

Allan Stoekl  
Prof., Emeritus, French and Comp. Lit.  
Penn State University  
University Park, PA 16802

## Sovereignty and Oil

The word sovereignty can be taken in many senses, but most commonly it refers to the functional independence of a political entity. Thus *The American Heritage Dictionary*: “Sovereignty. 1. Supremacy of authority or rule, as exercised by a sovereign or a sovereign state. [...] 3. Complete independence and self-government.”<sup>i</sup>

This definition is, admittedly, fairly vague, and elides a number of recurring questions and problems: what is the origin of sovereignty? How is it related to the establishment and maintenance of civil (and royal or republican) society? How does it manifest itself in relation to the law (its establishment, its imposition), which in turn ratifies sovereignty? In relation to the management and use of resources? Finally, how is sovereignty manifested in and by (and through) the individual citizen?

### I

In recent years discussions of sovereignty, which had been concerned almost exclusively with the establishment and maintenance of the rights of states, societies, and citizens (as the subjects of states) has shifted: there is now a concern with sovereignty in relation to “natural” resources, and, specifically, fossil fuels and that first among equals, oil. These questions first arose with the international oil embargoes of 1973 and 1979: how did the purposeful refusal of oil producers to put their product on world markets, or to trade with certain

nations (nation states), impinge on the sovereignty of those states? By withholding oil, certain states limited the possibility of action of other, sovereign states: their right to trade, to conduct foreign policy independent of material constraint, etc.

This change was part of a transformation of global markets, in which the sovereignty of trading nations was impeded: already in the 1970s the world was not “flat,”<sup>ii</sup> was not a homogeneous realm in which trade occurred without impedance. In fact national sovereignty was the very thing that was constraining trade, and in particular the trade in oil: the sovereign foreign policy decisions of certain nations (the “west”: the United States, western Europe, etc.) were challenged (in an effort to reverse those decisions) by the decision of oil producing nations (members of OPEC). Oil was the fulcrum: it was the central product on which the economies of industrialized nations were dependent. No oil, no industry, no “modern” way of life.

Oil was not only *the* essential component of modern industrial civilization; it was the lubricant, so to speak, that made possible world commerce itself. As Rüdiger Graf, in his book *Oil and Sovereignty* puts it, “economic structures appeared to have emerged that were largely beyond the control of individual states, while simultaneously having a potentially enormous impact upon them.”<sup>iii</sup>

Sovereignty in this formulation is, let’s say, (paradoxically) flexible: by this I mean that the sovereignty of a state, as indicated by Graf, is subject to modification, diminution; it even runs the risk of elimination. It is not absolute as would be, say, the sovereign gesture by which a constitution (a compendium of laws) is enacted, or the act by which a sovereign officially proclaims a set of political priorities (the Queen’s, or King’s Speech, in the UK). In the national and international context sovereignty is malleable: when a state suddenly is denied the fossil fuel resources it requires, its sovereignty is impinged upon: it loses some of its freedom of action. Its economic prosperity is endangered, even its future is in question. (We see this situation today, in Europe; Russian restriction of natural gas and oil exports endangers not just economic prosperity [the functioning of industries dependent on cheap energy resources] but

even the well being of individual citizens [who will no longer be able to afford exorbitant heating bills in winter, and whose savings and earnings will be devoured by inflation].)

But sovereignty in this sense can be modified: one nation's enhanced sovereignty is another's endangered sovereignty. There are sovereignties, and they are in constant relations of mutual modification. President Putin, for example, can affirm Russia's sovereignty—its freedom to act in the realm of politics, war, and trade—but only by impinging on the sovereignty of the nations of Europe (their freedom to keep their citizens warm and fed at the same time). Graf gets at this push-pull nature of sovereignty when he writes: "While the [oil] producing countries [in 1973] acquired rights of sovereignty and coordinated their production policies, the sovereignty enjoyed by the governments of Western industrialized nations appeared to be under threat" (4). It is, it seems, a zero sum game: enhancing my sovereignty means downgrading yours. And at the center of it is a product that is not just a product, but the essential "thing" upon which your life, and not just your prosperity, depends: oil.

