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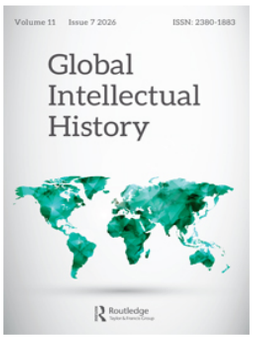
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Sovereignty in Fragments, Sovereignty in Practice

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Shifting Sovereignties: A Global History of a Concept in Practice, by Moritz Mihatsch and Michael Mulligan, Berlin, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2025, 383 pp, £54.50 (hardback), ISBN: 9783111446561.

Few concepts have structured modern political imagination as persistently and as ambiguously as that of sovereignty. In current politics it has become a shorthand for supreme authority, territorial exclusivity, juridical equality, political independence, and collective self-rule. The canonical narrative remains familiar: sovereignty emerges in early modern Europe, finds institutional form in the so-called 'Westphalian system', consolidates in the territorial nation-state, and enters crisis mode in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[1]

Over the past two decades, that narrative has been dismantled from multiple directions. Within international relations, sovereignty is no longer treated as a stable legal baseline. It is seen as a historically contingent and socially constructed principle, shaped by practices of recognition, hierarchy, and differentiation. The supposed coherence of the 'Westphalian' model has given way to accounts that emphasise sovereignty's dependence on shifting regimes of legitimacy, its embeddedness in power asymmetries, and its constant renegotiation within international society.[2]

Global and legal historians in turn, have exposed the myth of territorial coherence. Sovereignty in imperial contexts operated through layered jurisdictions, delegated authority, and uneven legal geographies.[3] Colonial encounters reveal sovereignty as a stratified order in which inclusion and exclusion were co-constitutive.[4] Meanwhile, historians of empire have challenged teleologies that cast imperial formations as mere transitional stages on the way to sovereign nation-statehood, emphasising instead the durability, adaptability, and hybrid constitutional experiments of imperial polities.[5]

At the level of political thought, the once-dominant image of sovereignty as a unified and indivisible doctrine has been displaced by accounts that foreground its internal plurality, genealogical complexity, and temporal instability. Rather than assuming a singular

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sovereign authority embodied seamlessly in the territorial state, early modern debates reveal competing conceptions of legitimate power – popular, dynastic, delegated, imperial – whose coherence was continually constructed in response to crisis. Contextualist histories have shown that what later appears as a stable doctrine of sovereignty was, in fact, 'fragmented' from the outset; an assemblage of arguments deployed to stabilise authority under specific historical pressures.[6]

The cumulative effect of this scholarship has been to spatially, conceptually and normatively destabilise sovereignty as a unified category. If sovereignty has always been layered, stratified, and contested, how are these multiplicities to be understood within a coherent analytic vocabulary? It is precisely this synthetic ambition that animates *Shifting Sovereignties*. Mihatsch and Mulligan reconceptualise sovereignty as a procedural configuration of power: a historically contingent, legitimacy-based structuring of authority that adapts to the central challenges of an era. Sovereignty, in this account, is a way of organising power. The theoretical language of supremacy and indivisibility, the authors argue, often obscures the practical reality that sovereignty has always been 'fuzzy, contingent, and situational' (3).

Their intervention rests on two core conceptual moves. First, sovereignty is defined as a 'regime': a structured distribution of power that is legitimacy-based and responsive to the central challenges of its era. Sovereignty, in this sense, is a configuration rather than a substance. The term describes how authority is organised and justified within a given political order. Second, the authors introduce the concept of 'system sovereignty': authority structured at the level of the international order as a whole. This category allows them to analyse inter/supra national arrangements – the Concert of Europe, the League of Nations, the United Nations, contemporary global governance – not as erosions of sovereignty, but as its reconfiguration across scales. These categories do significant analytic work. They enable the authors to avoid the twin dangers of essentialism and declinism. From their perspective, sovereignty is a historically situated arrangement that can shift upward, fragment internally, or be recalibrated in response to systemic pressures.

