INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty's Janus Face

Denying or Acknowledging Relationality

> All powers have two sides, the power to create and the power to destroy. We must recognize both, but invest our gifts on the side of creation.
>
> —Eddie Benton-Banai, Anishinaabe elder, quoted in *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Phoenix Rising: The Relational Subject of Sovereignty

Ryan Jobson (2020: 261) provocatively argued to let anthropology burn so that we can "imagine a future for the discipline unmoored from its classical objects and referents." A "stable foil" of liberal democracy and humanism no longer presents a discrete and distant ethnographic Other for detached anthropological inspection (Mazzarella cited in Jobson 2020: 261). We can live "among the 'so and so,'" as anthropologists used to unashamedly pronounce, but never truly with them. A genuine "with" will forever evade us as long as our epistemological approach to others fails to account for how the global expansion of liberalism, particularly in the form of colonialism, created the non-Western Other as an object to be identified, known, and managed. This expansion conjured up the anthropological discipline that, as Jobson and others argue, has yet to sufficiently sever itself from its liberal umbilical cord and so risks reproducing colonial structures despite its critique of them. This searing indictment is only anthropology's variation on a wider academic-cum-activist theme insisting that we dismantle liberal epistemologies that provide a particular kind of intelligibility of the world so that we can dismantle the corresponding power structures holding that world's inequalities firmly in place.

In definitive ethnographic style, Jobson anchors his mandate in a specific moment of space-time: the 2018 annual conference of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose, California. During the conference, blankets of airborne particles from relentless nearby forest fires infiltrated the conference venue creating a variety of respiratory problems. Some of the state's most vulnerable people were placed on the front lines of combat. Fifteen hundred penitentiary inmates were recruited to aid the effort to extinguish the fires in

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exchange for a $2.00 per day wage and the possibility of a reduced sentence. Then President Trump's authoritarian response of withholding relief funds on the grounds of the state's allegedly poor forest management made this policy decision even easier (Jobson 2020: 260). According to Jobson's report, the responses of conference-going anthropologists varied from sheer indifference to demands that the organizers provide N95 masks to calls to move beyond the environmentally unsound hotel conference model altogether (Jobson 2020: 260). In the aftermath, Jobson (2020: 261) concludes that "the dual threats of climate change and global authoritarianism are imbricated in longer histories of racial slavery and settler colonialism that persist in the uneven displacements and carceral regimes of the present." Therefore, transforming anthropology requires the discipline to "refuse complicity in [these] structures of dispossession taken up as topics of research" (2020: 261).

Jobson's mandate, appearing as an honored publication under the "Year in Review" section of the *American Anthropologist*, throws down a gauntlet that we cannot ignore. Nevertheless, this book makes no determination on the degree of anthropology's (or any discipline's) current complicity in oppression and ecological degradation. It fully accepts, however, and attempts to squarely answer, Jobson's fiery call to let anthropology burn, which seems to mean dismantling the discipline's persistent liberal suppositions to see what new visions of justice and being come forth (2020: 261). I suspect that most anthropologists share this interest and would welcome clearly articulated alternatives. Arguably, liberalism's most generative supposition—that from which so much modern epistemology derives—is the claim that social and natural reality is composed of discrete, bounded entities that first come into existence and, second, form relations with other entities. This book attacks that claim along with the inverse and equally modern claim that relations cause objects to precipitate wholesale out of them, like raindrops falling out of clouds. It, thus, fully concurs that "anthropology cannot presume a coherent human subject," though chapter 1 challenges, as still too tied to their liberal roots, current efforts to "adopt a new humanism" in response to the climate crisis (Jobson 2020: 267). In so doing, this book seeks to create a prism through which we can imagine "new forms of political organization . . . as we rethink the foundations of sovereignty" (Thomas cited in Jobson 2020: 260). It contends that the "saturation point" that scholars reasonably claim we have reached on all things sovereign (Kelly 2020: 700), speaks only to sovereignty understood in a liberal register.

