

## **The end of sovereignty?**

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**Is globalization “flattening” our world, leaving it void of territory and sovereignty? Such claims, repeated at length by carpetbagging globalists, are simply false in the eyes of political geographer John Agnew for whom, sovereignty is increasingly deterritorialized, but hardly disappearing.**

Reviewed: John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.

“Much writing about globalization seems based on the premise that one rarely achieves fame by virtue of understatement.” This line, in the preface of John Agnew’s most recent contribution to the political geography of globalization, says much of the sharpness and *justesse* of his analysis. Indeed, Agnew does not give himself to overstatement but proceeds systematically in both synthesizing key elements of the massive bibliography on the two subjects adjoined in his title and launching new paths in the debates on sovereignty and territory in the current phase of globalization. Through his numerous works<sup>1</sup>, Agnew has emerged as one of the most lucid voices in political geography, globalization and the reconfiguration of political space in our twenty first century. By driving home his essential argument that globalization does not mean the end of states, space, or sovereignty but rather a continuity in the overlapping of multiple sovereign spaces, he provides yet another reasoned voice in what appears at times a millenarist frenzy in global studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Among his most recent works are: *Hegemony. The New Shape of Global Power* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2005); *Place and Politics in Modern Italy* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2002); *Geopolitics. Re-Visioning World Politics* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2003).

Targeting arguments on globalization perhaps best captured by the work of Thomas Friedman (“The World is Flat is a great book title, but it does little justice to how the world still really works”), Agnew argues that the recent round of globalization has marked a re-jigging of the scale of sovereignty, but not, by any means, its end. According to Agnew, territory is not, nor has it ever been, the sole container for the exercise of sovereignty. The book proceeds to explore how it is that the territorial scale of the nation-state came to be understood as synonymous with sovereignty and concludes that while it would appear that we are witnessing the end of a would-be monopoly of the nation-state scale on sovereignty, we are in fact witnessing an extension of the multiple scales that always contained sovereign power. In the present round of globalization, Agnew argues, the economic development that dissipates the nation-state’s ability to manage global and local flows, the rise of international organizations, and the decline of mutually exclusive citizenship claims through greater flows of human traffic have merely increased and made more visible the multiple scales of sovereignty that have always existed.

### **The fragmented nature of sovereignty**

One of Agnew’s contributions then, lies in his reminding us of the limits of our geographical imagination when exploring questions like sovereignty that have been monopolized by national frameworks. Building on the work of French political geographer Jean Gottmann, Agnew provides a brief history of the emergence of territory as the dominant container of sovereign power. He concludes that while discourses on sovereignty have tended to reify national boundaries as dominant, the actual flows of capital and people across space even in the hey-day of the nation-state were never as total as scholars were wont to believe. The difference in the current round of globalization then is that the fragmented nature of sovereignty, that has always been present but hidden under an analytic discourse that was trapped within a nation-state paradigm, is currently becoming so incoherent that we cannot help but see the paradigm of territory and sovereignty crumbling. We are in a more extreme case of the separation of national territory and sovereignty but not, by any means, a moment which marks the end of either.

Sovereignty, then, in Agnew’s analysis, necessarily has a relationship to spatial frames, or produces space, but is not, and has never been, wedded to any particular scale. What is needed as a result is the possibility of theorizing sovereignty without spatial prejudices. In response to this challenge, Agnew builds on regime theory to offer the key

theoretical contribution of this work through the notion of “sovereignty regimes”. Employing the category of a sovereignty regime avoids the territorial trap of previous analyses while maintaining sovereignty as a critical agent in the construction of the current local, national and world scales. Therefore, the sovereignty regime necessarily operates in space but can function on different scales and can be shared by multiple actors.