Oil is not for this reason just a neutral item that can have peanuts or rubber ducks substituted for it in trade: it is the "object" (in all senses of the word) that generates all other objects, all other economic acts, all other sovereignties. If (national) sovereignty is malleable, subject to infringement, diminution, aggrandizement, oil, and the other attendant fossil fuels, is absolute: it brooks no challenge. Its presence—and then absence, in combustion—is the sovereign (independent of all conditions) action by which all other acts are generated. But what then of the *sovereignty of oil*? If heretofore "Petro-Knowledge" has been characterized as that "concerning the future availability of oil" (Graf, 9), in what will this knowledge consist when we consider oil's sovereignty? How can one *know* the unconditioned—that which establishes all other conditions, without being itself subject to any conditions?

It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who re-situated sovereignty from the will of a nation in an undefined sense—whose nation, whose will behind it?—to the republic’s sovereignty as the definitive expression of the people’s *general will*. As Rousseau puts it in *The Social Contract*, “As nature gives each man absolute power over all his members, the social compact gives the body politic absolute power over all its members also; and it is this power which, under the direction of the general will, bears, as I have said, the name of Sovereignty.”<sup>iv</sup>

The assembly of all wills, without any particular interest separating them, is the general will, which founds the sovereignty of the republic. Hannah Arendt, in her book *On Revolution*, notes that the general will is what unites all members of society not so much in favor of anything—beyond each person’s own freedom—but against his or her own particular interest. Arendt writes: “If only each particular man rises against himself in his particularity, he will be able to arouse in himself his own antagonist, the general will, and thus he will become a true citizen of the natural body politic. [...] To partake in the body politic of the nation, each national must rise and remain in constant rebellion against himself.”<sup>v</sup>

Where does oil fit in here? Rousseau, and indeed Arendt as well, had little interest in energy issues; for them the world was just a question of competing wills, of individuals seeking freedom and security. But we know—as I’ve discussed above—that sovereignty and oil are inseparable. A republic cannot be sovereign without, let’s say, petro-knowledge of the ergogenic general will. But how to conceive of that will?

We could posit two relations of a general will as implicated in, and implicating, oil.

First: a Rousseauian general will in which oil serves to eliminate particular interests. Society is united in its affirmation of each and all as a free agent, an affirmation beyond any particular interest or will. In this case oil is literally the lubricant of society, it allows each to pursue his or her dreams. Society’s petro-knowledge is invisible: each of us refuses his or her particular desires in favor of the coherence of the larger whole (the general will); oil merely allows us to live in society. It is a neutral object allowing us to eat, transport ourselves, be

happy, and then to be loyal citizens. In that sense it is no different from food which, for example, Rousseau never bothers to mention.

Another, contrary view: in the general will, oil is precisely what separates us. We are only united in our alienation (what Sartre called seriality, and Debord the society of the spectacle). My will to distinguish myself (against which, according to Arendt, I should be [paradoxically] in rebellion) is made possible through oil. All my possessions, all my status markers are made affordable through oil. I drive to work so that I can work to drive, thereby distinguishing myself from some schmuck who has to walk or ride a bike. In any version of a truly freeing general will, however, this kind of petro-knowledge—the awareness of my need for oil in order to make my distinction possible—will have to be opposed, with violence if necessary. Indeed the sacrificial violence that is part and parcel of my opposing particularity will in this case be directed not against someone who might oppose the general will, but against the very material object that, we could say, reifies my particularity: oil itself.

A war against oil? Not *for* oil, not for the control of oil resources, but *against* oil and all that it stands for in the domain of modernist, consumerist society? Here we might think of Carl Schmitt, the 1930s thinker of sovereignty. Sovereignty—that expression of the general will—is only possible in the consolidation of a polity in opposition to another group, another will, another enemy. This is the famous friend-enemy distinction.<sup>vi</sup> The general will uniting a society is only brought about in opposition to something, or someone else. The particularity against which I rebel is in this case someone else's: now there appears the above-the-law moment of the exception, the instant in which the will of the group is unified in order to confront an opposing will. But (following Arendt's Rousseau) we can also say that the enemy *is in us*; to affirm the general will we will have to fight the particularity not outside but within ourselves; we will have to go to war with our own oil, the oil in us. Oil is our particularity, not just a sign of it but its fuel, and it is the enemy within which we struggle (there is no space in modernity outside of oil)—and that

we would sacrifice, both figuratively and literally.<sup>vii</sup> This self-lacerating struggle will in principle free us from ourselves, our identity in and as oil.