The book's narrative unfolds in three broad movements, the first of which seeks to unsettle sovereignty's supposed point of origin. Rather than locating its emergence decisively in early modern Europe, Mihatsch and Mulligan begin with what they call 'sovereignty before sovereignty' (25). They identify proto-sovereign configurations in much earlier polities, including ancient Mesopotamian city-states and other early forms of organised rule, arguing that structured and legitimacy-seeking distributions of authority long predate the conceptual vocabulary of sovereignty itself.[7] In these cases, authority was already being centralised, territorialised, ritualised, and justified in ways that anticipate later formulations. Sovereignty, in this view, does not appear ex nihilo in the sixteenth century; it crystallises as one historically specific articulation of a much older problem: how to organise power in a manner perceived as legitimate. When the discussion turns to Bodin and his successors, the book resists treating them as founders of a settled doctrine. It situates early modern theorists within the confessional conflicts, civil wars, and geopolitical pressures that shaped their writing.

If Part I destabilises sovereignty's origins, Part II, aptly titled *Illusions of Coherence*, turns to dismantling the idea that sovereignty ever achieved a stable institutional form. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are often narrated as the era in which sovereignty became territorially consolidated and legally codified before later fragmenting under

globalisation. Mihatsch and Mulligan invert this chronology. Coherence, they suggest, was always aspirational.

The emergence of a recognisable interstate order, particularly after the Congress of Vienna, institutionalised the coexistence of competing sovereignty regimes. Imperial formations such as the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian Empires did not simply decay under nationalist pressure. They experimented with federal arrangements, administrative decentralisation, and constitutional reform in an effort to reconcile imperial authority with emergent national claims. Sovereignty within these empires was renegotiated, redistributed, and hybridised. Nationalism, in this telling, was not a deterministic solvent. Imperial collapse depended on war, fiscal exhaustion, elite fracture, and contingent political decisions. There was nothing predetermined about the outcome.

This argument gains force in the chapter on imperial entanglements (120). The authors show that European states that claimed sovereign equality within the Concert system simultaneously operated in colonial and peripheral spaces through graded and divisible forms of sovereignty The so-called 'system of Berlin' exemplified this stratified order: imperial expansion was framed in legalistic language that both recognised and constrained sovereignty. Treaty-making practices were internally contradictory. They presupposed sovereign capacity on the part of non-European signatories while simultaneously limiting that capacity through the making of protectorates, the granting of concessions, and the institution of regimes of external oversight. Chartered companies exercised quasi-sovereign authority – taxation, policing, adjudication – without formal statehood. In sync with much of the previously discussed literature, sovereignty here appears as a differentiated architecture embedded within global hierarchies.

Although the book does not take Greece as a case study, the Greek experience in the nineteenth century offers a particularly illuminating illustration of the overlapping sovereignty regimes the authors describe. The establishment of the Greek kingdom in the 1820s and 1830s did not represent a clean replacement of imperial by national sovereignty. Independence was recognised through a framework structured by great-power intervention and dynastic imposition; a Bavarian monarch was installed as part of a multi-lateral international settlement. Formal sovereignty, in other words, was conferred through diplomatic agreement among external powers. The new state thus existed simultaneously as a formally sovereign kingdom and as a polity whose autonomy was mediated through great power arrangements. Its autonomy was shaped by external guarantees, financial oversight, and geopolitical bargaining. At the same time, Greek national aspirations extended into Ottoman territories where imperial sovereignty continued to operate through its own layered and adaptive mechanisms.

Far from marking a linear transition from empire to nation-state, the Greek case reveals competing and overlapping sovereignty regimes coexisting across the same political space – precisely the kind of entanglement that the procedural framework of *Shifting Sovereignties* is designed to illuminate. It is also a revealing example of how sovereignty was performed as much as structured. The installation of the Bavarian dynasty in Greece brought along an entire retinue of Bavarian aristocrats, administrators, military officers, and court officials who helped institutionalise and visibly stage the new kingdom. Through dynastic ceremony, court ritual, architectural symbolism, administrative centralisation, and later constitutional reform, sovereignty was enacted in everyday political life. Public rhetoric of national destiny and classical revival further anchored the

monarchy within a narrative of historical continuity. Legitimacy, in this sense, was a carefully constructed performance designed to render externally conditioned authority intelligible and credible.

If the nineteenth century reveals sovereignty as layered and relational, the First World War exposes the fragility of its organising claims. The collapse of the Habsburg, Ottoman, German, and Russian empires produced a new configuration of sovereignty regimes structured through mandates, minority regimes, and international supervision. Mihatsch and Mulligan show convincingly how Wilsonian self-determination reorganised nineteenth century hierarchies. Some European nations were granted full statehood; former imperial territories outside Europe were placed under mandate administration, formally recognised as not yet capable of exercising sovereign authority. Sovereignty operated simultaneously as a universal principle and as a graded entitlement.

