

***Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of
Contemporary International Relations***

Edited by Christopher J. Bickerton,
Philip Cunliffe, and Alexander Gourevitch

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A compendium of essays, *Politics without Sovereignty* posits an “unholy alliance” of scholars, activists, and political leaders that is undermining the sovereign state as the fundamental unit of analysis in international relations. While the same conclusion is echoed in the political science literature, the essays skillfully critique the characterization of this process as one that is progressive or simply benign. Arguing forcefully against a world in which ultimate political authority no longer inheres in the sovereign state, *Politics without Sovereignty* injects a healthy dose of skepticism into the debate surrounding the future of the international system.

The book advances two central claims. First, the decline of sovereignty is a political rather than a material phenomenon. Second, sovereignty is essential if citizens are to hold political leaders accountable for their exercise of power. The essays in this volume,

written by the editors and outside contributors, challenge political actors to rethink the wisdom of projects ranging from international law to European integration.

In his chapter “Sovereignty and the Politics of Responsibility,” Philip Cunliffe of King’s College, London criticizes the doctrine that a state forfeits its sovereignty if it fails to satisfy the basic needs of its citizens. The revocation of sovereignty by the international community implies that sovereign power is not supreme and thus cannot be held accountable. Along the same lines, Christopher J. Bickerton of Oxford University contends that contemporary state-building efforts are fraught with difficulties; the influence of Western donors and non-state actors makes the elected officials of developing countries less responsible to their respective constituents.

But sovereignty is diminishing not only in

traditionally weak states. The chapter written by Columbia University's Alex Gourevitch, "Natural Insecurities: The New Politics of the American National Interest," broadens the book's assertions by illustrating that the United States no longer pursues its national interest in the manner prescribed by realism. Eschewing neoconservative explanations for what he views as U.S. retrenchment from the height of its global leadership, Gourevitch observes that, since the end of the Cold War, "all wars have become wars of choice" (71). Absent a sense of necessity, policymakers have trouble sustaining public support for proactive diplomatic endeavors. The result is a "crisis-driven foreign policy" that is "deeply undemocratic" (72).

Taken together, these trends presage a new global order, wherein: "Instead of peoples and their governments shaping the ebb and flow of international politics, high-level agreements and conventions become the prime driver of international relations" (28). Such conventions replace local considerations of interests with "universal" notions of ethics as the basis of politics. A later essay, alluding to Hungarian dissident George Konrad, calls this phenomenon "anti-politics" (153). The term might well be wielded by

the book as a whole: far from generating a more progressive politics, sovereignty's decline has undermined rational choice and therefore threatens to depoliticize politics itself.

The book concludes with the transcript of a roundtable discussion that took place at Columbia University in December 2005. Chaired by Gourevitch, the roundtable sought to answer the question "How should sovereignty be defended?" (187). Discussants included Columbia University professors Michael Doyle and Jack L. Snyder. In his remarks, Doyle emphasizes the role of sovereignty in facilitating identity, security, and economic productivity. Snyder suggests that "the only effective institution for guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, and human rights is a well-ordered state" (198).

Politics without Sovereignty stands for the proposition that sovereignty is inseparable from the clear and accountable mediation of power. As such, it mounts a direct challenge to the internationalist views espoused by many participants in the preceding "Sovereignty Exchange." At the very least, this timely volume is a compelling defense of what the state alone has to offer.