



## **SPECIAL SECTION: SOVEREIGNTY**

### **Introduction**

#### **Sovereignty and Social Contestation— Between Violence and Alternative Sociocultural Orders**

*Martijn Oosterbaan and Wil G. Pansters*

In the past decade, the concept of sovereignty has swiftly risen in popularity within anthropological circles, especially in relation to violence in postcolonial and post-authoritarian societies (Das and Poole 2004). The rationale of this section is rooted in the aspiration to build on and further develop anthropological understandings of conflict and violence centered on the notion of sovereignty. Whereas the contributors to the section are indebted to theoretical approaches influenced by the writings of Agamben (1998, 2005), they also present analytic advantages and shortcomings. For instance, a recent critique of Agamben's notion of sovereignty—and of many of his followers—is that it reproduces totalitarian notions of modern politics that cannot account for the historical existence of “ordered” communities “free from subjection, and ... free from subjecting others” (Jennings 2011: 43).

The section brings together five authors who critically engage anthropological theorizing on sovereignty to continue the academic conversation about its conceptual possibilities and limitations and to explore elements hitherto understudied. Although sovereignty is about the power to decide matters of life and death with impunity (cf. Agamben 1998, 2005; Buur 2005; Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Sieder 2011), the authors featured in this section understand sovereignty in a more comprehensive manner, which includes the power to govern the self and others, the constitution of order and security, the ability to discipline and punish, as well as the authority to decide on inclusion and exclusion from communities.

Research has shown that *de facto* (localized) sovereignties have distinctive ways of symbolizing and justifying authority, built on “ways of life” and culturally specific understandings of status, hierarchy, distribution of goods, wealth, and means of coercion (Humphrey 2004). However, questions remain about how exactly this plays out in similar yet different sociocultural contexts and about the conceptual implications. This section aspires to engage with these questions. The articles in this section, which were originally presented at an international seminar at Utrecht University in April 2014, aim to go beyond existing approaches of sovereignty by focusing not only on disruptive and violent forms of sovereign bodies but also on emergent (nonviolent) forms of sovereignty. Anthropological research has examined the sovereignty claims of guerrilla and paramilitary organizations, private police, and security companies, but has also studied the constitution of sovereign bodies based on ethnic, religious, and indigenous identities intent



on constructing nonviolent orders. The articles brought together here demonstrate that these different orders condition each other and are the outcome of a complex interplay between sovereignty and social contestation.

The first two articles of the section provide a historical-theoretical perspective on the relations between different political groups and institutions that claim sovereignty in a particular subnational space. The articles of Finn Stepputat and Wil G. Pansters show the great benefits of what might be called a *moyenne-durée* perspective on sovereign orders. Such a perspective brings to light how, in a given context, new sociopolitical imaginations can emerge after ruptures in the political order, and how such imaginations often build on existing institutions, prefiguring emergent political bodies. The last three articles theorize sovereignty in more ethnographic-theoretical terms. Such an approach has the benefit of highlighting how sociopolitical imaginations are embodied and contested and how they relate to everyday life. In a way, Lars Buur's contribution bridges the first and second part of this section since it offers a detailed historical-theoretical exposé on the relation between sovereignty and social contestation in combination with a rich ethnographic description of the mechanisms of popular uprisings. The articles by Daniel M. Goldstein and Martijn Oosterbaan share a focus on the cultural-symbolic aspects of sovereignty. The former draws on detailed ethnographic fieldwork, offering a fascinating analysis of competing and overlapping practices of (private) policing.

Together with Thomas Blom Hansen, Finn Stepputat decisively contributed to the development of an anthropological perspective on Agamben's writings on sovereignty. In this section, Stepputat demonstrates the importance of "grounding" the different elements of sovereignty in a regional space and history. Building on his longitudinal research in the borderlands of Guatemala and Mexico, Stepputat shows that the political landscape of the region is formed by overlapping, partial, competing, and nested claims to sovereignty. He suggests the concept of "formations of sovereignty" as a way to speak about and understand the effects of the coexisting, multiple claims to sovereignty. In the next article, Wil G. Pansters studies the emergence of self-defense forces (*autodefensas*) in Michoacán (Mexico), in the context of the historical evolution of state and drug-trafficking relationships. Using anthropological theorizing about the relations between sovereignty, state-making, and (dis)ordering, an analysis of developments in Michoacán describes and explains the triangular dynamics of sovereignty-making between organized crime, the state, and armed citizens. Pansters concludes that all sovereignty-making is territorial and historical, as well as embedded in political, economic, and cultural identities. A theoretical and ethnographical examination of the complex interplay between sovereignty and social contestation constitutes the heart of the article authored by Lars Buur. Focusing on a series of (food) riots in Maputo (Mozambique), Buur analyzes the interaction between the collective, embodied effervescence at play in the riots and the historical, political structures that characterize Mozambique's political landscape. Rather than understanding riots as a form of "pure politics", Buur studies their relationships to the state-political legal order. This perspective brings to light how mobs and riots are coproduced by existing political orders anticipating certain favorable, though always unpredictable, outcomes. Buur proposes a model that allows us to acknowledge the "excess" at the heart of social contestation while simultaneously discerning the repertoires of "domestication" at work. In the next article, Daniel M. Goldstein studies the main marketplace of Cochabamba (Bolivia) and analyzes policing practices in relation to vendors legally recognized by the state and illegal street vendors. In a rich ethnographic report, Goldstein investigates how a private security company called the "Men in Black" operates within the market and behaves as a state-sanctioned authority. Goldstein's analysis stresses the performative dimension of the constitution of sovereignty and shows the different interactions between legality and illegality that are at the heart of different forms of sovereignty. Several elements of

the Buur and Goldstein contributions are also addressed in the last article of this section. In it Martijn Oosterbaan seeks to answer the question of why the comic figure Batman became a prominent character of two different groups that contest the Brazilian state: the militia Liga da Justiça (Justice League) in Rio de Janeiro and the protesters that took to the streets before the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The appearance of symbols from comic books in the context of contemporary sovereignty claims shows the important role of popular aesthetics in shaping such claims. To come to grips with this role, Oosterbaan proposes the notion of a “popular culture of sovereignty”. The latter connects to Goldstein’s study of the Bolivian private security firm Men in Black, which is styled on the 1997 Hollywood movie featuring extralegal policemen fighting extraterrestrial criminal aliens.

Taken together, the different articles in this section aim to provide readers with an understanding of how a broad and differentially operating spectrum of social, political, coercive, as well as cultural processes constitute the interplay between sovereignty, ordering, and social contestation.

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