Frictionless Sovereignty: An Introduction

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The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 codified a modern notion of the nation-state that neatly aligned sovereignty with territorial claims and integrity, generating the “common sense” or *a priori* configuration of rights, land and governance.[[1]](#endnote-1) Although essentially a colonial model of state formation exported globally from Europe, this common sense understanding of sovereignty remains necessary for states and governments to enter into agreements with each other and in international organizations despite the ideal correspondence upon which it depends having been rarely achieved in practice. It has become the fiction of sovereignty upon which geopolitics trades and operates. Notwithstanding its fractured and inconsistent application, fragile formations, and incessant reliance on violence and arbitrary implementation, it is the keystone for international order and supposedly “civilized” geopolitics. Operating as a social contract or agreement between states, the concept of sovereignty provisionally prevents interference from other states while conferring the legitimation of laws within the nation-state, providing international recognition of statehood and offering the only political formation capable of legitimately enacting violence. Sovereignty as a political technology emergent from and reliant on a complex nexus of relations--including political, spatial, temporal, economic, strategic, legal, technological (in multiple senses)--has resulted in an uneven jumble through which states seek to enact or assert control over borders, financial systems, military action, violence, land (as well as seas and sea beds), the movement of money/people/data, and upon occasion human or environmental rights. Nonetheless, the assertion of sovereign right, as both a conceit and a fact, might be the only quality--though tautological --that designates sovereignty as such.

This introduction to the special issue “Frictionless Sovereignty” explores some frames and prompts for the special issue’s titular concept, which emerges from the empirical conditions listed above related to planetary computation and a reading of these systems through works on sovereignty by Giorgio Agamben, George Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, Benjamin Bratton, Jacques Derrida, Stuart Elden, Michel Foucault, Catherine Malabou, Achille Mbembe, Fred Moten, Carl Schmitt, Sylvia Wynter, and others such as Arne De Boever (2016) and Dimitris Vardoulakis (2013) (both included in this special issue). The special issue seeks to consider the implications of their arguments for the scales at which frictionless sovereignty might seem to be in operation. The papers included in this special issue develop, challenge and modify the concept in light of technology, urbanism, artworks, aesthetics, bodies and mobilities/borders, blackness, imaginaries of empty spaces and over-determined geopolitical territorialization. At the same time, the papers broach the question of whether or not sovereignty is necessarily the best conceptual apparatus for examining the issues operative within the frictionless domains of systems and computations. Clearly sovereignty as a conceit operates within and justifies geopolitical claims, economic regimes, migration, data flows and planetary computation, but might it just be a placeholder for, or distraction from, other forces in action? Might sovereignty be the rationale for enacting the desires embodied in and realized through both the frictionless and the chokepoints of friction, such that we could swap adjective and noun to make it “the sovereign frictionless”?

To be clear, frictionless sovereignty is essentially a dream, a desire, an ideal, an aspiration, a phantasm, a goal for different entities heady with the power of neoliberal markets, urban human teleologies, nature as standing reserve, anthropocentric history, transitive grammar, and tele-control in which a subject (either individual, state, military, corporation, multi-agent entity) can dictate and manipulate an object without reversibility of that dynamic. An important tenet for frictionless sovereignty can be found in the following formulation: maximum benefit with minimum responsibility. Although immaterial in its essence, this imaginary is undergirded by, generated by and accelerated through complexly multiplying materialities that link in strategic and fundamentally contradictory ways with the desires to which they give rise.The role of finance and the leveraging of inequity, as well as its effects from certain public discursive domains in the sites that most benefit from this frictionless and rapid flow of money, as AbdouMaliq Simone reminds us, is key: “Here, the logics and mechanisms of financialization, for example, are adept at suturing value generating relationships among discrepant raw materials, manufacturing sites, consumption markets, and cultural backgrounds situated in wildly divergent locations and without regard to historical distinctions” (2019).