Indeed, rethinking the foundations of sovereignty cannot be disentangled from rethinking the foundations of the liberal subject. To be sure, Marxists, phenomenologists, feminists, and post-modernists among others have long argued against the empirical reality of bounded, coherent subjects. Many Indigenous peoples likely never had a reason to even construe a person in such

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narrow terms when lived experience obviously points to a deep intertwining of people, animals, plants, and the surrounding ecologies. The table turns as the key question becomes not how "primitives" failed to see the light on boundedness, but rather how "moderns" so willingly devoured this "curious deviation from experience" (Latour 2016: 313). This book takes inspiration from all these alternative positions to ask, "If we are not bounded, internally coherent, and discrete subjects, as liberalism insists, then what are we?" It argues that what appears to modern eyes as such a subject is instead an open-ended entity both inseparable from the global field of relations through which it emerges as a worldly actor and distinct from that field because it lives a life that no one else ever has, ever can, or ever will.[1] This relational subject, which, I suggest, has appeared in an eclectic array of polities throughout history, sets up a relational form of sovereignty that enables human *being* rather than destroys it as happens with state sovereignty when it unleashes its full force.

It will likewise argue that the relational subject's public appearance in any given moment—where it appears to others and experiences itself as unified and singular—is only a temporary manifestation of an inherently dynamic, open-ended tension between the subject and its external relational field as well as the same subject and its internally divided self. Put differently, the world itself is composed of a plurality of relational subjects, each appearing as a singularity, but yet each apparently singular subject is also a plurality within itself always capable of engaging its relational field differently than before. "I am what I am" not because I assert it or discover it but because of how others recognize the malleable "I" that I present to them. Through that ongoing negotiation, "I" am effectively struggling to constitute a world with others that allows me to bring unity to the inner turmoil I feel when the world as I know it precludes me from feeling at home in it. Therefore, the relational subject is, on the one hand, incoherent, prone to reflection, and always vulnerable to the words and deeds of others while, on the other, strives for a distinct and constitutive presence in the world, which requires others to confirm it as such a singular being. Liberal epistemology, along with modern politics, cannot account for both the reality and banality of such a human being.

Given that this open-ended relational subject emerges anew in the space that it constitutes with others, it requires not a just a new understanding of the political. Rather, it requires a fuller definition of sovereignty, which in a modern liberal register has come to mean the power to declare the "exception," that is, to act outside of constitutional precedent to re-establish order in the face of threats that law alone cannot withstand. Accordingly, this formulation defines that sovereign entity with Carl Schmitt's ([1933] 1985: 5) famous phrase "he who decides on the exception." The "he" can come in different forms: a dictator, a president constitutionally authorized to suspend the constitution in certain situations, or a configuration of actors who set the social stage on their

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own terms with no accountability to anyone else. In any case, Schmitt regards the sovereign as "the highest, legally independent, underived power" ([1933] 1985: 17). He recognizes, though, that such power is "infinitely pliable" in its sociopolitical configurations ([1933] 1985: 17). The phrase "legally independent" can fully detach sovereignty from the state because actual power is not always aligned with the highest legally recognized power ([1933] 1985: 18). Legally independent means to have no need for legal recognition. Anthropologists have accordingly focused on non-state configurations and correctly noted the existence of "de facto sovereignty, i.e., the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity where it is found and practiced, rather than [necessarily] grounded in formal ideologies of rule and legality" (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296; see also Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Clarke 2017: 364). Yet, whether tied to a nation-state or not, what still renders these configurations state-like is the formal opposition between those who have sovereign authority and those who do not. Some people possess the capacity to reconstitute the polity while others have their polity reconstituted for them, even if the latter action is justified in the name of the "people."

However, this modern liberal understanding of sovereignty fails to grasp the phenomenon's deeper premise and thus can identify and explain only a narrow range of its real-world expressions. The deeper premise to sovereignty is that it expresses a basic human capacity to inaugurate new beginnings in shared space, for better or worse. Any such inauguration requires an exceptional moment—the moment in which normal order is suspended—that has nothing inherently to do with a state. Instead, it showcases the human possibility of acting without precedent, of effecting rejuvenation and redefinition, and of escaping the ostensible predeterminations of "Nature," "History," "Progress," or the "State." These such events are not just "politics" as they amount to more than just power struggles, manipulations to gain more resources, or even fighting for inclusion in exclusive society. They are instead struggles to constitute a polity where people can appear before each other in terms they negotiate directly among themselves. Sovereignty thus appears in the course of action, regardless of whether the action succeeds in obtaining its formal goal. The key challenge is to explain sovereignty's Janus face, which Patience Kabamba (2015: 26, 38; see also Byler 2021: 166–68) aptly describes as inflexible practices of asserting order (*potestas*) on one side and new ways of manifesting our creative possibilities of being (*potentia*) on the other.[2] Each version can lead to drastically different results, from the violence of invoking states of emergency that squash alleged threats and crush the opposition to the thrill of establishing new emancipatory spaces premised upon differences and mutual agreements.

