1 Introduction: Sovereignty and fire

What is sovereignty? If there are questions political science ought to be able to answer, this is certainly one. Yet modern political science often testifies to its own inability when it tries to come to terms with the concept and reality of sovereignty; it is as if we cannot do to our contemporaneity what Bodin, Hobbes and Rousseau did to theirs.

Thus posed, the question of sovereignty can be brushed aside as irrelevant to modern political science. One could argue that the discipline has outgrown the need to wrestle with general concepts, and should devote itself exclusively to their concrete instantiations in empirical reality. Today, when empirical reality furnishes us with a great many sovereignty struggles, we should step down from the ivory tower and concentrate on less abstract problems, perhaps to the benefit of their very concrete victims.

Still, the general question of sovereignty is likely to enter through the back door. With some simplification, one could say that the question of sovereignty is to political science what the question of substance is to philosophy; a question tacitly implied in the very practice of questioning. However much we want to get down to earth, few would deny that modern political reality has the state as one of its constituent parts, however intangible and porous it seems at closer inspection, whether this closer inspection purports to deal with questions about ‘autonomy’, ‘integration’, ‘democracy’, or ‘justice’.

Typically, when the political scientist stumbles upon the state as a unit of analysis, and is forced to define it as an object of investigation, he will once again become entangled in a discourse on sovereignty as its defining property; for what makes a state a state? Simply put, and as I hope to make clear, to the extent that modern political science deals with political phenomena that are conditioned by the presence of
A genealogy of sovereignty

states, it will necessarily presuppose some answer to the question of sovereignty in its attempt to classify and investigate those phenomena. Thus, our will to political knowledge is intertwined with the notion of sovereignty right from the start.

Now this book is not an attempt to answer the question of what sovereignty is; rather, it is a study of what happens today as well as what has happened in the past when others have tried to answer this essentially essentialist question. It is an attempt to investigate the relationship between sovereignty and truth. Doing this, the overall objective of this study is to provide a conceptual history of sovereignty in its relationship to the conditions of knowledge. Given the nature of the subject matter, what would such a history look like?

As I will argue throughout this book, a history of basic political concepts such as sovereignty necessitates a change in methodological orientation from what is established practice within the study of political ideas. Contrary to the convictions of the conceptual analyst, I will insist that the relationship between the very term sovereignty, the concept of sovereignty and the reality of sovereignty is historically open, contingent and unstable. Contrary to the convictions of the contextualist historian of political thought, I will insist that the history of sovereignty is more a matter of swift and partly covert epistemic discontinuity than of a ceaseless battle of overt opinions taking place within delimited and successive contexts. Nevertheless, and now contrary to the convictions of the conceptual historian, I will insist that the history of sovereignty ought to be studied not in isolation or within a narrow temporal frame of inferential and rhetorical connections, but in terms of its multiple relations with other concepts within larger discursive wholes, these not being necessarily confined to political ones. Finally, contrary to the convictions of the structuralist historian of ideas, I will, however, insist that these conceptual systems or discourses are open-ended and subject to constant modification by means of rhetoric – a battle over truth which moves discourse forward in unexpected directions more by its unintended consequences than by its intended ones.

But why embark upon such a study, which is most likely to be both abstract and laborious? Let us for a moment dwell upon the relationship between sovereignty and knowledge; is not the connection between them already fairly clear to the political scientist? Sovereignty, either as a general concept or as a property of individual states, is already a given to experience, semantically or empirically. All that
Sovereignty and fire

needs to be done is to disentangle the concept from the ambiguities of its everyday use, and give it a sufficiently precise operational definition as a defining characteristic of the modern state. If this were done, sovereignty would be a ready-made object of inquiry for political science, and all further questions of sovereignty would then be empirical ones; under what conditions are we entitled to speak of a state as being sovereign? Exactly where in this or that particular state is sovereignty located?