If all sovereignty is a phantasm, or “a delusion,” a self-referential term with more imaginary than ontological purchase, then frictionless sovereignty is but one of the more recent versions of that phantasm. And it is so for a few specific, interrelated reasons and qualities: teletechnologies that rapidly conflate time duration and spatial distance, the continuation of Cold War geopolitical claims on the planet as globe coupled with claims for state rights on entities and actions in discontiguous territory, the near complete domination of economics by neoliberal capitalist markets, the elevation of the ideal of the individual as agent (in spite of a lack of agency at every turn) replicated in discursive domains and governmental policies, total surveillance of populations, ease of movement of certain kinds of bodies, imaginaries dominated by domination, the intensification of bourgeois comfort into unproblematic existence, human culture positioning itself as supposed master of nature as extractive resource for exploitation and greed, the rapid deterritorialization and reterritorialization of state and individual interests, selective adherence to international norms and laws by nation-states and corporate actors, corporations acting with the rights of individuals: rights that are denied abstract actors such as nature and indeed most citizens/individuals (except in the legalistic formulations) and many others. Writing of the full control over global capital upon which so much of frictionless sovereignty depends, Achille Mbembe argues “Now that everything is a potential source for capitalization, capital has made a world of itself: a hallucinatory phenomenon of planetary dimensions that produces on a grand scale, subjects who are simultaneously calculating, fictional and delirious” (2019). The intimate co-dependence of actors on differing scales operates within and through the mutually reinforcing hallucinatory properties of capital and sovereignty, of gain and triumph, of code and control, of mastery and subservience.

The shift from an epoch of domination (slavery, obedience, alienation) to a more distributed system of hegemony, “in which everyone becomes both a hostage and accomplice of global power” (Baudrillard 7) finds analogy in the shift from the sovereign power of the monarch to that of the people, of the epochal mode of biopolitics, as articulated by Foucault and Agamben. The latter epoch occurs with the dissolution, distribution and perhaps dilution of sovereignty to the citizens in democratic regimes. Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos ask the pertinent question “How to do sovereignty without people?” in the title of their 2007 *boundary 2* piece. The “subjectless condition of postliberal power” is exactly the domain of Baudrillard’s hegemony. This hegemony, which is also the neoliberal order of globalism, has been infinitely accelerated by planetary computation and the increased operation of multi- and polyscalar autonomous remote sensing systems working together by design and accident on planetary scales and beyond (see Bishop and Bratton). Emergent from military technologies that freed centralized command from a specific corporeal presence and thus allowing it to be everyone at once, tightly controlling the chain of command remotely, these current teletechnologies provide data gathering, oversight and remote control of those materials and personnel deemed worthy of attention and direction. The accidental exo-planetary mega-structure of planetary computational platforms and the rapidly expanding ring of satellites surveilling the planet and transmitting wireless data about it, further entrenches the hegemony of the epoch that Baudrillard labels as our own.

Another way of thinking about the end game or overarching purpose of these global computational systems might lead us to pick up a strand of questioning objects/systems along the lines of “What does a brick want?” (Louis Kahn), or “What do images want?” (W.J.T. Mitchell), or “What do simulations want?” (Sherry Turkle). So we can ask “What does sovereignty want?” And in the current moment, the question might be answered, even if somewhat glibly: to be frictionless. How and when this specific ease of engagement is enacted, however, becomes precisely what is up for grabs. The frictionless, too, might simply be or mean impunity, selective responsibility, unilateral benefit, strategic historical memory, willed amnesia and a full-scale discursive and material agenda to become “an id on a tricycle”, to quote Ishmael Reed about Reagan-era America.

*The Frictionless*

Frictionless sovereignty is either an oxymoron or a redundancy. Perhaps it is both. It is oxymoronical because sovereignty requires some sort of resistance–some force or other, some state or territorial challenge, some excess or breach–which would serve as a challenge to legitimize the authority and necessity of that sovereignty while thus proving its authority through its triumph over resistance. The formulation of frictionless sovereignty is redundant because the notion of the sovereign is that which operates self-evidently within its domain, that which can enact its will with impunity (God on earth, or at least God in the marketplace, or the market as god or unquestionable transcendental). More importantly frictionless sovereignty is an imaginary, a goal, born out of inherited notions of the sovereign subject operating in representational democratic governments, codified and fuelled by transitive grammar and semantics, and manifested by tele-technologies that allow for the manipulation of the material world at a distance. In its role as desirable ideal, it shares qualities, aspirations and technics of the supposed teleology of the urban human form as the highest achievement in the history of humanity, an achievement that operates on the frictionless absorption of nature and the rural by the urban to furnish human existence within it.