He proposes principally four types of sovereignty regimes: *classic*, *imperialist*, *integrative*, and *globalist*. Employing Michael Mann’s distinction between infrastructural (power *through* society) and despotic (power *over* society) state power<sup>2</sup>, Agnew proposes that the *classic* sovereignty regime is the one that has been most traditionally analyzed—a single state within a bounded state territory that has generally implied high levels of “infrastructural” and “despotic” power. The *imperialist* regime characterizes the opposite case based on a network of control across space that supplements the total monopoly of power over a pre-established territory. The third sovereignty regime, the *integrative*, is best characterized by the European Union. Here, power has obvious territorial and infrastructural aspects with boundaries both defining its limits and shaping the contours of its interior. However, he notes that it also functions in some non-territorial ways as the construction of a sovereign power implies a constant reconfiguration of these boundaries and its own territorial shape. Essential to his analysis of the integrative regime is the idea that the territorial form of European sovereignty will not someday look like an early twentieth-century nation-state, but will function on multiple levels that will be spatial but not necessarily territorial. The final type of regime, the *globalist*, is best characterized by the United States currently or Britain in the nineteenth century. Here the dominant aim is to maintain the sovereign territoriality of states while integrating them, either through cooptation or coercion, into an empire that depends on the hegemony of a central actor. While Agnew’s ideal-typology has the obvious effect of oversimplifying the nature of sovereignty within each particular case, it does provide a helpful entry into thinking new relationships between territory and sovereign power, echoing the works of Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner, and Saskia Sassen among others.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Brenner and Jessop have been key figures in the development of a neo-marxist political geography over the last 10 years. Alongside their many articles and book projects, their most commonly cited works are Neil Brenner, *New state spaces* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Bob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

## The “newness” of globalization

However, while Agnew echoes many of these approaches, this work does highlight some essential differences. Saskia Sassen’s recent *Territory, Authority and Rights* offers a particularly interesting point of contrast to Agnew<sup>4</sup>. Sassen too opens her work by focusing on the emergence of nation-states in the medieval and early modern period (she used many of the same sources such as Gottmann and Kantorowicz in her work that Agnew uses in his 2009 publication) and attempts to overcome the “territorial trap” of mapping the territorial state onto a study of globalization in the *longue durée*. However, her approach differs in that, instead of focusing on sovereignty, she approaches the question from the triple perspective highlighted in her title. Her argument is that globalization emerged alongside nation-states in the sixteenth century and therefore it has always been structured through territorial states, but in different ways. Moreover, what has made the territorial state, especially in the form of the nation-state, so powerful is that this institutional scale has monopolized the production of territory, authority and rights over the last 300 to 400 years. As a result, she concurs with Agnew that the most recent round of globalization does not mean the end of states, but rather their redeployment on multiple scales. Globalization will continue to mean the mobilization of states, but they will no longer have a stranglehold on the institutionalization of territory, authority and rights.

It is for this reason that Sassen opens her work claiming that “we are living through an epochal transformation”—an argument that Agnew hardly agrees with. Agnew’s project is precisely to show that the current shift is not nearly as radical as we have been led, or wanted, to believe. Rather, Agnew suggests that sovereignty has never been as hemmed into the national territorial boundaries as social sciences and others have assumed. So while both works attempt to look outside the national territorial paradigm for answers (Sassen refers to the “endogeneity trap” while Agnew refers to the “territorial trap”) they differ in their interpretation of the relationship between the current phase of globalization and the previous regime. In this sense, the disagreement between Sassen and Agnew goes to the heart of the debate within globalization literature. A debate that may be defined in the following terms: are we truly experiencing an epochal and global shift, or are we simply experiencing a new phase of processes that have been taking place for hundreds of years but that are only now

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<sup>4</sup> Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

becoming visible? The disagreement between these two works highlights the question of the “newness” of globalization that has increasingly become a key issue.

By freeing up the discussion of sovereignty from the caging of social relations within the nation-state, Agnew gives greater weight to the latter argument. He provides a broader picture of the connections between the current transition and the past by placing another piece in the puzzle of sovereignty and democratic legitimacy in global processes. The chapters on how different sovereignty regimes are functioning through the cases of monetary flows and immigration are partial but do provide a useful sketch of how Agnew understands these sovereignty regimes’ functioning on the ground. Furthermore, his discussion of monetary flows, for example, provide an interesting example of how Mann’s powerful concept of infrastructural power can be employed across space but not necessarily within territorial boundaries.

This contribution to global studies provides a lucid voice among works that have overstated the end of sovereignty and have lacked the imagination to look outside the national box. In the end, Agnew reminds us that sovereignty and the nation-state are alive and well and will no doubt remain so. It is, however, their relationship that will be subject to deep change in the coming century. What is needed then is continued reflection on the origins, construction and reconfiguration of the sovereignty-territory relationship no matter how “flat” or “hot” the world may currently appear.

Published in [www.laviedesidees.fr](http://www.laviedesidees.fr), February 24, 2010.

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