Book Review

Raia Prokhovnik, *Sovereignties: Contemporary Theory and Practice*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 272 pp. ISBN 13: 978 1403 913 234.

It is difficult to evade the pulls of sovereignty. As the defining feature of the most common and successful principle of organizing modern political life — the state — sovereignty remains central to nearly all academic negotiations on politics. The variety and intensity of debates around sovereignty in recent years, coupled with interesting books published by formidable scholars, have offered considerable critical purchase. Sovereignty's genealogy has been written, its simulation chronicled and its Westphalian mooring defended afresh. Indeed, for an 'organized hypocrisy', it has registered impressive resurgence in academic literature across the world and beyond the disciplinary confines of International Relations (IR). In this context, it must appear exciting to see the weight of conceptual history and political theory being put behind an analysis of sovereignty's contemporary meanings and practices. In fact, Raia Prokhovnik's *Sovereignties: Contemporary Theory and Practice* at once absorbs the reader into the fascinating claims it makes about too many aspects of sovereignty. Sovereignty has a plurality of conceptions, she argues, and is open to positive reconceptualizations. That this possibility is either not fully recognized or remains unexplored is due to a range of conundrums: the narrowly conceptualized conventional distinction between political and legal sovereignty, internal/external distinction between political theory and IR, sovereignty's association with state, depoliticization of sovereignty in liberal political theory and intangibility of sovereignty as a political concept. A systematic treatment of these conundrums, Prokhovnik suggests, would save sovereignty from falling into oblivion and make it amenable to fresh imaginations. For a discipline still starved of critical research, IR would have stood to gain aplenty if this breakthrough could be made. Unfortunately, reading beyond the promissory opening lines of this book returns disappointment. Just how, and why, this happens needs elaboration.

Prokhovnik's impressive background in political theory and history of ideas allows her a fairly accurate diagnosis of the problems involved in studying sovereignty. Her approach to the problems and their solutions, however, stands on woolly ground. She holds realist theory of IR responsible for much of the narrow, state-centric understanding of sovereignty and the internal-external dichotomy at its heart. This 'dominant' theory of IR has been responsible for sovereignty's stifling, thus according it an absolutist,

Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association
Vol. 43(4): 477–479. © NISA 2008 www.nisanet.org
SAGE Publications, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore
www.sagepublications.com
0010-8367. DOI: 10.1177/0010836708099038

state-centric and stable identity. Now, much of this criticism would have held if Prokhovnik had been sensitive to nuances of IR theory. It is neo-realism, rather than classical realism, which stabilizes sovereignty's legal, state-centric meaning given its structural orientation. Prokhovnik misses this point, which weakens her critique. Interestingly, though the entire book is configured around demolishing the alleged realist hold on sovereignty, not a single realist's work has been mentioned, let alone discussed, in the book. Prokhovnik relies on Stephen Krasner, Hendryk Spruyt, Hedley Bull and Alexander Wendt to paint the 'realist' view of sovereignty in approximately 14 lines (p. 39), and mainly these scholars, along with Benno Teschke, are used whenever she references IR scholarship on sovereignty. None of them, including Krasner, is a realist! It appears a sloppy piece of academic enterprise. She acknowledges Quentin Skinner's influence on her work, but doesn't hesitate to label, incorrectly, Hedley Bull a neo-realist on the basis of an article he wrote in 1966, when the most important neo-realist work, Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, was published 13 years later in 1979. In effect, Prokhovnik creates an army of straw men to destroy them as she pleases. This book would have gained credibility had she taken up even one neo-realist scholar — Waltz is the most viable candidate — to challenge realism's conception of sovereignty. But it relies, instead, on uncorroborated or non-realists' views of realism to anchor its arguments. It is unlikely to find any acceptance in IR community for this very failure.

As its subtitle indicates, the book engages contemporary theory and practice of sovereignty. The former, spanning four chapters, is fairly unimpressive. Does her analysis of sovereignty's practice — in the form of European Union (EU) — perform any better? Prokhovnik submits that the focus of this chapter 'Less is More: Sovereignty in Europe' is 'complex' (p. 184). It is. If a reader could wade through the jargon flood of lengthy sentences, she would find the author suggesting that European past, particularly Spinoza's concept of sovereignty in regard to the United Provinces in the seventeenth century, may be a suitable form for EU sovereignty. A decentralized confederalism, which prohibits hierarchical, unitary state form, should be the model of sovereignty the EU must adopt. This would incorporate territorial and non-territorial cultural, ethnic, linguistic and regional differences without destroying the identity of each of the constituent units. This is a fair suggestion, and must be acknowledged as such. However, there is little else that is novel about this practical aspect of the work.

The sheer scale of scholarly production today makes it easy to structure a narrative to one's pleasing. Prokhovnik's trajectory throughout the book betrays this weakness. She forwards an argument, often by improving upon another scholar, and then pitting it against a third one, sprinkling it with esoteric and verbose text. There are too many instances of other scholars having argued 'important' points 'convincingly', 'usefully', 'strongly' and offered 'perceptive analysis'. In effect, on offer are numerous pages of useful summaries of scholars thinking in different fields. It is equally difficult to distinguish Prokhovnik's own contribution to that of the scholars she frequently cites. The reader is left wondering where, for example, Neil

Walker's scholarship ends and her own begins. Numerous spelling errors and unclear sentences suggest a measure of haste. A poorly prepared bibliography makes it difficult to locate sources.

Prokhovnik's signal effort — reconceptualization of internal/external lying at the heart of statist conception of sovereignty — is a story well entrenched in critical IR. Richard Ashley's formidable explorations on the issue mid-1980s onwards and Rob Walker's classic *Inside/Outside*, among numerous others, have offered penetrating critiques and new viewpoints. These works have already shown sustained and successful engagement with issues Prokhovnik raises. In comparison, this book returns embarrassing disappointment, offering nothing new beyond express summaries of a range of scholarship.

ATUL MISHRA
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India