However, “this imaginary of the frictionless is set within a world of highly differentiated possibilities of friction,” as AbdouMaliq Simone notes. “In some parts of the Global South, particularly, it is not clear who is in charge, who can deploy the signs of overarching authority, and where multiple sovereignties come and go across the same territories of operation, always in intensive operations of friction—where friction itself is the object to be managed more than population or territory” (2019).The frictions and fissures that result from and impinge upon this current mode of mobile, transnational imaginaries about sovereignty are as much the focus of this special issue as the unimpeded operations are. This imaginary exemplifies the “delusion” of sovereignty, as articulated by Joan Cocks, with the difference that the delusion of control central to sovereignty is delimited in her account to physical space (2014). The extensiveness of frictionless sovereignty’s delusion eludes such spatial constraints and as such contains echoes of metaphysical freedoms that harken back to pre-Enlightenment politico-theocratic regimes, thus releasing nostalgia coupled with a false sense of historical continuity.

As such Fred Moten’s description of “the illusory coherence in/and spatio-temporal constitution of sovereignty” points toward the extensiveness and insubstantiality of frictionless sovereignty (2017). As a delusional concept that operates nonetheless with great purchase and resonance, (frictionless) sovereignty traffics in the geopolitical apophenia Moten points to: a coherence between disparate entities and patterns/relations hallucinated by a shared set of “common sense” assumptions about individuals, states, territory, governance and control (cp. Hansen and Stepputat 2005). Frictionless sovereignty leverages these assumptions while simultaneously deploying critiques of them to strategically create sceptical engagement even in the act of embrace: a strategy deployed often by far-right nationalist agendas. The first step that extracts the spatio-constitution of sovereignty from any justification for claims of sovereign rights (and acts taken in the name of said sovereignty) is liberatory; however, it is also reconstitutive of the cynical support systems perpetuating the frictionless, as sovereignty moves from state-centric formulations as its primary site and source. Vardoulakis (in his contribution to this special issue) succinctly bundles these paradoxical and strategically selective foci of frictionless sovereignty into an evocation of Kant’s rhetorical and analytic readings of antinomy. The anti-*nomos*, against a *nomos*, resident in the term’s etymology proves useful for frictionless claims to sovereignty that are against the law of the *nomos* upon which its claims depend while also generative of a substitute, as-if *nomos*. The antinomy, crucially without a medial term, functioning in frictionless sovereignty as it pertains to a (potential) waning of authority in the face of authoritarianism (cp. Vardoulakis), is thesis and anti-thesis (as Kant laid them out in the *Critique*) but without dialectic resolution in any kind of transcendental. Nonetheless, the self-contradictory nature of sovereign claims under these conditions asserts resolution by claimant needs, goals, desires, evanescent memory and a general inability on the part of those who suffer from said claims to respond in a sustained and effective manner.

The quality of the “frictionless” is one desired and fostered by decades of neoliberal economics and social values–free flow of goods, images, ideas, information, capital, natural resources, raw materials, and people (at least some). The facilitation or impeding of movement characterizes much of sovereign claim and legitimacy from the establishment of borders and trade routes and sea rights from early modernity to the present and is pivotal for an understanding of “frictionless sovereignty” as the organizing *topos* of this special issue. The desire for sovereign entities to govern and regulate or steer (as in the Greek term *kybernetic*) flows of people, finance, goods, images and information in the name of its own benefit helps legitimate the sovereignty of the sovereign agent operative within planetary systems and other global operations. Despite exceptional efforts, all kinds of phenomena evade this sovereign desire, not the least dauntingly prevalent and corrosive to sovereignty itself being pollution and epidemics. Nonetheless, sovereign claims as dictation of movement telescopes our inherited understanding of the term to something far more amorphous, porous and ephemeral than public discursive use would suggest. Friction overtakes the frictionless at the border, as we seem to witness more and more every day. Friction is the main quality Brexit, for example, would impose on the European Union’s administrative and bureaucratic say in the UK’s affairs, policies and laws, especially on citizen movement. It is thus mobilized by populist claims to nation rights when engaging alterity or international governing bodies. Similarly but in an altogether different register, the public good or social/collective good becomes the friction in the frictionless sovereignty of the mobile sovereign subject who places individual well being and gain over all else, which is the essence of neoliberal economic rationale. At yet another register, artistic works proffer modes of friction while deploying the tools of the frictionless against itself, with aesthetics drawing attention to the unavoidable politics of its operation.

