

**Peter Gratton**

*The State of Sovereignty: Lessons from the Political Fictions of Modernity.*

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Peter Gratton's *State of Sovereignty* is a detailed assessment of contemporary European political philosophy. The title carries a double meaning: first, an assessment of the concept 'sovereignty' in contemporary philosophy; second, how sovereignty is politically enacted in the state today. Commentary dedicated to the former carries the bulk of the investigation, while concern over police forces, the administration of bare life, and the cruel edges of 'democratic freedom' – criticisms of the modern 'sovereign' state – motivate the whole. The main point Gratton seeks to impress upon the reader is the vitality and consistency of a thinking of sovereignty in Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. This tradition is then used to criticize the way sovereignty is thought of in Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt.

Gratton argues that sovereignty is always related in narrative form. Whether 'mythical' or 'historical', a story of sovereignty aims to relate the glory and power of either the sovereign individual or state, where sovereignty is conceived as a monadic and external self-sufficiency, a pure self-relation. The story form is a strategy that masks any historical contingency. Opposed to such tales is another class of narratives, 'counter-histories'. These are genealogies that unmask the operations of sovereign forms of power. The model therefore follows Foucault, with a focus on understanding the particularities of each historically specific form. Formalisation of the 'sovereign exception' is treated cautiously, as Gratton wants to avoid transposing a theological conception of sovereignty onto secular forms. Thus today's critique of the sovereign state is a continuation of the critique of the sovereign subject that has dominated much of 20th-century French philosophy.

We can read Gratton's linking of sovereignty to narrative as an examination of the historicity of sovereignty. Stories of sovereign power must time and again step out of history in justifying that power, claiming in the same move a power over history. In contrast, Gratton wishes to 'divide up' power, share it out amongst historical relations and forces, losing sovereignty in its historical contingency. Here Gratton provides a methodologically interesting reconciliation of a Derridean genealogy with his Foucaultian one.

The core of the book is formed by two chapters on Hannah Arendt, (Chapters 2 and 3) and a long chapter on Foucault (Ch. 4). These are bookended by two discussions of Derrida, early and late, and the whole book is posed in the wake of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is with Arendt and Foucault, however, that the book really gets going. Gratton draws the connections between their thinking on sovereignty. Foucault and Arendt share elements of a conception of bio-politics. Foucault's genealogy is of modern political forms; Arendt's is of the origin of politics itself. Both narratives speak of a sovereignty expressed through an administrative rule

over life's necessity. This is a discourse of economic security that forecloses, in Arendt's terms, a true politics.

Modern politics has mistakenly institutionalized categories taken from the sphere of a 'household,' with its master or ruler, and zoned out of existence the space of free action which no-one rules. Necessity and pointless production have come to dominate our politics, rather than the proper equal activity for which labour and production should create a space (72). So sovereignty for Arendt is a violent category mistake.

Arendt therefore seeks another *archē* of the political. Where sovereignty is self-authorising, the historicity of the non-sovereign act is its alignment with 'the fragility of human affairs' (82), an irretrievable background of words, actions, and relationships among the many. As a result, the *archē* is not a 'cause,' nor does it occur in the linearity of time. Arendt's phenomenological background is evident here. Further, the *archē* reworks *future* and *past*. The event of birth ('natality') is non-given, non-present, uncapturable (83). Gratton doesn't mention it, but Arendt's thinking of historicity is close to Derrida's. We recall that *archi*-writing possesses similar qualities, (non-present, non-linear, unrepresentable historicity), and is likewise intended to be an undoing of sovereignty (see 51–59).

Natality's historicity means that an action is always underdetermined. The web of human relations in which it is nestled and from which it is born means that while it carries a principle, its consequences are unforeseeable. It poses no sovereign seed of historicity that would surely play itself out. The actor is never alone but acts in concert, and thus does not retain a mastery over a project.

