

**Shifting Sovereignties. A Global
History of a Concept in Practice
by Moritz Mihatsch, Michael Mulligan.
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As right-wing movements gain increased traction globally, advocating for tighter border control and displaying skepticism of global institutions, the concept of sovereignty has returned to the forefront of public discourse. Canonically political theory offers us two ways to interpret these developments: With Carl Schmitt we could return to the “great man theory”¹ and locate sovereignty in the authority that “decides on the exception,” interpreting it as the present power of sovereign rulers.² Conversely, Michel Foucault urges us to “cut off the King's head,”³ and decentralize sovereignty into a multitude of historically fluctuating practices of rule. These definitions operate around a range of dichotomies: Is sovereignty a stagnant concept which takes one form of rule or is it defined through multiple temporalities? Is sovereignty the direct ability of governing people to influence the world or are they controlled by the system they operate in? These questions are at the heart of *Shifting Sovereignties: A Global History of a Concept in Practice*. Written in 2025 by Moritz Mihatsch, a historian of nationalism, and Michael Mulligan, a historian of international law, the book problematizes existing histories and political theories of sovereignty. Using a global history approach, the authors examine how sovereignty has been exercised and conceived from pre-history to the contemporary world, highlighting the fluctuating practice of this notion.

Older accounts identify sovereignty as a European invention of the Thirty Years' War that solidified the indivisible command of rulers over a fixed territory in the Westphalian system,⁴ which then spread throughout the world,⁵ tying it to the emergence of the modern nation-state. This reaffirms Schmitt's notion of sovereignty as the central command of the sovereign. Since the interventions of postmodernism, it has become commonplace to methodologically reflect on the historical fluidity of the units of scientific analysis. Global history itself is an attempt to decenter the unit of the nation-state to counter the present methodological nationalism of the humanities.⁶ Is the conception of the sovereign nation state not precisely what we as global historians seek to question?

1 For a critical reflection see: Daniel Schönpflug and Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger “Große Männer,” in *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2023).

2 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

3 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Pantheon Books, 1980): 121.

4 Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Problem of Sovereignty Reconsidered,” in *Columbia Law Review* 48, no. 3 (1948): 341–65.

5 For Example: Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Routledge, 1992); Daniel Philpott, “Sovereignty: An Introduction and Brief History,” in *Journal of International Affairs* 48, no. 2 (1995): 353–68, especially 365–66.

6 Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

Recent research calls for a revision of the Westphalian chronology of sovereignty. Andreas Osiander questioned the presence of the central principles of sovereignty in the treaty to begin with.⁷ More recently and with a focus on state sovereignty in Central Europe, Natasha Wheatley traces this development into the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ Similarly, the spread of the idea of sovereignty has to be placed in a more multidirectional framework that accounts for the influence of global processes such as colonialism⁹ and its appropriations through decolonial movements.¹⁰ Sovereignty conceptualized as the complete and uniform control of a ruler over its territory has simply not been a thing. Research following the “New Imperial History” paradigm emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the center and periphery to dethrone a “monolithic” conception of empire.¹¹ Lauren Benton concludes that imperial rule was “uneven, disaggregated, and oddly shaped.”¹² Similarly, scholars of the nation-state argue that they are political systems prone to the subversion and differentiation within their systems of rule.¹³

Building on this line of thought, Mihatsch and Mulligan utilize an anti-nominalist approach built around a decentering of a Eurocentric perspective on sovereignty in favor of a process-oriented and practice theory perspective. Conclusively, the focus is on the actual application of sovereignty and its changing nature, rather than analyzing it through an investigation of changing principles of law or abstract theoretical legal concepts. Centering their definition of sovereignty around the notion of legitimacy, they define sovereignty as “an attempt to organize power in a way perceived as legitimate and able to solve the central challenges of an era.”¹⁴ This adapts existing notions of sovereignty to account for its historically changing nature in relation to challenges to the political order and centering on legitimacy as the basis of sovereignty. The authors propose two frameworks to examine this.

7 Andreas Osiander, “Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth” in *International Organization* vol. 55, no. 2, (2001): 251-287.

8 Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton 2023).

9 Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.

10 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

11 Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper “Between Metropole and Colony. Rethinking a Research Agenda” in *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (University of California Press, 1997), 6.

12 Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty. Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2014), 2.

13 Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism. Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy*, (London, 2023), 13-37.

14 Moritz Mihatsch and Michael Mulligan, *Shifting Sovereignties: A Global History of a Concept in Practice* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2025), 8.

First, for the authors sovereignty is not isolated within the borders of the nation-state, but rather is entrenched within “sovereignty regimes.” Such regimes exert power beyond the borders and unevenly within certain regions of the territory. A sovereignty regime is defined by the authors as the underpinning rationality of power and its era-specific legitimation, be it dynastic sovereignty or national self-determination.¹⁵ This approach challenges the importance of the Treaty of Westphalia 1648 refocusing on the ascension of state structures after the Vienna Congress of 1815 based around the sovereignty regime of “dynastic legitimacy.”¹⁶ Decentering Europe in the development of sovereignty, the book traces common frameworks of sovereignty adopted in the Arab, Indian, and Chinese empires. Through these case studies, Mihatsch and Mulligan identify common concepts of state legitimacy within state formation. Their concept of sovereignty regimes therefore facilitates a global approach to sovereignty throughout history, distinct from the earlier concept of “sovereignty regimes” posited by John Agnew.¹⁷