We can look for frictionless sovereignty and its attempted operation at differing but interrelated scales: the individual as sovereign subject (especially with citizenship options available through online platforms and libertarian ideals); the state and thus the Truman Doctrine enacted seamlessly (or so it seems) at a distance made possible by teletechnologies resultant in the flow of information, goods, money and military action (*Grossräume* or “spheres of influence” with state sovereignty detached in selective ways from land or territory); at the corporate level and at the level of other organizational actors such as those autonomous remote sensing systems for surveillance, profit, military action or soft power influence, including planetary computations loosely tethered to national governments. These scales do not operate in isolation nor are they hermetically sealed. Each one replicates, reiterates and affirms the others through their operations and the desires that drive them.

*Unsettling* Grossräume

“Poor Schmitt: The Nazis said blood and soil. He understood soil. The Nazis meant *blood.*”—Hannah Arendt (marginalia 211, cited in Jurkevics)

Frictionless sovereignty passes through political institutions and bodies, territorial state claims and territorial integrity like neutrinos through human corporeal integrity. Neutrinos treat humans as the ghost realm, translucent and transparent. The same holds for frictionless sovereignty in relation to proclamations of inviolable statehood, territorial integrity and meaningful borders.

Territory, Stuart Elden claims, is a political technology (2013). Schmitt argued that the British, from 1815, brought this technology to the sea, providing a sense of abstract space to waterways and claims of international law to that which had no spatial ordering principle. But many historians of maritime law and sea routes argue such juridical ordering occurred much earlier. Charles I, for example, extended “the Sea of England” to the coasts of the Continent and laid claim to “absolute sovereignty” for the Crown of all the waters in between (Fulton 5-11). In his decidedly unsentimental and thorough *The Sovereignty of the Sea,* Thomas Wemyss Fulton details English claims to oceanic sovereignty as necessary for national defence, but also for plunder, dual justification operative in ever expansive decrees beginning as early as early as the first half of the 17th century. The arguments made for spatial control of the ocean and its byways in abstracted form offered positions similar to that taken later by US in the Truman Doctrine. Similarly, the abstract sense of space migrated from the groundless ground of the sea to that of air space and from air space back to territory through precision targeting of the earth from the sky, creating as Cornelia Vismann notes, the deterritorialized no man’s land bereft of order operational during World War I, dubbing it “the primordial scene of the *nomos*” (62).

Clearly planetary computation, as well as polyscalar autonomous remote sensing systems, function in the same way because many of those targeting and surveillance systems are in fact the same. Trying to sort through the juridical jumble of the post World War II geopolitical sphere, Schmitt distinguished between space-powers (*nomos* tethered to land and not abstracted necessarily into cartographic territory) and air-powers, which described the Cold War emergence of the US global regime. His desire was to reterritorialize sovereignty, much as we witness today in the nationalist resurgence of a specific stripe of sovereignty. The fetishization of land and land rights as foundational for sovereignty finds one important culmination in Schmitt’s *nomos,* which is itself undermined by Heine’s pithy description of the Torah as “the portable Fatherland” of the Jews, thus permanently delinking sovereignty from land and anchoring it in language, community, religion, culture, practices. As a result, according to Sloterdijk, the “space-between-us” and the medial relations that allow us to think ourselves as “us” predates the land in which we live or how we imagine that space (2017: 125-127).

The firm yet remarkably malleable relationship between private ownership and sovereignty narrates state concepts differentiating land from territory. Individuals can own land, but states control territory (see Elden 2013) and territory is comprised of individual property holders of individual land tracts conjoined to become state territory, with individuals and state having differing rights in relation to the same piece of geographic land. Rousseau, in his “Discourse on Inequality,” notes that in the 18th century rulers no longer refer to themselves as being King of peoples but of land, of a state. Thus to dwell in the territory is to be subject to sovereignty and to acknowledge explicitly (or not) the subservience to larger bureaucratic and institutional powers often predicated on transcendental ideological claims that can result in fealty or resentment.