Gratton suggests that, despite never referencing Arendt, Foucault was a careful reader of the former, though he takes care not to make too much of this. Nonetheless, this is an important observation in opening up an avenue for future work on power. Moving past Foucault's methodological idiosyncracies, Gratton observes a late thinking of sovereignty in Foucault's work from his 1975–6 lectures onwards. Articulating this thinking is a real benefit to Foucault scholars, and to political philosophy more broadly.

Foucault's genealogies are the logical and methodological heart of Gratton's book. He urges a more refined reading of Foucault than one that sees him as a conventional historicist. Rather, there are 'genealogies in the multiple' (114). The point is to resist homogenising forms of power, not thinking it reductively, but leaving it in dispersion. This calls for a strategic logic, recognizing each *dispositif* [apparatus] of power in its particularity (118). However, despite the emphasis on their heterogeneity, Gratton also insists that these formations *are* sovereignty – *as* disciplinarity, *as* bio-power, *as* pastoral power – each functioning at their own level. 'The point is to think the very dynamism of power', what makes power powerful in its concrete deployment (119).

This is the basis for the thematic and methodological interest in 'counter-history' in *The State of Sovereignty*. 'There is no neutral point from which to converse about history; writing history is not exceptional to history itself' (134). If historiography can offer a counter-blow to

tales of sovereignty, then it must find its foothold and grip in some other force, perhaps a freedom and power beyond sovereignty.

Gratton highlights Foucault's descriptions of the apparatus of security. Here is the specificity of the modern neoliberal state. In the name of safety and security of populations, power is concerned with the administration of a given population's biological existence (151). Utility is paramount, as in Arendt. A demographic 'racism' is employed, differentiating groups for the purposes of defence, immunization, against threats whether internal or external. Racism, in the hands of the state, is a modern exercise of sovereignty (154), exercising its right over life, but no longer in a juridical function. The extreme of this is where the citizens themselves defend the security of the nation, with a power of life over each other through denunciation and informing (155).

Agamben, along with Schmitt, draws Gratton's critical fire. If Arendt, Foucault, and Derrida all aim to dismantle the myth of sovereignty, Agamben criticizes a certain sovereignty, but ultimately only in order to install a 'real' or 'true' sovereignty, 'a rather classic messianism' (178, and see also 165). This must be carefully distinguished from Derrida's *messianic* (187). In such a messianism, Agamben, far from offering a counter-history, claims to divine secret codes that have dominated history, codes that all previous philosophers have ignored or missed (174, 180). To claim this, as Gratton ably demonstrates, Agamben must force the historical archive to speak where it is silent time and again. Moreover, his messianism ends in a quietism with 'nothing left to say'. This results in a resigned conflation of *all* threats to the absolute worst (198).

One of the intentions in examining sovereignty has been whether or not it is able to think the force of social life *without* a sovereignty that would neither inaugurate life together, nor police it, nor again be the simple element to which it is reduced. Here would be a chance for the political state. In the course of the book, Gratton locates at least four such possibilities: Derrida's unconditional freedom without autonomy, Arendt's right to have rights, Foucault's genealogical truth-telling, and Rousseau's question of pardon.

Gratton takes a long time to reach each of these four chances. Gratton's methodological rigour in reconstructing each pathway is a great strength of the book, but at times the detail of the reading leaves the reader without synthesizing moments that would gather the argument together. There is not enough comparison. This is a danger of the attention to narrative, which, moreover is never really analysed in its formal structure. If Gratton had proceeded more speedily to his four chances, then he could easily have pushed a theoretical synthesis further than he in fact does. That being said, the same feature can also be construed as a positive. This is a very pedagogical book, full of lessons in the way it treats each of the authors under discussion. It is therefore a good graduate student text, and for each discussed author the book makes significant contributions to current scholarship. A choice exists here, perhaps, between the concept and the close reading. This would be nothing other than the double entendre of the title: the multiple states of sovereignty.

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