Second, they conceptualize these regimes as being developed and managed by “institutional frameworks” which form their second major concept, “system sovereignty.” One example they give is the United Nations which provides a systematic framework for different sovereignty regimes to form their legitimacy from within this system. The authors interrogate how the principles of sovereignty in the Cold War and postcolonial era were legitimized, highlighting different “logic[s] of legitimization.”¹⁸ For example they posit that “the West” drew their legitimation largely from the conception of state sovereignty, whereas “the Soviets” drew their legitimation from what they call “workers sovereignty,” referencing “the communist transformation of society.”¹⁹ International institutions of governance, were a site for clashes and cooperations of power. The authors posit that the current failures of existing system sovereignties to react to the crises of today, resulted in the revitalization of the nation-state as the model of sovereignty through global right-wing movements. Through an interrogation of the history of sovereignty, the authors discuss how sovereignty can be utilized to form a better global society in the future.²⁰

Nonetheless, it is at times unclear how useful these categorizations of sovereignty regimes and sovereignty systems are and how far they would aid

15 Ibid., 12.

16 Ibid., 85.

17 John Agnew, “Sovereignty Regimes: Territoriality and State Authority in Contemporary World Politics,” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 4 (2005): 437–61.

18 Mihatsch and Mulligan, *Shifting Sovereignties*, 226.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 339.

future histories of sovereignty. Within the book there are moments where the boundaries between regimes and systems become blurred and are hard to distinguish for the reader. System sovereignty as organizational principles and sovereignty regimes as sovereignty can be interlinked in practice. Further, these concepts focus on sovereignty as a matter of state policy, its implementation in international order, and state reactions despite arguing for the transcendence of territorial boundaries.²¹ The only non-state actors the book examines in depth are so called “micro-sovereignties,” communities that reject the sovereign state in place of their own visions of sovereign statehood.²² In this sense, the book takes a predominately top-down approach to histories of sovereignty which undermines the presence of multiple experiences of sovereignty within one society that may be affected by gender, class, race and disability.

At the heart of sovereignty, for the authors, is legitimacy. The authors repeatedly refer to the significance of legitimacy to the concept of sovereignty, arguing that “once sovereignty loses legitimacy it is no longer sovereignty, but merely power.”²³ This begs the question, in which contexts and to whom should power be legitimate? The basis for their conception of legitimacy relies on Max Weber’s canonical definition which undermines their fresh approach to the field. Weber imagines legitimacy as a force that is experienced similarly by people within one political system emanating from the ruler.²⁴ Drawing on the research cited above, one could argue that the diffusion of legitimacy, as well as its public reception, depends on a multitude of factors that are unaccounted for when legitimacy is used as a solely emanating force in a Weberian tradition as the authors do. Often the authors propose that a sovereignty regime is adopted by rulers of one system and implemented to rule an area, without analyzing how these concepts were diffused and perceived by the people under them. Conclusively they do address the changing and at times paradoxical nature of legitimacy throughout history, yet the role of power is insufficiently unpacked. For example, they analyze the concept of the divine Mandate of Heaven (Tianming) utilized by the rulers of Qing China after their ascension to power in 1644. Did the people of Qing China accept Tianming as legitimate as the authors suggest, or was it just a form of power they were subjected to?²⁵ As the authors say, the concept was utilized to justify imperial intervention, but that does not mean that it was perceived as legitimate. This points to a tension on how they understand practice theory. For them practices are predominantly legal and ideological practices of sovereignty regimes and their utilization in

21 Ibid., 324.

22 Ibid., 287-288.

23 Ibid., 329.

24 Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* (München/Leipzig, 1919) https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/weber_politik_1919?p=1 (Accessed September 10, 2025).

25 Mihatsch and Mulligan, *Shifting Sovereignties*, 30-33.

the establishment of power structures. They fail to account for the different personal experiences that people can have within one legitimized sovereignty regime and thus do not sufficiently analyze sovereignty as a power in practice.

At the same time *Shifting Sovereignities* offers fresh takes for historiographical research. Refocusing the chronology of sovereignty, the authors argue that it has a pre-history, traced around the ancient and medieval world showing that sovereignty systems and regimes existed before modernity.²⁶ Similarly, they decenter the Westphalian perspective through a global history approach. Highlighting the ascendancy of state-sovereignty as a global development from the 16th to 19th century, this becomes the norm of government only after the Congress of Vienna in 1815.²⁷ Sovereignty is thus neither a fully primordial nor modern concept.

Exploring sovereignty as a praxis, the authors show how sovereignty in empires depended highly on local circumstances. Through the analysis of “recognition,” “extraterritoriality,” and “civilization” they show how empires interfered into other existing sovereignties.²⁸ For example, the recognition of nation-states through other nation-states made the status of nation a desirable quality of political formations. Regarding decolonization, they expand their alternate chronology into the 20th century, arguing that decolonization was not a straightforward process of birth of new sovereignties, but rather a complex process of “self-protection” and “compromise” around neo-colonial economic relationships.²⁹

In conclusion, *Shifting Sovereignities* is a valuable addition to historiographies of sovereignty, demonstrating the value of a global history approach to dismantle Eurocentric portrayals of the development of political ideologies of states and international organizations. While its big history approach is not without pitfalls in regard to analyzing differing experiences of sovereignty, the authors manage to navigate the immense literature and theoretical debate on the topic with ease. *Shifting Sovereignities* is an important methodological groundwork for scholars interested in empire, the nation-state, and the history of global governance and economy.

26 Ibid., 25-51.

27 Ibid., 117.

28 Ibid., 119-152.

29 Ibid., 218.