The emergence of Cold War blocs and the Truman Doctrine, which essentially stated that anything on the globe held potential security concerns for the US, prompted Schmitt to further his theories about the *Grossräume,* deterritorialized “spheres of influence” rather than direct territorial annexation. Related to and developed out of sea trade, mercantilism and rationalizations for colonial control, the *Grossraum* has links with “soft power” and other modes of tele-control over space, populations, infrastructure, activities and more importantly their noetic possibilities to imagine shaping the world in the nation-state’s sovereign image. The Westphalian state, indispensably rooted in territory and borders, was from the outset a fiction of transgression, with transgression being the means by which it articulated sovereignty and control. It constituted a secular version of the earlier political theology substituting internal organizations (from the people) for divine authority. This vision of the state is undermined by international trade alliances, pacts and organizations, but also by planetary computation and total real-time global surveillance. Moreover, it was accompanied by a re-emergence of the retrograde political theology that wishes to reconstitute pre-modern geo-jurisdictional domains, or the hallucinations thereof (Bratton 380). The post-Cold War moment, according to Elden, is characterized by an assertion in the United Nations charter that “territorial integrity” proves essential to thinking international norms of sovereignty while simultaneously being challenged. The UN charter puts it thus: “territorial preservation seen as non-negotiable; territorial sovereignty as entirely contingent” (2010). The seemingly paradoxical division of land, territory and sovereignty contained within this summary of the charter indicates an elasticity within the constitution of sovereign claims beneficial to the phantasm of frictionless sovereignty.

The historical role of colonies in articulations of sovereignty and in relation to *Grossräume* is long, complex and ineluctable. On the one hand the colony undermines the sovereign state through discontiguous land claims (the failure of territorial preservation and integrity from within and through the state) while, on the other hand, the colony reifies state sovereignty through its tele-control of lands and peoples for the purposes of state exploitation and the extraction of value. The 19th century saw claims of occupation by state entities that had once been the province of private colonial societies two centuries earlier (Schmitt 215) and were precursors to full occupation in name and deed, especially on the African continent. The legal muddles emergent from such claims were further confused by the US and Asian countries entering the fray, leading to an international set of treaties intended to convert the Age of Discovery into the Age of Civilization (with all of the hubris these phrases announced in universalist upper case abstractions). The Congo Conference of 1884-5 that seemingly settled the matter ended with the infamous words of King Leopold of Belgium, sounding eerily like Marlow’s Company in Conrad’s novel: “Civilization opens up the only part of the globe it has not yet reached, piercing the darkness, enveloping the entire population. That is, I wager to say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress” (qtd. in Schmitt 21). We do not need to belabour the horror of these tropes of discovery or civilization or progress, but their self-proclaimed justification cuts an historical path through to the Truman Doctrine, Cold War pacts and contemporary frictionless sovereignty regimes: the teletechnological reach of military and finance to interfere with and intervene in the world at a whim with the sole purposes of institutional control, value extraction and power display.

Contra Schmittian terra-based biases for sovereignty claims based upon its supposedly obdurate solidity, a number of theorists (e.g. Ross Exo Adams, John Agnew, Joe Painter and Paul Virilio) have argued that territory and networks, beginning as early as the 16th century, could be understood as being one and the same. All forms of political organization or polity, claims Agnew, “from hunter-gatherer tribes to nomadic kinship structures to city-states, territorial states, spheres of influence, alliances, trade pacts, seaborne empires” occupy some form of space and thus space-spanning networks exercise non-territorially determined sovereignty, in both hierarchical and distributed organizational patterns (2005: 441). Networks in this instance are multiple and include trading routes on land and water, to air in the recent past and present, to communications, to colonial connections, to labor agreements to digital media. These too can be *de facto* territory in the manner of distributed *Grossräume*, decoupling territory from bounded state land. When networks count as territory for state actors, frictionless sovereignty cannot be far behind.

China’s massive “One Belt, One Road” initiative (RBI) begun in 2013 offers such a networked, distributed, tentacular set of infrastructural and noetic sovereign claims. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” provides an overland set of linkages and the “Maritime Silk Road” offers the same over-water. The belt links mainland PRC to South Asia, the Middle East, and forking off to Africa and Europe. The road connects the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean toward the same large geographical areas using coastal portals, all with the grand plan of continuing the PRC’s soft power stance as champion of the developing world as established by Mao in 1949. The RAND Corporation’s 2018 analysis of the project interprets the entire endeavour as driven by China’s concerns about security, an attempt to bolster continued economic growth, increased global influence, intensified international investment along with PRC citizens living abroad, and challenges to US and European influence in areas residing in Western geopolitical grey zones of minimal interest (2018: xiii-xvi).

