

The Politics of Nothing

On Sovereignty

Edited by

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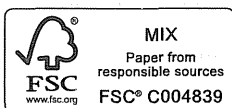
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Enmity and Culture: The Rhetoric of Political Theology and the Exception in Carl Schmitt

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The Ends of Stasis: Spinoza as a Reader of Agamben

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Next to Nothing: Jean Paulhan's Gamble

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Introduction: The Negativity of Sovereignty, Now

Clare Monagle and Dimitris Vardoulakis

The title of this collection is inspired by Georges Bataille's famous formulation: 'Sovereignty is NOTHING' (1980: 300). Here, Bataille suggested that sovereignty resides in the ecstatic moment of forgetting, outside of knowledge, chronology and causality. For Bataille, sovereignty exists only in moments of absence, only when referentiality is abandoned and the nothing is paramount. It can only be known on the *via negativa*, through its effects of, for example, horror, disgust, hysteria, elation or intoxication. Bataille's gesture was to move the concept of sovereignty beyond the juridical, towards subjectivity in the broadest sense. The subject experiences sovereignty through the miraculous moment of rupture into the nothing, which, in turn, itself ruptures the coherence of the subject.

Bataille's statement may appear too obscure or 'metaphysical' in a world that became obsessed with questions about sovereignty after the events on September 11, 2001. Much of the legal debate that took place in the United States, for example, about the correct treatment of enemy combatants hinged on whether or not suspected terrorists should be understood to be citizens of sovereign states, and therefore permitted the protections of the Geneva Convention. And many critical readings of the presidency of George W. Bush were concerned by his extra-judicial decisions, concerned at the presidential assertion of his own exceptional sovereign powers at the expense of due process. The *realpolitik* of sovereignty, expressed through questions about who has it and what it really means, has been laid bare in the international politics of the post-9/11 world.

It is this political context that makes Bataille's gnomic statement that 'Sovereignty is NOTHING' indispensable for beginning a conversation about sovereignty and modernity. In spite of the seeming opaqueness of Bataille's words, his assertion speaks to both modernist and post-modernist unmaskings of the nothing at the core of sovereignty. That is, much twentieth-century theoretical writing has been concerned to show how sovereign claims to authority are always grasping towards an illusory universality. They claim an always deferred higher power as a source of legitimacy. Bataille's proclamation of the nothing at the heart of sovereignty is emblematic of these larger inquiries into the assumptions that generate legitimacy in culture and politics. As such, it functions as a hermeneutic informing this collection of essays. They each seek to consider what happens to sovereignty when its profound nothingness is made explicit. What does this do to conceptualisations of sovereignty? How can a politics be articulated in the face of the nothing?

According to Oliver Roy, one response to the modern understanding of the impossibility of sovereignty can be seen in the actions of Islamic fundamentalists whose actions emanate from the desire to attain pure religion.¹ That is, they resist the idea of a governmental structure that would claim to mediate sovereignty from a higher authority to a general population. Rather, they are driven by a fantasy of the creation of a pan-Islamic community that would transcend the sovereign state, in favour of deculturation in the service of salvation. This manifests as a war on culture, as that which stands between the individual and his God. This is a politics that refuses the distinction of the political as a category, fusing public and private, heaven and earth, and human and divine temporalities. Islamic fundamentalists actively refuse the aspiration of the creation of sovereign entities, preferring instead to proffer an eschatological politics that is always just about to deliver transcendence and bounty. On the other hand, the US and their allies have replied to the terrorist threat through imperialist gestures such as the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Where al Qaeda have refused the idea of sovereignty, conventionally understood, the US and the Coalition of the willing have sought to bolster their own sovereignty through the exercise of force and the use of exceptional powers within their respective domestic situations.

International politics post-9/11 has exposed this fault line, between nation states intent on maintaining their sovereign authority over territories and populations, and terrorist groups desiring to combust the sovereignties of modernity in favour of eschatology. This has been particularly clear in the language used by neo-conservatives to characterise al Qaeda. For Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and others, Bin Laden and his followers represent a dangerous medieval force. The argument went that due to their lack of interest in conventional sovereignty, and their lack of respect for the rule of law, al Qaeda placed themselves outside of modernity's telos. Hence, partly, from this line of argument came the justification for the use of torture on the part of the neocons. As has already been mentioned, as non-moderns, who refuse identification with the sovereign state, it was argued in the 'Torture Memos' that alleged terrorists need not be afforded the general protections laid out in the Geneva Convention.