To this it is of course possible to reply that sovereignty ultimately is something man-made, and also deserves to be studied as such in its reflexive relationship to knowledge and political reality. Not only is hermeneutics able to mark out a territory of his own: it is likewise possible to reply critically that this fight against ambiguity itself is a peculiarity of the sovereign state, and that empiricism is integral to this strategy.¹ But let us for a brief moment stay empiricist, and suppose that sovereignty, like a natural phenomenon, is, at least potentially, a given to experience as an objective reality, and that it is open to investigation as such.

In speaking of something as an object, we are generally inclined to think that we are objective about it, but because we chose it in the first place, there is a possibility that the object of our choice reveals more about us than we do about it. Take fire: since prehistory, fire has been available to human experience as a datum. Still, despite the apparent uniformity of the objective phenomenon of fire, it is close to impossible to discern a corresponding uniformity in the accounts of fire since antiquity. From ancient teachings on the elements, through medieval alchemy to early-modern phlogiston theory, fire is an object of knowledge, yet the accounts of it vary to the point of incommensurability. More puzzling, when the question of fire is raised today, one is likely to discover that fire no longer is a reality for science; there is a theory of combustion, but whenever the original question is posed, answers are likely to repeat the most ancient and most fanciful explanations. In modern textbooks in physics, it is as if fire did not exist.²

Yet if fire does not exist, we still speak and act as if it did. The same goes for sovereignty. For all that we know, most human societies have confronted problems of power and authority, and where they should be located. Yet recipes differ from one another, in form and content as well as through space and time; within the regional context of European political thought, we can discern how the source and locus of
A genealogy of sovereignty

authority is distributed downwards in a slow chronological series, ranging from God to king, and then from king to people. Yet our textbooks in political science have become increasingly silent on the topic of sovereignty; since the latest upsurge in the decades immediately before and after the Second World War, the question of sovereignty is seldom raised, and when it occasionally has been, answers tend uncritically to repeat premodern or early-modern formulas, or to sociologize it away as reminiscent of a bygone age.

So perhaps we should do to sovereignty what Gaston Bachelard, a physicist who turned to literary criticism, did to fire; we should avoid the direct question of what sovereignty is, and instead ask how it has been spoken of and known throughout a period of time, and connect the answer to this question with the question of why it seems so difficult to speak of and to know sovereignty today. Posed in this way, the question of sovereignty instead becomes a question of the unthought foundations of our political knowledge and how they relate to the concept of sovereignty, when stripped of all predetermined content and opened to definitional change over time.³

This strategy provokes yet another why. Who is going to benefit from such an inquiry? Certainly not our politicians; the outcome will surely not add to the rhetorical resources of someone involved in a struggle over sovereignty, who instead risks being exposed to laughter. Perhaps the mainstream political scientist; hopefully the outcome will prove edifying to him. But also perhaps a bit disturbing. For every inquiry must depart from somewhere, from a point that is self-evident or at least held to be unproblematic, and since the present inquiry has for its object precisely such points of agreement, it will consequently set these points in motion, expose them to contingency, and deprive them of their unproblematic status. As such, it is likely to have an effect on the mainstream political scientist which is analogous to the effects of his inquiry upon the ideological protagonist.

If the perspective of the mainstream political scientist is the one of a detached spectator who tries to understand clashes between different versions of the political good, the perspective of this book is the one of the detached spectator who tries to understand clashes between different versions of political truth. Thus, if it is accepted as true that every inquiry must start from somewhere, from where do you start if the object of inquiry is starting points? How can one claim to be a detached spectator, if the position of the detached spectator itself is held to be contingent, quite Protestant and sometimes rather illusionary? Is it
Sovereignty and fire

possible to study truth-games without becoming involved in them or being altogether arbitrary in relation to them?