The simple, “common-sense,” equation of land to territory and thus to sovereignty is further complicated by the dynamic and processual nature of the earth itself, of the ground on which the claims are grounded. Not only do the atmosphere and bodies of water, along with their complex interactions as well as the mountains of data generated about their interactions, create challenges for sovereign claims due to their volumetric dimensions and strategic operations within them from air space control to ocean petroleum or metals or even DNA/biological extraction, but also in the polymorphic forms of deserts that move and reconstitute boundaries. Ice masses, for example, contain the geochemical content of water coupled with the phenomenological and experiential qualities of land (Bruun and Steinberg 158). Hydrothermal activities are constantly reshaping the seabed and depositing chemicals of potential value ripe for exploitation. Similarly, the constitution of the land itself is not simply the crust of the geo- in geopolitical assumptions, but a heaving and vital combination of biomass, phytomass, geological strata compiled over aeons of tectonic alterations and mobility. These elements of our planet that strike our senses as solid and stable, of course, ebb and flow in constant processes of metamorphoses, as Empedocles, Hesiod, Lucretius and Ovid philosophically and poetically evoked. The deep time effects of these processes have left numerous chemical geographies that further challenge sovereignty claims when they become the source of extractive industries and large scale terra-forming and terra-altering economies and projects. Selectively choosing state or non-state interactions and claims of control on such a roiling, entangled set of geological, biological, chemical interactive processes and trajectories constitutes the willed lacunae of frictionless sovereignty. Some of terra-altering’s others are the formations one finds at the polar caps, or in ice islands, or the littorals, or volcanic areas…areas that are the sprinters on the geological scales compared to the imputed stolidity and stability of terra firma. Their protean nature is infinitely faster, and therefore more easily legible to humans, than the landmasses that yield “terraforming” imaginaries, planetary design and default claims of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

*Epochal Shifts on the Way to Frictionless Sovereignty*

In his 1576 “Discourse on Voluntary Servitude,” Etienne de la Boétie raises several questions about differing epochs of sovereign control. Michel de Montaigne’s friend wonders about both those who wish to exact domination on others as well as about the masses that willingly submit to such conditions. He writes:

I should like merely to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him.

But if a hundred, if a thousand endure the caprice of a single man, should we not rather say that they lack not the courage but the desire to rise against him, and that such an attitude indicates indifference rather than cowardice? When not a hundred, not a thousand men, but a hundred provinces, a thousand cities, a million men, refuse to assail a single man from whom the kindest treatment received is the infliction of serfdom and slavery, what shall we call that? (de la Boétie 7-8)

De la Boétie answers these questions with the observation that people serve a tyrant because that is what they want: they do it of their own volition. This is the departure point for, and embrace of, domination. The thrust of his argument is not to encourage rebellion or revolution, necessarily, but to remind subjects “that any domination is illegitimate” and wholly given through acquiescence. He held no respect for sovereignty or sovereigns, and perhaps less so for those who voluntarily acquiesced to these regimes (Lotringer 28).

Using this apt text in his introduction to Baudrillard’s posthumous essay “From Domination to Hegemony,” Sylvère Lotringer contextualizes Baudrillard’s epochal argument for regimes of sovereign control and claims. “In order to grasp how globalization and global antagonism works,” Baudrillard writes, “we should distinguish carefully between domination and hegemony” (33). The master/slave relationship is the quintessential domination model, replete with alienation and force along with a “violent history of oppression and liberation” (33). The symbolic relationship of domination and dominated disappears with the liberation of the slave: “the emancipation of the slave” also included “the internalization of the master by the emancipated slave” which sets the stage for hegemony. The shift marks a move from direct to indirect, distributed and abstract control. With hegemony, realized through networks of virtual technologies and movement, total exchange at a horizontal (frictionless?) plane allows distinctions between domination and dominated to dissipate into the systems that deliver everyone into their operation. It returns us, Baudrillard says, to cybernetics in its original form: *kubernetikè,* which is the art of governing. The two paradigms are almost antithetical: “the paradigms of revolution, transgression, subversion (domination) and the paradigm of inversion, reversion, auto-liquidation (hegemony)” (34). Domination has an outside from which it can be overthrown. Hegemony can only be altered--“inverted or reversed”--from within it (38).