These antithetical effects of sovereignty are a function of the extent to which relationality among the people involved is acknowledged. Denying relational-

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ity makes possible the objectification of the Other along with the dehumanization that follows in its wake, as those in a stronger position of power remain blissfully (or strategically) unaware that their power is only an effect of an unequal relational existence. It has nothing to do with any inherent qualities of themselves or the Other. As Albert Memmi ([1957] 1965: 98–99) explains that "to justify himself, [the colonial figure] increases this distance still further by placing the two figures irretrievably in opposition." Objectification insists that other people are fixed, finalized, and knowable entities that are inherently unrelated to "us" however "we" may be defined. The denial of relationality facilitates the abandonment to which those in positions of power will consign Others because it denies their constituting roles in our lives. The genocidal sovereign power exerted upon the Jews in the Holocaust over the span of a few years or upon Indigenous peoples worldwide over several centuries required that they be repeatedly diagnosed as vermin and brutes at worst (nonhuman life) or simply irrelevant at best (human life not worth caring about). To be sure, the idea of the relational subject is certainly not foreign to the so-called Western tradition. Recall John Donne's poetic lines from 1623 that Ernest Hemingway chose for the epigraph of his 1940 novel on the Spanish Civil War:

> No man is an *Iland*, entire of it selfe; every man
> is peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a
> *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse,
> as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor*
> of thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were; any mans *death*
> diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And
> therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls;
> It tolls for *thee*.

It just has no influence on Western political imagination.

In contrast, relationality, when acknowledged, provides for the equality of differences among people. Difference is not a pre-given categorical condition, although the deployment of alleged categorical differences in human affairs places serious conditions on peoples' lives. Rather, difference is an inescapable fact of human existence. Hence, Hannah Arendt (1998: 8) emphasizes plurality as a basic condition of being human simply because no two people have ever lived the same life. Each of our unique trajectories through the world, in combination with our interpretations of them, generate our distinct standpoints. This fact reveals a curious feature of being human, specifically, that while we are biologically the same, we are politically different. Understanding relational sovereignty requires us to distinguish these two sides of humanness even if they overlap in daily life. On the one side, humans are all the same, biologically speaking, insofar as the species reproduces itself as recognizably

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human, and, as with other animals, biological reproduction requires a certain social organization to enable it. Biological-cum-social reproduction does not need to invoke our political personae, that which distinguishes each person because of their unique standpoint. Indeed, the plurality of those personae might jeopardize the efficiency that such reproduction requires based as it is on utilitarianism and the policing of public order. Better for the "system" that we appear as generic laborers, planners, logicians, and citizens.

On the other side, to realize the political persona, each subject needs recognition from others as a particular and irreplaceable entity. To be recognized does not mean to be agreed with, but only regarded as one whose opinions are worthy of fair consideration. The openness each person holds toward the other leaves all people involved open to transformation. This combination of openness (requiring equality of difference) and mutual recognition makes for a relational sovereignty that is premised upon plurality rather than upon its denial through reduction to a common biological type (nation, race, gender, or any stereotype explained as a natural fact). It also creates a situation in which sovereign action reconstitutes the actors themselves and their shared space because none of them are finished products but rather open-ended beings capable of newness when they act as a plurality. The experience of renewal is possible precisely because of the subject's lack of internal coherence along with its inseparability from all other subjects. In this regard, relationality does not simply refer to interdependence, but rather to the fact that each person's *being* (in the present) and *becoming* (something new in the future) is possible only through the public space that emerges from their mutual recognition of each other. This phenomenon refers not to some feel-good idea that "you're OK, I'm OK." Instead, it means that human beings, in their political personae, exist relationally, that is, in how people acknowledge each other as "others" (not Others) with whom they struggle to constitute spaces where they can *be*. In this regard, our being as sovereign subjects (as opposed to being subjects of the sovereign) is an effect of the togetherness of our differences.