The League of Nations embodied this duality. It institutionalised what the authors term system sovereignty: an international architecture designed to stabilise relations among states and mitigate the excesses of national sovereignty. Yet the League also entrenched differentiated sovereignty within its very design. The minority treaties required certain newly recognised states, primarily in East-Central Europe, to accept international oversight over the treatment of linguistic, religious, and ethnic minorities as a condition of diplomatic recognition. Sovereignty was acknowledged but explicitly qualified.

Crucially, this minority regime was not simply an expression of a new, progressive sovereignty order associated with the League. Rather, it constituted a through-line linking nineteenth-century hierarchical practices to the twentieth-century international system. As Laura Robson has shown, the interwar minority system drew directly on earlier imperial precedents, including the Ottoman capitulations and the broader European practice of placing minority communities under external protection.[8] What appeared in 1919 as an innovation in international minority protection was in fact a reformulation of older mechanisms through which sovereignty had been rendered conditional and stratified.

Seen in this light, the interwar order did not mark the triumph of a coherent nation-state system but rather the consolidation of system sovereignty layered atop asymmetrical national sovereignties. The mandates regime reinforced this logic. Territories in the Middle East and Africa were governed under a language of tutelage that presupposed eventual sovereignty while withholding its immediate exercise. Sovereignty was temporally deferred and administratively mediated. The universalist rhetoric of self-determination coexisted with institutionalised gradations of political maturity and civilisation.

This interwar story reinforces one of the book's central insights: sovereignty has rarely been as coherent or self-contained. At the same time, it raises an important question: For many of the states and their subjects placed under minority oversight, these arrangements were not experienced as neutral mechanisms of international guardianship but as visible reminders of unequal status. The authors' procedural framework captures this institutional layering with clarity. What receives less attention, however, are the symbolic and political struggles through which such differentiated sovereignty was understood, contested, and sometimes mobilised domestically.

The dramatic expansion in the number of sovereign states after 1945 might suggest the triumph of the nation-state model. Mihatsch and Mulligan resist that reading.

Decolonisation globalised sovereignty's' compromises. Newly independent states entered an international order already structured by economic asymmetry, geopolitical rivalry, and institutionalised supervision. Full autonomy and formal recognition did not align. Development aid frequently carried explicit or implicit conditionalities; financial institutions shaped fiscal and monetary policy; inherited administrative and legal frameworks reflected colonial priorities. Sovereignty was affirmed in diplomatic language yet constrained in economic practice. Strengthening autonomy along one dimension – international standing – could entail vulnerability along another – economic dependence.

Here the book's procedural definition once again proves analytically flexible. Because sovereignty is understood as a legitimacy-based structuring of authority compromised postcolonial statehood appears as a particular sovereignty regime. Yet this breadth also raises a question: if sovereignty encompasses both formal equality and structural dependency, the concept risks becoming capacious enough to describe almost any configuration of political power. The authors largely avoid this danger by anchoring sovereignty in legitimacy, but the elasticity of the category remains a tension.

The discussion of the cold war period further intensifies this ambiguity. Mihatsch and Mulligan characterise the period as one in which sovereignty was effectively 'put on ice' (223). Nuclear deterrence and bloc politics curtailed the meaningful autonomy of many states even as juridical sovereignty proliferated. Superpower rivalry disciplined smaller states through alliance systems, economic leverage, and occasional direct intervention. Sovereignty persisted in law but was constrained in practice. There is considerable force to this interpretation. But the Cold War was also a laboratory of sovereignty's redefinition. Postcolonial leaders mobilised sovereignty as a claim to dignity and developmental self-determination. The Non-Aligned Movement articulated a vision of collective autonomy that resisted both blocs. Revolutionary regimes reframed sovereignty in anti-imperial and ideological terms. Meanwhile, interventions – from Hungary to Vietnam to Afghanistan – revealed the vulnerability of sovereign regimes. Rather than frozen, sovereignty during the Cold War might be understood as polarised and politicised. Competing conceptions (national, revolutionary, developmental, bloc-based) circulated simultaneously.