Baudrillard’s hegemony maps fairly neatly onto, and reveals the multiple self-serving operations, of frictionless sovereignty, down to the constitution of the human as sovereign species steering a course to the Anthropocene. He writes that “we could even say that the hegemony of global power [in geopolitics] resembles the absolute privilege of the human species over all others” (47). This very sense of self-proclaimed privilege enacts frictionless sovereignty and guarantees its furtherance and perpetuation. As the human stands in smug privilege to other species in the epoch of hegemony and frictionless sovereignty, so stands the subject in relation to the demands of the *munus*--that is, a position of defiant immunity from said demands. The immune position of the sovereign proclaims to be both above the law and the law itself: a position constituted by the law but which does not pertain to the sovereign.

Although the epochal conversion of domination to hegemony as outlined by Baudrillard is clear enough, especially in its realization of the frictionless imagination, we should not ignore the desire for friction, for antagonism, even in the shape of something that might be feared, envied, desired and repulsed all at the same time in a stabilizing/destabilizing ambivalence. As mentioned, multiple examples exist: pollution, disease, disparate access to frictionless systems and benefits resulting in economic inequity, revanchant nationalism, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, migration/refugees, pestilence, specific aesthetic projects (art, literature, music, theatre, dance) and other phenomena that would seem to render ambiguous the neat boundaries between domination and hegemony. Just as bodies become consistent sites and objects of value extraction, with their attendant intimacies and creative possibilities for change and innovation, they also require both free rein and intricate controls. Frictionless sovereignty often factors individuals and their bodies as control objects or sites of profit, elements of the smooth running systems flowing in uniform directions, rather than the disruptive tricksters they clearly can be and often are.

*Some Contexts*

The primary context that the individual papers address is the large body of critical theoretical work on sovereignty (e.g. Agamben, Arendt, Bataille, Baudrillard, Derrida, Elden, Foucault, Malabou, Mbembe, Moten, Schmitt, Wynter, to name a few). Although sustained close readings of these varied theoretical positions–pivotal and essential in the current moment–is beyond the scope of the special issue, the frames nonetheless are integral to the arguments and analyses operative throughout. All of the pieces emerged from and in dialogue with these important writings and specific sustained engagements feature in each article. Literature from a number of relevant fields also play an integral in contextualizing this special issue, including from political science, literary studies, cultural geography, legal studies, maritime law, visual culture and migration studies.

A secondary context can be found in the study of polyscalar autonomous remote sensing systems and their effects on some elements of political philosophical thought relevant to understandings of sovereignty: *autos* (self), *nomos* (law) and *munus* (gift and burden, obligation to others in a community) (Beck and Bishop, Bishop, Bratton, and Gabrys). These inquiries led directly to thinking sovereignty in relation to friction and the frictionless. Although encoded and constructed for different functions and to operate in separate domains, the tele-technological operations of these systems occur through the same combination of software platforms, sensing devices, machine-to-machine interfaces, autonomous monitoring and acting capacities, real-time tele-technologies, automated detection and responsive action components, and widely-distributed sensory data used by a range of agents. Remote sensing systems like the Planetary Skin Institute, Central Nervous System for the Earth (using Smart Dust), and many others work with and feed into the new geopolitical formations operative through planetary computation and platforms. These have reconfigured the *autos*, *nomos* and *munus* in ways still inchoate, emergent and contradictory, providing a deterritorialization and reterritorialization of hybrid governmentalities. As noted earlier, the processes of relating land, territory and de-/re-territorialization to sovereignty are complex and consistently being reshaped from the early part of the 20th century (especially in military terms with the emergence of War Zones and No Man’s Land) to the present (see Elden, Vismann, Virilio, Bratton, Bishop and others). These systems replicate, intensify and accelerate these complicated relations upon which claims of sovereignty reside. For all the supposed efficacies of remote sensing, planetary computation and computational infrastructures tracking and generating various state and corporate interests, the persistent transgression of many traditional territorial claims for statehood and sovereignty become placed in question through the enactment of this contemporary form of sovereignty. At the same time, the reification of borders in specific sites confronts the proliferation of fuzzy borders, places of incessant contestations and ambiguity that result in sites partially authorized, represented and knowable.