As we shall see in chapter 3, my response to these problems is that of a spectator who not only tries to be detached from his subject matter, but also incredulous towards it by stripping it of some of its pretence. By approaching political science and history as modes of writing rather than as modes of being, we can situate ourselves as detached spectators within history, and can avoid making our detachment dependent on something outside it. As I shall argue, this is possible by starting out from a problematization of what appears as evident in the present. Doing this, we can disclaim the Platonic concept of truth, and instead look into the effective formation of truths, including the truth of our own story, which would then be arbitrary only to the extent that it is undetermined, and false only to the extent that it claims to be itself timeless, and thus self-refuting.4

As a consequence, perhaps the addressees who will reap most benefit from this study are the political philosopher and the historian of political ideas, and among them especially the ones who deal with thought on international relations. As we shall see in chapter 2, we recently have witnessed a renewed interest in the concept of sovereignty among a tiny fraction of scholars devoted to the philosophy of international relations. The upshot of this reappropriation of the concept of sovereignty has been largely critical, and, to my knowledge, no systematic study of sovereignty has yet been undertaken within this field. To the extent that political philosophy merits the label of a science, this fact furnishes another rationale for studying sovereignty. There are few up-to-date studies on sovereignty, and those which do exist tend to take for granted precisely that which is profoundly problematic about sovereignty, or to reconfirm those very distinctions and concepts they set out to analyse.5

Simply stated, the main thesis of this book is that sovereignty and knowledge implicate each other logically and produce each other historically. This thesis is based on the more general assumption that knowledge is political, and politics is based on knowledge. If this thesis is circular, it remains for me to explicate this circularity as a healthy one, which better helps us to understand both sovereignty and knowledge as well as their actual historical relationships. Since this book is devoted to such an explication, a few formal and introductory remarks will suffice here.

First, this circle is not closed at the level of definition, since both
A genealogy of sovereignty

concepts are held open as to their definitional content, which must remain a historical question. Second, this circle is not closed logically, as in a tautology, since this would indicate a stable inferential connection between concepts, and leave nothing for us to investigate. Third, this circle is not closed from a position outside it, from which we safely could observe the interplay between ready-made and well-defined concepts. If the thesis displays circularity, it is because this circularity is repeated in the topic under investigation as well as in the structure of the study itself. If history is a mode of writing rather than a mode of being, a study of history as narrative must itself be a historical narrative, and follow a narrative course which to an extent reflects the structure of the investigated narratives.6

Let us now turn to the a priori warrant of the thesis. What makes knowledge political, and what makes politics knowable? Formally, any decision about what is political and what is not political is in itself a political decision.7 As such, any decision upon the political is a decision based on knowledge, since it either must be taken within a specific body of knowledge or must be legitimized from a vantage point which renders the distinction itself clear-cut or fruitful.

If knowledge is understood as a system for the formation of valid statements, all knowledge is knowledge by differentiation, and this differentiation is a political activity. First, in order to constitute itself as such, some given knowledge must demarcate itself from what is external to it, from what is not knowledge, be it opinion, ideology or superstition. Second, knowledge reproduces itself by internal differentiation, by discriminating between the clear and the opaque, the relevant and the irrelevant, the valid and the invalid, the true and the false. Thus, knowledge implies a set of ontological decisions; what does exist, and what does not exist; what is present as an object, and what is absent? From these decisions, two other decisions follow. One is ethical, and tells us who we are, who is a friend, who is an enemy and who is a stranger. In short, the ethical decision is one of deciding who is Same and who is Other. The other decision is metahistorical, and tells us where we came from, how we became friends, how we got here, where we are, and where we are heading. In short, knowledge, being political to the extent that it differentiates, is indissolubly intertwined with identity and history.

Now knowledge does not differentiate itself wholly by itself; differentiation invariably involves the objects, subjects and concepts that occupy the spaces and positions defined by knowledge. It is here that
Sovereignty and fire

the problem of sovereignty enters; it is here that the concept of sovereignty is filled with a historically variable content. As such, sovereignty does not stand in a predetermined and internal relation to knowledge, nor in an undetermined and external relation to it. Rather, the relation between sovereignty and knowledge is undetermined and internal, and is therefore also a historically open and productive circuit. This productive relationship can be broken down into three distinct types.