One effective way to appreciate human relationality is to consider the opposite experience of total isolation. Lisa Guenther synopsizes the horrific effects of solitary confinement whereby prisoners denied the bodily presence of others leads to the erosion of their own subjectivity, their very sense of self. This effect testifies to the fact that "we are not simply atomistic individuals but rather hinged subjects who can become unhinged when the concrete experience of other embodied subjects is denied for too long" (Guenther 2013: xii). The relational structure of the prisoner's being in the world is used as a weapon against them. This move amounts to the "worst form of torture and the principle upon which all more determinate forms of torture are based" (2013: xv). Counterintuitively, then, the worst form of torture takes care of prisoners as biological entities since they are clothed, fed, and housed, so that it can most

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effectively destroy them as political entities, which simply means as particular entities, through mere isolation.

Another effective, and directly contrasting, way to appreciate human relationality is to recognize the thrill people experience when participating in any variety of joint actions that fall under the general term "direct democracy." David Graeber (2002) observes that "it is difficult to find anyone who has fully participated in such an action whose sense of human possibilities has not been profoundly transformed as a result. It's one thing to say, 'Another world is possible.' It's another to experience it, however momentarily." Graeber does not invoke the word "sovereignty" to describe this experience of newness and originality when collectively constituting another world. However, in defining "direct action" as acting "as if the state does not exist," he achieves precisely that (2009: 203; see also Feldman 2022: 319). This thrilling and phenomenal experience, I suspect, is more common than acknowledged, even if it only happens in fleeting moments either within pockets or on the margins of mainstream society. The problem is that we—academics as one type of intellectual—lack a clear and consistent formulation of it. We fail to give it a name: *sovereignty* in the fullest sense of the term. We thus continue to marginalize such sovereign actions, even if we endorse them, due to the limits of the liberal epistemology through which we inadequately explain them.

The Divided Subject of Sovereignty: Overcoming the Modern Dichotomy between Objects and Relations

The enduring anthropological tenet of holism refers to a basic commitment to investigating different features of human sociality relative to each other to better understand how the parts and the whole work together. Still, what we mean by human relationality requires explication. As Marilyn Strathern (2020: 1) writes in her comprehensive book *Relations*, inquiry into relations "does not simply seek out associations and disassociations across phenomena but imagines and describes them *as* relations, and indeed may use the epithet 'relational' to claim a distinct quality of analysis." In other words, the phenomenon in question is itself a relational entity, an understanding of which cannot be fully obtained by breaking apart and re-assembling the pieces that, from a liberal gaze, seem to compose it. Two problems complicate our understanding of relational entities. First, this entity is itself manufactured out of the relationship between it and the modality through which it is observed. Karen Barad exemplifies the point by means of Niels Bohr's experiment showing that atomic entities appear either as waves or as particles depending on the observational apparatus employed (cited in Strathern 2020: 17). The unique standpoint of the social scientist would likewise condition their perspective on the relational

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entity, even to the point of not allowing them to see it as relational at all. Second, the linguistic tradition in which we are steeped also conditions our apprehension of relational entities because each tradition conceptualizes the relational in different ways (2020: 2). These important caveats need to be flagged, but, for better or worse, this book foregoes the difficult questions of the ontology and epistemology of relations to focus on a different problem tied to the phenomenon: whether relations are external (i.e., the empiricist view that they amount to connections between pre-given, discrete entities) or internal (i.e., the idealist view that relations precede and constitute those entities) (Descombes cited in Strathern 2020: 5). A critique of this dichotomy—a false one in the realm of human affairs—shows us what renders human beings not just as relational beings in this book's formulation but as quintessentially sovereign actors.

To be sure, formulating relations as either internal or external serves well certain approaches to understanding human sociality. Early anthropologists started with external relations and began with the discrete entity. Franz Boas's historical particularism situated alien customs—from a Western standpoint—in their bounded, "nonmodern" contexts so that what appeared as isolated exotica could be understood as reasonable and banal in concert with adjacent customs. Bronisław Malinowski's functionalist anthropology viewed culture as an entire system calibrated to the surrounding ecology through which individual biological and psychological needs are met. Later anthropologists emphasized internal relations. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown explicitly identified them, rather than discrete humans, as the discipline's basic object of analysis. He located the building blocks of society in dyadic relations between, for example, a father and son or a mother's brother and sister's son. For social anthropology, persons implied relations, unlike persons understood biologically in which case they were discrete and nonsocial (Strathern 2020: 9). Fredrik Barth also understood relations as the modality through which group differences are constituted when arguing that "ethnic distinctions do not depend upon an absence of social interaction and acceptance [between groups] but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built" (1969: 10). Marxian-inspired anthropology likewise emphasizes the power of internal relations to generate apparently discrete objects. For Karl Marx, commodities are valued things that precipitate out of relational struggles between capitalist and worker over the wages of labor. In a parallel line of reasoning, Eric Wolf (1982: 3) argued that "the world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes, and inquiries that disassemble this totality into bits and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality." Concepts like nation, society, and culture must be understood as "bundles of relationships" rather than things (1982).