A tertiary context is that of the realm of aesthetic production as a site capable of evoking conditions of friction and the frictionless within the operation of sovereignty. As addressed in several papers in this issue (Bishop and Roy, De Boever, Hayden, Hegarty, and Owen), the production of aesthetic subjectivities and works of so-motivated art is not without its contradictions and capacity for reinforcing the very concerns the works purport to critique. As with any challenge to the *nomos,* as Umberto Eco reminds us with the genre of parody, they can often simply rearticulate and reinscribe the power of the dominant ideological narrative and infrastructures of hegemony they attempt to resist, challenge, question or elude. This quandary resides as an integral component of the works addressed in this special issue and bespeaks its import as well at a level of self-reflexivity that might inadvertently participate in or perpetuate the sovereign phantasm in the operation of critique. The formation of aesthetic subjectivities as a putatively non-coercive form of control--as the power to release life from the hold of frictionless sovereignty--say, for heuristic purposes here, in neo-Romantic registers of *Bildung*, or, in the vector of the postcolonial with the recuperation of effaced civilizational symbolics--might also be viewed as a constitutive element of the sovereign phantasm. However, we might not but be able to play that game.

With the possibility of frictionless systems of planetary computation possibly being the source for this expression of sovereignty--as in a drone as smart weapon taking a life not at the direction of a human controller but by software determination that allows the smart weapon to choose a given target–then we return in the current moment to a kind of politico-theological formulation of sovereignty: one predicated on the death penalty and the capacity to take life. The strike need not be the result of a smart weapon but also a remotely controlled one, as exemplified by the 2020 assassination by the Trump administration of the Iranian General and government official Qassem Soleimani; or the accidental deaths of hundreds from the Obama administration’s escalation of tactical drone warfare. Whether the weapon acts on its own predetermined software analytics, or hits the intended “legitimate” target or others as “collateral damage,” frictionless sovereignty puts the “tele-” (at a distance) into the politico-theological potentiality of sovereign action and justification. It becomes the horizontal reach across verified territorial control and rights into the vertical enactment of sovereign control from afar. This is but an extension of the Cold War erasure of sovereignty claims caused by ICBM’s that so shook International Relations scholars and policy-makers (not to mention their polities) in the middle part of the 20th century. The difference in the present is that such actions concurrently produce the retrograde pre-modern geo-jurisdictional domains that accompany planetary computation in a reclamation of national sovereignty predicated on the earlier “right to let live, right to kill” biopolitics outlined by Foucault. If the guillotine marks the move from politico-theological sovereignty to collective state-based sovereignty in an epochal shift, the technologies that make frictionless sovereignty possible mark the movement to new geopolitical formations as yet inchoate but fully operational, as yet indeterminate but robustly imagined, as yet obscure but uncomfortably realized.

The papers that comprise this special issue address various theoretical implications of frictionless sovereignty through three overlapping and interrelated frames: visualizing sovereignty, technology and urbanism, and sovereignty at the scale of aesthetics. Some papers address the frictionless formally--the pursuit thereof or its undoing via artistic processes that enact friction (Bishop and Roy, Hayden, and Owen), the artistic and geopolitical examination of territories that exist, at least in the popular imaginary, as empty or unmarked by lines of sovereignty or clearly articulated through national and transnational juridical regimes (Bishop and Roy, Brebenel, and Hegarty), as well as of city and rural spaces in which such lines multiply overlap, albeit across differently dimensioned strata (Bishop and Simone, and Brebenel). Others engage with bio-ontological positioning via blackness and the strategic mobilization of sovereignty claims as integral to a proper politicization of sovereignty in its contemporary guises and for imaginary futures (Brebenel, De Boever, Bishop and Simone), or through antinomies of sovereignty played out in the tensions resultant from the weakening of political authority in the face of rising authoritarianism (Vardoulakis). In so doing, the papers in different and complementary ways invite reflection on the possibilities and preconditions of artistic and other interrogations of the biophysical imperative of sovereignty to transform life, its limited capacities to do so, and a seemingly growing indifference toward that imperative, serving as it does other aims and interests: those of the frictionless.

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