In so many ways, then, sovereignty has erupted as an urgent issue in a variety of fields – philosophy, political science, legal theory, international relations and so on. However, as Jens Bartelsen has recently showed, the debate in all these fields is marred by a trenchant opposition between two sides. For one group of scholars, the challenges posed by the post-9/11 landscape affords an appreciation of how the forces of globalisation have diminished the power of state sovereignty, arguing that 'crucial features of state sovereignty have been weakened, such as its ability to make and enforce laws, the power to define and defend territorial borders, as well as the capacity to shape and direct economic performance' (2006: 466). Other scholars, on the other hand, maintain the efficacy and necessity of sovereignty as a concept underpinning political life, and argue that what is going on at present is a resetting of the relationship between constituting and constituted power. Sovereignty, here, is reified as the inevitable manifestation of political life. In the former frame, sovereignty is under threat as a result of global capital and market economies. For the former, sovereignty may change its operations, but will essentially remain a concept that underpins governmentality and the state. In order to disentangle this antinomy, Bartelsen (2006) insightfully observes that neither side is aware enough of the ontological status of the concept of sovereignty. Wendy Brown (2008) implicitly shares this view in arguing that sovereignty retains as its central core the fiction of the autonomy of the political – a fiction whose ontological

status is theological. Our inability to unpack that fiction leaves us in sovereignty's thrall, and 'prevents political thought that is in its grip from reckoning with the nature of sovereignty's practical breakdown and re-located trace effects, and above all from reckoning with capital's historically unprecedented powers of domination' (2008: 252).

Bataille's statement that 'Sovereignty is NOTHING' speaks to Bartelson and Brown's insights. In its apophatic energy, it reads sovereignty's implicit theology as a nothing. Sovereignty is never given, as Bodin famously put it, because of its ontological status – its being theological, and hence unfounded on any social practice or discursive justification.² In other words, its ontological status is nothing. Sovereignty *is* nothing, inasmuch as we refuse its always present, if somewhat latent, theological claims. The implications of this recognition for thought and practice are vast, but there are three primary concerns in relation to the understanding of the political in modernity, and which concern us in this volume.

The first concern relates to whether negativity divests discourse of any serious political weight. This is the spectre of the 'dialectic of nihilism', as Gillian Rose (1984) called it. The fear named by Rose is that understanding the nothing of sovereignty would result in paralysis of praxis. The most common line of argument asserts that the nothing or negativity inscribed in the structures of power that many 'post-structuralists adumbrate ultimately leads to vacuous formulations, mere word-play. The notion of sovereignty's negativity undermines the capacity for intellectual or political foundations, within the nothing, there can be no basis for action and a descent into anomie. As a consequence, the nothing is here understood as being divorced from politics, as being unable to have any impact in the way institutions are formed or the law is exercised. This combative attitude harks back to the first modern text that used the term 'nihilism', Jacobi's open letter to Fichte (Jacobi: 1994).³ In this letter, Jacobi chastised the adherents for transcendental realism for their tendency, as he had it, to be less interested in the reality of the material world than in the subjective experiences that produce knowledge. For Jacobi, this philosophy was unmoored from the real, and therefore resulted in a pointless nihilism.

The inevitability of nihilism when sovereignty is recognised as nothing is an idea refuted by Anna-Louise Milne in her chapter for this volume, 'Next to Nothing: Jean Paulhan's Gamble'. Drawing on Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, she argues that the author distinguishes between the nothingness that he held to characterise the Nazi occupation, and the 'small nothings' of custom and habitus that sustain life. In so doing, she refutes claims that Paulhan's work was apolitical, challenging readings that consider Paulhan's thought to be aporetic. Charles Barbour's chapter 'The Sovereign without Domain: George Bataille and the Ethics of Nothing' refutes the tendency of some scholars to impute a mystical nihilism on the part of Bataille, without recognising the fundamentally ethical dimensions of Bataille's embrace of the nothing. That is, Barbour argues, Bataille's assertion of sovereignty's nothingness is in part a repudiation of the servility and waste endemic to sovereignty in its mainstream meanings. Bataille is also a central figure in Ian James' 'Naming and Nothing: Nancy and Blanchot on Community'. In this chapter, James considers the exchanges between Nancy and Blanchot on the nature of community. James shows that both thinkers, in spite of many disagreements, shared the project of thinking community in the light of the absence of transcendent principles that could guarantee authority. James shows how they negotiate their conversation, partly, through their readings of Bataille's affirmation that 'Sovereignty is NOTHING'.

The second concern canvassed in this volume is the opposite of the first, in that it insists of the political significance of the nothing or negativity. As Carl Schmitt argues, sovereignty ‘looked at normatively ... emanates from nothingness’ (Schmitt 1985: 31-32). This line of argument goes back at least to Hegel.⁴ It is often concerned with the way the sacred figures within the secular, with how the theological trace manifests or lingers or erupts in political discourses that claim to be worldly. Most post-World War II political theory can be read from this perspective, from Althusser’s post-Marxism to the famous debate between Nancy (1991) and Blanchot (1988) about Bataille, and from Ernesto Laclau’s concept of the ‘empty signifier’ (1996) to Giorgio Agamben’s more recent argument that the notion of the exception is based on an analogy between justice and negative theology (1998). The common denominator of this approach is that nothingness is here regarded in positive terms. The debate now is about to realise the productive potential of the nothing, of negativity. In this theoretical frame, the nothing opens up a vista of opportunity to rethink political and ethical verities. The nothing, here, forces a reconsideration of the very basis of political commitments, one that takes the refusal of ontology as its generative starting point.