First, there is a relation of supplementation, by which sovereignty sustains and reinforces the decisions on differentiation within a given knowledge, and by which a given concept of sovereignty is sustained by a specific differentiation within a given knowledge. Second, there is a relation of articulation, by which sovereignty is articulated and legitimized within a given knowledge, and by which a given knowledge is articulated and legitimized through a given concept of sovereignty. Third, there is a relation of duplication, by which the positions of objects, subjects and concepts constituted by a given knowledge are doubled by the position allotted to objects, subjects and concepts by a given concept of sovereignty.

The primary objective of this book is to describe these conceptual relations within three different periods – the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and Modernity – each of them representing a specific arrangement of knowledge, a specific mode of differentiation and a specific arrangement of sovereignty. A secondary objective is to account for the effective transition between these epistemic arrangements in terms of the internal and undetermined relation between knowledge and the concept of sovereignty. A tertiary but no less important objective is to comment upon and to criticize existing philosophical and historical accounts of sovereignty.

The general approach of this study is genealogical, a notion that will be developed more fully in chapter 3. To say that a study is genealogical is to say three things. First, in so far as genealogy is a historical method, it attempts to be effective history. A genealogy is not a history of the past. Histories of the past can be written either in terms of a present, or in terms of a hypothetical and perhaps idealized future, whereas genealogy is a history of the present in terms of its past. Being effective, it is not a history of causal connections between opinions or precursive relationships between ideological positions, but a history of logical spaces and their succession in time. In order to be effective, a genealogy must start from an analysis of the present, and explain the
A genealogy of sovereignty

formation of this present in terms of its past; a genealogy has not as its
task to tell what actually happened in the past, but to describe how the
present became logically possible. Doing this, I will start out by an
analysis of the relationship between sovereignty and empirical know-
ledge within contemporary political science, and then seek to account
for the formation of this configuration in time. Second, and in order to
be effective history, genealogy must be episodical. It does not aim to
describe or explain past ages or past world-views in their entirety, but
focuses only on those episodes of the past which are crucial to our
understanding of what was singled out as problematic in the present.
Third, in order to be episodical, genealogy must also be exemplary. The
historical argument of genealogy proceeds by means of examples, and
these examples grouped together constitute episodes. An example is
not cut out of a corpus of evidence on the basis of its representa-
tiveness in relation to a preconstituted field, since what is to be
represented is a matter of what is exemplified. Rather, and as with
Aristotle, an example is selected on the basis of its multiplicity and
excess within a hypothetically determined field; an example is chosen
on the basis of a hypothetical rule which governs the formation of
examples within this field, and then used to support the hypothesis of
such general rule. An example is a good example to the extent that it
can be multiplied, and a series of examples is a good series if the series
displays a regularity beyond the individuality of each particular
example. In short, an exemplary history is based on the possibility of
finding general rules for particular cases, and particular cases for
general rules.

In this study, the primary object of analysis is text. As I shall argue at
length in chapter 3, text ought to be treated as autonomous, and as
something logically prior to the objects with which it deals and the
author which it implicates; texts explain the world, rather than con-
versely.

The texts used in this book fall into two broad and ideal-typical
categories. First, there is what I would call traditionary texts. In this
category we find the canon of Western thought, texts that are read and
reread as containers of meaning and truth, as Leviathan or Kurik der
reinen Vernunft. Traditionary texts are those that become classics by
being constantly interpreted and reinterpreted over a span of time. At
the moment of their emergence, traditionary texts are read or intended
to be read as ratio scripta, the meaning and truth contained in them
being the meaning and truth of the world of which they speak. At
Some fluid moment in time, however, their meaning and truth become documentary, and the texts themselves become part of a historical legacy, either because the world of which they speak has withered away, or, because the world of which they speak has become all too real to the reader, who has become its inhabitant. From this point on, they speak of a world which is no longer simultaneous to the world in which they emerged, but to a world which in its turn has emerged out of it.