This opposition to oil can take many forms. A society united in its opposition to oil in principle finds its general will in the dream of freedom from the stuff that disunites it, the material glue of all the individual actions in seriality destroying the planet. But any opposition will necessarily have to be technical. All wars are the effect of technical planning, forecasting, and appropriation. Tools are fabricated, or swiped already fabricated from one's enemies. The war against oil will necessarily be technical as well. This war implies the embrace of alternate energy sources. The danger, however, is that the logic of energy use, and energy transformation, will remain under the sovereignty of the logic of oil.

But these energies will be opposed to oil not just in opposing it and replacing it but, given the problem of the self-lacerating petro-will, enabling the development of another kind of fuel use, another kind of consumption. It is not just a matter of replacing one energy regime with another. It's a matter of rethinking the will in such a way that it is no longer constituted through self-deprecating self-affirmation (in other words it will entail the opposite of Rousseau's general will). Indeed one can argue that that kind of self-affirmation is the ultimate (inner) enemy of any really renewable energy regime.

Against this *other* consumption, which I'll discuss in the section below, there remains the sovereignty of oil itself. If oil is the enemy in the friend/enemy dyad, it too has a will: to sacrifice our very independence as thinking beings, the sovereignty of our supposed general will. Oil in this sense is an *actant*, whose own general will results in the necessary elimination of particular human wants and desires, outside of those narrowly prescribed by oil itself. Sitting in the parliament of things,<sup>viii</sup> it is not represented by us; rather it first represents us, then heckles us, dares us to dispense with it when it is so necessary even to the production of food without which we cannot live. We calculate, but it allows itself to quantify and be quantified, to measure out the carbon molecules on which we depend, our miles per gallon, our BTU's, our parts per million in

the atmosphere. It asserts itself, united against us, daring us to dislodge it from its throne. It calculates us.

### III

This second model of sovereignty—the enemy we face, the sovereignty of the general will—while necessary, poses quite a few problems. The danger of the general will is clear enough: if all that binds us is our will to be bound, and all that separates is us our particular interests, then, since we all have particular interests, we will be constantly at war with each other. The regime of the general will will become the persecution of all that would challenge the general will defined in the broadest sense. Sovereignty then will express itself through the guillotine: as is well known, Rousseau's most devoted reader, Robespierre, found himself engaged in the endless task of rooting out particularisms, and particularists. Anyone with ideas that differed from Robespierre—who had elected himself the incarnation of the general will—was necessarily condemned as a “federalist,” a renegade, an opponent of the general will. True sovereignty, it seemed, could only be revealed in the pronouncements of a single person, the spokesperson of the general will as utopia (a planned, absolute not-place). Or, as others called Robespierre, the tyrant. The glorious freedom of the sovereign general will soon revealed itself in the Terror.

The logic of the friend-enemy distinction, of course, lends itself to violence. In the Schmittian model sovereignty can only manifest itself in opposition, in war. Sacrificing oneself totally (to the point of death) for a good cause is of course laudable, but as Schmitt makes clear the logic of sovereignty does not require that the cause be good—only that it be a cause for

which one (in alliance with others) is willing to sacrifice oneself. Morality is beside the point in sovereignty of the exception.

Opposing the sovereignty of oil implies a warfare, a calculative, finally utopian *strategy* in which all must bend their personal wills before the demand to defeat the regime of oil. Laudable in itself, this inner restraint and outer constraint nevertheless implies a self-sacrifice that too easily can come to be seen as the mere imposition of tyranny. Who would tell me to consume less oil? Why should I? What do I have to give up? Why should I sacrifice my standard of living? Etc., etc. At moments of enthusiasm—the “moral equivalent of war,” as Jimmy Carter called it—constraint/restraint can win the day. Otherwise...

I would like to propose a third sovereignty, then, after the first, which envisaged the paradoxically flexible sovereignty of the state in foreign affairs and commerce, and the second, which envisaged sovereignty as the embodiment of the will in the foundation of the social bond. The third version of sovereignty posits it not in relation to a state, or to a social body, but in a sense that can vary: from national, to personal, to cosmic, but in ways that defy the national, the personal, if not the cosmic.

