territory. Notably, Lauren Benton<sup>3</sup> points out:

Empires did not cover space evenly but composed a fabric that was full of holes, stitched together out of pieces, a tangle of strings . . . spaces were politically fragmented; legally differentiated; and encased in an irregular, porous, and sometimes undefined borders. Although empires did lay claim to vast stretches of territory, the nature of such claims was tempered by control that was exercised mainly over narrow bands, or corridors, and over enclaves and irregular zones around them.

She notes a wealth of other historical work investigating different cases and aspects of the history of sovereignty, “as a contingent and stubbornly incomplete process” (p. 4).

Benton goes on to consider a variety of sovereign forms that accompanied Empire and state formation: such as the princely states within British India, or the Indian and other territories incorporated into the United States, Manchukuo (established by the Japanese in 1930s Manchuria), the Berlin and Rome-sponsored Croatian state from 1941 until its reincorporation into Yugoslavia in 1945, as well as places like Panama and Guam after the arrival of American imperium. It might be thought that the extraordinary complexity and density of debates and practices relating to sovereignty that historians like Benton document, have been compressed since 1945, leaving such

scattered anomalies as Monaco and the Vatican city, and a handful of dependencies (such as the Isle of Man, Gibraltar or Curaçao) as exceptions. Nina Caspersen's book however focuses on recent and contemporary examples of unrecognised states. After some brief historical reflections (that would have benefited from more depth and engagement with the literatures and cases surveyed by Benton), she traces the paths by which recent and contemporary examples of statehood without recognition (or, in some cases with very limited recognition by other states) have emerged. The first is secessionist warfare and state breakdown. Prior status is a factor, especially where they were autonomous regions or part of federal structures or under a different colonial jurisdiction. She then examines their survival strategies, involving territorial control, patronage and relationships to diasporas. To what extent should the examples<sup>4</sup> she cites be regarded as a new type of sovereignty? Caspersen acknowledges that there are many precedents, but she judges that the norms that have emerged since 1945 governing 'self-determination' further constrain their prospects. Yet, her book also indicates the continuities or parallels and other classic work on sovereignty that she cites has pointed to the variety of sovereign arrangements (co)existing. Krasner, for example, has noted how the inter-state system 'has not pushed out alternative strategies, but rather has lived with them'.<sup>5</sup>

Denise Natali's book 'focuses on external factors, and particularly foreign aid, as providing the necessary foundation to create and sustain Kurdish quasi-statehood'.<sup>6</sup> Although they cite some common literature (and Natali is also referenced by Caspersen), the quasi-state in Iraqi Kurdistan is bolstered by the federalisation of Iraq after the American-led invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Hence Natali notes how, whereas the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was unrecognised in the years when it was first established (after the 1990–91 Gulf War) in the context of a weakened and embattled regime in Baghdad, the KRG was able to tax trade across the Turkish and Iranian borders – generating a source of revenue, that was supplemented by foreign NGOs, American aid and UN agencies. The 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq yielded much violence and uncertainty. However, it also

offered new forms of external patronage and international support to the Kurdish quasi-state, which enhanced its legitimacy and leverage in a federal Iraq . . . the 2005 Iraqi constitution provided the KRG with recognition, rights, and revenues as a distinct political entity . . . to control its own police and security forces; and to manage natural resources in the region, including rights to exploit and administer certain petroleum fields . . .<sup>7</sup>

In 2006, the two rival Kurdish nationalist parties merged the areas they governed into a single administration. Although there are unresolved border

demarcation issues between the KRG and the rest of Iraq, and disputes about oil revenues with Baghdad, the KRG is very visible within its area of jurisdiction and projects itself internationally (<http://www.krg.org>). However there is little immediate prospect of a formal secession and, as Natali notes, Ankara refuses to use the term KRG, preferring instead 'the local administration in northern Iraq'. Moreover no neighbouring country or outside power wishes to see this quasi-state become a formal state, with all the (often contested) issues of recognition that have arisen with other secessions or new states elsewhere. Whilst the extent of autonomy and exact borders of the KRG are evolving, its experiment in quasi-sovereignty seems likely to endure and Natali's book will be a valuable reference point for those seeking an account of the KRG or to compare and contrast it with other cases of autonomy, quasi- or multiple-statehood. The KRG may also become a model or point of reference for Kurdish movements contesting Ankara, Damascus and Tehran and suggests new ways of crafting citizenship, state and governance.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the three books are testimony to the political creativity that has resulted in a wide variety of sovereign practices. They do not exhaust the repertoire (such as governments in exile) whose range exceeds our lexicon and concepts. Moreover, sovereignty is often hard to disentangle<sup>9</sup> from other equally complex issues: nationalism, territory, governmentality, borders and imperialism. Hence the three books reviewed here are useful, but they merely scratch the surfaces of sovereign processes that demand meticulous, critical and comparative scrutiny.

## NOTES

1. For example: P. Bilgin and A. D. Morton, 'Historicising Representations of 'Failed States': Beyond the cold-War Annexation of the Social Sciences?', *Third World Quarterly* 23/1 (2002) pp. 55–80; E. Berg and E. Kuusk, 'What Makes Sovereignty a Relative Concept? Empirical Approaches to International Society', *Political Geography* 29/1 (2010) pp. 40–49; J. D. Sidaway, 'Sovereign Excesses? Portraying Postcolonial Sovereigntyscapes', *Political Geography* 22/2 (2003) pp. 157–178; and the review by F. McConnell 'Sovereignty', in K. Dodds, M. Kuus, and J. Sharp (eds.), *The Ashgate Companion to Critical Geopolitics* (Farnham: Ashgate) pp. 109–128.

2. My reference to topologies is partly inspired by Stuart Elden's call to more carefully consider the three-dimensions of territory, geopolitics and sovereignty; S. Elden, 'Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power', *Political Geography* 34 (2013) pp. 35–51. However the term 'sovereign topology' is from David Briggs account of 'Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta' where he argues that "even well into the twentieth century, *miền tây* (Cochinchina's western, or delta region) was not typically represented as a sovereign region but as a sovereign topology, one measured by hydrographic engineers . . . and then patrolled by gunboats and police"; D. Briggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press 2010).

3. L. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires 1400-1900* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2010) p. 2.

4. In a table on page 12 of *Unrecognized States*, Casperson lists the following cases since 1991: Abkhazia, Bougainville, Chechnya, Eritrea, Gaguazia, Kurdish Autonomous Region, Montenegro, Nagorno Karabakh, Republika Srpska, Republika Srpska Krajina, Somaliland, South Ossetia, Tamil Eelam, Transnistria, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. She also lists two 'borderline cases': Kosovo, Taiwan.

5. Cited on p. 119.

6. Natali, p. xiv.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

8. This argument is developed in C. Houston, *Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves* (Oxford: Berg 2008). See too the richly suggestive feminist interpretation of the KRG's sovereignty tactics by D. E. King 'The Personal is the Patrilineal: *Namus* as Sovereignty'. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15 (2008) pp. 317–342.

9. I have adapted the wording here from the introduction to the stimulating study of the Japanese puppet state of Manchuko by P. Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham MA: Rowman and Littlefield 2003).