Second, and as a silent murmur surrounding the history of canonized texts, we find what I call manuals. If traditional texts furnish blueprints for reality, manuals help to translate their meaning and truth into reality and action, to animate the world of which the former speak, to disseminate their ideas and turn them into folklore. They are guidebooks to a reality which they simultaneously help constitute. In this category we find works like Rohan’s *d’Interest* and Descartes’ *Regulae*; works that exercise a strong influence in their own time, but, having performed their function as manuals for thought and action, fall into relative obscurity and partial oblivion.

Like all ideal-types, these categories are not fully mutually exclusive. It is not difficult to find texts that have become traditional due to their impact as manuals. Nor is it difficult to find writers who have written both traditional texts and manuals. *Il Principe* is perhaps the most obvious example of a manual which has become traditional; Bodin and Descartes are good examples of writers who wrote both traditional texts and manuals.

In this book, both categories of texts are used as examples as well as sources of examples, which means that the texts singled out for exemplification and interpretation are not always those commonly identified as the major ones of an age. Then too, when traditional texts are used, the reader will perhaps sometimes be surprised to find that the passages utilized for exemplification are those which traditionally have been regarded as peripheral, cryptic or too commonplace to merit any serious attention. My selection of texts, and my selection of passages from individual texts, are both idiosyncratic and self-conscious; throughout, I have tried to avoid the trivial by reversing the relationship between what has been regarded as central, and what has been regarded as peripheral. This reversal, however, is not a reversal for its own rebellious sake, but has been undertaken with a view to what is central and what is peripheral to my problem. Thus, if I happen to pay more attention to Rouset and Mably than to Montesquieu, or to


A genealogy of sovereignty

read Rousseau's État de guerre closer than his Jugement, it is not out of disrespect for Montesquieu or out of negligence of the Jugement, but out of the conviction that it is effective history that counts, and that the rest is conversation.

Consequently, the specific questions and presuppositions guiding each chapter have also been allowed to guide the sampling and treatment of textual material. For example, one may well wonder why I in chapter 4 chose to read three writers (Machiavelli, More and Vitoria) closely, while in other chapters I use the technique of thematic grouping and exemplification. The answer is fairly simple; it depends on what I want to demonstrate. Specifically, since what is at stake in chapter 4 is to demonstrate rather than merely discourse upon the peculiar relationship between the Renaissance text and extra-textual reality, I must get down to textual detail. This demand becomes less severe with classical and modern texts, since they, although with different emphasis, draw upon and are conditioned by a representational relation between text and reality with which we are much more familiar.

When I have picked editions and translations, I have done so with an eye to authenticity and availability. Whenever a translation has been available, I have used it instead of the original text for quotation and reference, but cross checked the translation of crucial terms whenever a suspicion of anachronism or undue simplification or popularization has arisen. When I have used original texts, I have tried as far as possible to use standard editions. When I have quoted passages in my own translation, I have supplied the untranslated passage in a note.

When I have confronted individual texts with a view to their place in the genealogical framework of analysis, I have done so not in a search for their hidden meaning or their buried truth. As I shall venture to explain in chapter 3, I have tried to stay on their surface, and focused on individual texts as both statements in themselves as well as containers of statements. I have approached them as a felicitous positivist, but not under the illusion that the act of interpretation can be avoided or suspended. As with the choice of texts, interpretation should stay away from the trivial, yet simultaneously it ought to be guided by and relevant in relation to an overall problematic. This double demand always runs the risk of doing violence to the text; throughout this book, I have consistently sought to undo this violence by supplementing the demand of non-triviality and relevance with a