In *La Souveraineté (Sovereignty)*, a projected (but never completed) third volume of *The Accursed Share* from 1953, Georges Bataille succinctly defines at the outset what for him sovereignty entails:

What distinguishes sovereignty is the consumption [*la consommation*] of wealth, in opposition to labor, to servitude, which produces wealth without consuming it. The sovereign consumes and does not work, while at the other extreme of sovereignty the slave, the man without wealth, works and reduces his consumption to what is necessary, to the products without which he could neither survive nor work.

[...] We could say that the sovereign (or sovereign life) starts when, with necessities assured, the possibility of limitless life opens up.

Reciprocally, the enjoyment [*la jouissance*] of possibilities not justified by utility is sovereign (utility: that which has as its end productive activity). The *beyond* of utility is the domain of sovereignty.<sup>ix</sup>

Bataille links sovereignty here not to the general will but to “limitless life.” In other words the unconditioned now characterizes (if it is indeed a characterization) not political power or social authority, but all acts “beyond utility.” Sovereignty then would account for all human action, and even all action that is not-human or post-human, that is not subordinated to an end. One can think of any number of activities that are useless, of value only as “pleasure”—or as anything else that has no practical purpose. These are precisely the activities that are monitored and controlled (and often forbidden) by a centralized sovereign (political, economic) authority. Aesthetic and sexual pleasures, the joys of all forms of wastage and destruction, glory in war, infamy in crime, the allure of the gangster or glamorous person famous for being famous (e.g., the Queen), laughter, tears, meditative states, other unimaginable states of consciousness...

A strange conception of sovereignty indeed. A conception that challenges in its formulation the very possibility of thought (“serious” thought that is, which is by definition utilitarian), and certainly all thought of sovereignty. But it can manifest itself in many zones, from the cosmic to the personal: we are no longer limited to simply sacrificing ourselves in service to a sovereign *ideal*. The useless sacrifice is carried out irrespective of an ideal; it is not the ideal that is sovereign, but the sacrifice itself.

Bataille continues this line of thought by noting that the useless expenditure of energy is sovereign, and this is where the cosmic becomes important. The universe itself is characterized by the sheer expenditure of energy, unbound by any utilitarian plans, subordinate to no (sovereign) authority. This is a sovereignty unbound by the technocratic. Thus in this third version of sovereignty, that of *tactics*, the planning for any post-oil regime becomes a planlessness, a movement where a sovereign head determining how energy is to be “used” and

“quantified” and “managed” is overturned, since it is no longer the head that is sovereign, but the domain beyond utility.

Oil now appears on a spectrum of energy; it is, after all, only “ancient sunlight.” The sun, wind, geological forces, all are sources of energy that lend themselves to being wasted, spent in a non-utilitarian function. Their conservation and use is subordinate to their sovereign expenditure. Utility is subordinate to the “enjoyment of possibilities”; we conserve only to expend, as does the earth (rhythms of natural growth ending in death, extinction and renewal) and the cosmos (stars holding energy only to burn it off in spectacular fashion).

The attempt to “use” oil is what leads to the famous “addiction” to it; freed from utility as the primary underpinning of sovereignty, energy (and not just oil) is free to be expended without the simple destruction of the planet, in the ancient mode of sovereign uselessness.<sup>x</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *American Heritage Dictionary*, 1973, p. 1236.

<sup>ii</sup> In the famous formulation (and book title) of *NY Times* journalist Thomas Friedman: *The World is Flat*.

<sup>iii</sup> Rüdiger Graf, *Oil and Sovereignty: Petro-Knowledge and Energy Policy in the United States and Western Europe in the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn, 2018): 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London: J. M. Dent, 1930): Chapter IV, 26-27.

<sup>v</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963): 73.

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>vii</sup> On sacrificial violence and the (in principle) selfless affirmation of (a) society, see Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror and Sovereignty* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2008).

<sup>viii</sup> On the object as *actant*, and the parliament of things, see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

<sup>ix</sup> In Vol. VIII of Bataille's *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 48. Emphasis by Bataille; my own translation.

<sup>x</sup> I elaborate further on these different versions of sovereignty, the technocratic and the non-utilitarian (while focusing not on sovereignty but on another crucial term, sustainability), in my recent book *The Three Sustainabilities* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2021).