With the end of the Cold War, the authors turn to what many scholars described as sovereignty's 'end.' Globalisation, international courts, trade regimes, and regional integration appeared to displace state authority. Mihatsch and Mulligan, again, resist declinist narratives. They distinguish between *waning* sovereignty, where legitimacy erodes through depoliticised technocratic governance, and *shifting* sovereignty, where authority is relocated to higher levels in pursuit of collective solutions.[9] Institutions such as the European Union, the World Trade Organization, and the International Criminal Court are interpreted as embodiments of 'system sovereignty' rather than as evidence of sovereignty's disappearance.

The distinction between waning and shifting sovereignty becomes particularly illuminating when viewed through the lens of the contemporary migration debate in Europe. Few issues more clearly expose the tension between national autonomy and system-level coordination. Border control has long been treated as a core marker of sovereign authority. Yet in highly integrated contexts – most notably within the European Union – migration governance (authority over asylum procedures, external border management)

is redistributed. Sovereignty does not disappear; it is reorganised across scales. At the same time, this redistribution is far from neutral. For many citizens and political actors, the upward relocation of authority over borders appears as external imposition.

Migration becomes a visible site where 'system sovereignty' is experienced in everyday life. It is not surprising, then, that the resurgence of sovereignty rhetoric in the twenty-first century often crystallises around questions of migration and border control. Populist movements in Western states invoke 'taking back control' of borders, leaders in formerly colonised countries frame migration governance as a form of neo-imperial interference. For Mihatsch and Mulligan, such developments signal the continued recalibration of sovereignty, a powerful grammar through which legitimacy claims are articulated.

At its best, the adopted framework replaces static definitions of sovereignty with a dynamic understanding of political structuring across scales. Yet, because sovereignty is defined procedurally the analysis tends to privilege institutional design and structural adaptation. What recedes somewhat from view are the affective, symbolic, and representational dimensions through which legitimacy is produced and contested. Here recent scholarship on sovereignty's 'scaffolding' offers a productive complement.[10] Sovereignty endures because it is also symbolically sustained through rituals, constitutional myths, territorial imaginaries, genealogies of origin, and the aesthetic projection of unity. States enact sovereignty in ceremonies, borderscapes, and public rhetoric even where effective autonomy is constrained. Minority protections, mandates, financial supervision, and migration regimes may be institutionally legible as sovereignty regimes, yet their political resonance often turns on how they are perceived, dramatised, and resisted. A fuller engagement with these aesthetic and affective dimensions would further enrich the book's already ambitious synthesis.

A related issue concerns the concept of legitimacy itself which is central to the authors' procedural definition of sovereignty. Whose recognition counts, and how is it measured? For instance, the interwar experimentations with minorities and mandates offers a revealing example. Minority protections under the League of Nations were framed as safeguards of justice and stability, but they also generated intense disputes over who had standing in international law. As scholarship on the League's petition system has shown, marginalised groups sought recognition not simply as protected communities but as subjects capable of addressing the international order directly – effectively making claims to new forms of legal personhood.[11]

Mihatsch and Mulligan reframe sovereignty as a structured practice. Their work shifts the analytic focus from timeless definitions to the work that sovereignty does in ordering authority, resolving crisis, and stabilising competing claims. What makes *Shifting Sovereignties* especially valuable is its ability to integrate a vast sweep of phenomena into a vocabulary that explains their shared structural logic without resorting to teleologies of decline or resurgence.

By reconceiving sovereignty as a shifting configuration rather than a fixed doctrine, Mihatsch and Mulligan provide scholars of international order, empire, and political thought with a flexible analytic tool. In an era in which sovereignty is once again invoked with urgency and anxiety, *Shifting Sovereignties* offers a disciplined way of thinking about how authority is reorganised under pressure. And that is no small achievement.

Notes

1. The literature is voluminous. For an example, see Grimm, *Sovereignty: The Origin and Future of a Political and Legal Concept*.
2. Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*; Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*; Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*; Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society*; Zarakol, *After Defeat*.
3. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*.
4. Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations*; Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*.
5. Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*.
6. Kalmo and Skinner, *Sovereignty in Fragments*; Armitage, *The Foundations of Modern International Thought*; Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign*.
7. For a similar move from a different perspective, see Ben-Dor Benite, Geroulanos, and Jerr, *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty*.
8. Robson, "Capitulations Redux."
9. See also Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.
10. Ben-Dor Benite, Geroulanos, and Jerr, *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty*.
11. See, for instance, Wheatley, "Mandatory Interpretation."

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