This is not to say that starting something from nothing is easy. A number of chapters in this collection respond to these attempts to think through the nothing, and show the intractability of doing so. For example, in ‘A Sovereign Act of Negation: Schmitt’s Political Theology and its Ideal Medievalism’ Clare Monagle excavates Carl Schmitt’s fantasy about the Middle Ages, upon which his political theology is premised. When faced with sovereignty’s nothingness, she argues, Schmitt takes recourse in a historical vision that privileges the Medieval Church as a long-lost site of unity and pure politics, himself inscribing a historical ontology of sorts. Jürgen Fohrmann’s ‘The Rhetoric on Political Theology and the Exception in Carl Schmitt’ offers another reflection on the foundations of Carl Schmitt’s notion of the exception. Fohrmann draws on a comparison between Schmitt and Benjamin’s readings of *Hamlet*, in order to explore Schmitt’s reluctance to depart from a figure of foundation. The exception, even when Schmitt secularises the concept, necessitates an instant of transcending that is eschatological.

In ‘The Late Althusser: Materialism of the Encounter or Philosophy of Nothing?’, Warren Montag argues that in one of his later works, Althusser deploys the Lucretian notion of the ‘void’ as a way to understand both unfolding chronology, as well as the singularity of the momentary, producing as Montag says ‘a theory of messianicity without a messiah’. Here, the nothing, paradoxically, enables a return to the sacred. A sacred, however, divested of the divine. In ‘The Ends of Stasis: Spinoza as a Reader of Agamben’, Dimitris Vardoulakis shows how the diseased bare life of the *Musulmann* functions for Agamben as a zone of indistinction, separable from politics. This bare life, Vardoulakis argues, is both the nothing and the end in Agamben’s thought. Agamben thus founds a theory of sovereignty, and concomitantly on ethics, upon the passivity of bare life which he reads, following Spinoza, as a site of absolute immanence. Vardoulakis explores how this theory of the nothing of sovereignty turns on itself, and projects a totalising discourse with its own sovereign claims.

The third aspect considered within this collection is, in fact, a symptom of the previous two, and permeates all of the chapters in this collection to some degree. It is the recognition that politics in modernity is inescapably linked to the way nothingness is related to sovereignty. This is an understanding of temporality, that sees sovereignty’s nothingness as not merely a symptom of modernity, but in fact one of its defining features. In this telling, modernity is haunted by its absent ontology, in a double bind

of presence and absence. And because of its centrality to the condition of modernity, the nothing of sovereignty is not a problem that remains confined within political theory. Rather, it permeates every practice that aspires to modernity, in any form. The aforementioned, Jean Paulhan (2006), for example, offered an instance of this when we recognise how sign-posted his study of literature with the notion of the nothing. It is also implicit in Derrida's repeated assertion that deconstruction is a challenge to all forms of sovereignty.⁵ The poetics offered by the photographic negative also comes into play here, as the power of negation that structures modern forms of vision, and representation (see Cadava 1997 and Agacinski 2003). It may not be an overstatement to say that nothing is modernity's trace.

In the context of sovereignty, however, modernity should not be understood as a temporal signifier separated from the past. Rather, as the theological provenance of sovereignty's negativity indicates, sovereignty retains its past as remnants that it refuses to shed. Moreover, as Vardoulakis has recently argued in *Sovereignty and its Other* (2013), such remnants are instrumental in the strategies of the justification of violence employed by sovereignty. So, modernity here does not signify a static temporal category, but rather the moment of the *now* as it is related in various modalities and articulations, connections and disjunction, to past expression of sovereignty.

Notes

- 1 Roy's position is developed over two books (1994 and 2004). From this perspective, Carl Schmitt's (2007) description of the partisan is the complete opposite of today's al Qaeda and other fundamentalists – including Christian Evangelists – since the partisan always includes in his aim the creation of a sovereign state.
- 2 '[T]he people or the aristocracy of a commonwealth can purely and simply give someone absolute and perpetual power to dispose of all possession, person, and the entire state at his pleasure, and then to leave it to anyone he pleases, just a proprietor can make a pure and simple gift of his goods for no other reason than his generosity. This is a true gift because it carries no further conditions, being complete and accomplished all at once, whereas gifts that carry obligations and conditions are not authentic gifts. And so sovereignty given to a prince subject to obligations and conditions is properly not sovereignty or absolute power' (Bodin 1992: 7-8).
- 3 For a discussion of this letter, see Vardoulakis (2010, chapter 1).
- 4 See, for example, the fascinating exchange of letters between Carl Schmitt and Alexandre Kojève about Hegel (1998).
- 5 For Derrida's most important discussion on sovereignty see Derrida (2005).

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