Despite its powers of explanation, the dichotomy between internal and external relations is a false one in the realm of human affairs because, ultimately,

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either one can only explain reaction rather than action itself. The dichotomy disempowers the actor and moots our search for the relational subject as a potentially sovereign being. From either perspective, internal or external, the subject is robbed of initiative and, at most, only responds to forces not inherent to its own sense of self. Bruno Latour (2016) explains this limitation through his critique of the traditional Western formulation of sovereignty. He argues that this idea of sovereignty rests on an unexamined epistemology of the impenetrability of discrete objects, from cells to sheep to workers to nations and, of course, to states (2016: 311–12).[3] This epistemology creates a false picture of reality as composed of bounded entities all localizable on a global map, that is, through a system of discrete coordinate points on a grid overlaying territorial space (2016: 313–15). Stuck with a scattering of discrete objects, the question arises, very narrowly framed, of how one object influences or is influenced by another. Newtonian physics becomes the metaphysics to understand sovereignty based on the example of billiard ball A causing ball B to roll forward upon impact. However, no attention is given to the full milieu in which the balls inseparably co-exist with "the table, the game, the participants, the green felt cover, the rules, etc." (2016: 317). The global game of geopolitics, then, gets narrowly construed as one internally coherent sovereign state (i.e., a static entity) imposing itself on another (2016: 317–18).

This logic does not identify what causes the first state (or ball) in the sequence of events to move or to act as such. All that can be explained is a chain reaction because both internal and external relations preclude originality. If relations are internal, then the object depends upon forces outside of itself to set it in motion. Modernist explanations would refer to laws of History or Nature. All such theories of the inevitably of "progress" (or "regress") are theories of internal relations. But, if relations are external, then the object needs a cause inside it that nevertheless still somehow transcends it or precedes it. The common explanations in this case often carry Darwinian overtones pointing to "selfish" genes, competitive instincts, the sex drive, and survival of the fittest (Herbert Spencer's phrase, actually). Thus, Latour explains that localized, discrete objects suffer from "de-animation" since cause is always attributed to something other than itself (2016: 317). Ironically, objects are brought into motion by causes that cannot be pinpointed on a grid unlike the objects they impact. In Latour's words (2016: 317), "agency has been granted to the external causes that have the magical ability to traverse [objects] entirely."

Yet, while he spotlights its limits, Latour offers little help in escaping the internal-external dichotomy so that we could address the visceral matter of sovereign action, the relational phenomena whereby humans reveal themselves as animate beings capable of introducing newness to worldly life. The question is how to identify and explain the sinews and fibers that link the interior of an incoherent, open-ended, and morally struggling entity (e.g., a human being)

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to the exterior field of relations in which it appears as a singular and distinct entity. This question allows us to see the originality of action without assuming either the radical independence of the given person or the determinative power of social, natural, or biological conditions over their lives. Thankfully, literary reflections provide guidance, particularly James Baldwin's explanation of how he became a writer. Using himself as the example, he both divides the human subject internally and relates it externally to all other beings, thus showing how newness emerges from interior struggles that necessarily manifest themselves in dialogue with the external world.

Baldwin (1984: xix) writes that in the process of trying to discover himself (or avoid himself, as he also mentions), he realized "there was, certainly, between that self and me, the accumulated rock of ages. This rock scarred the hand while all tools broke against it." Yet, he felt deeply that somewhere near that rock was himself, his salvation, his identity, but only if he could first "decipher and describe the rock." That rock signified his "inheritance," which he distinguishes from his "birthright." For Baldwin to claim his birthright, he necessarily had to "challenge and claim the rock" lest the rock claim him, define him, and forever tie him the social position into which he was born. An extended quote is warranted:

> Or, to put it another way, my inheritance was particular, specifically limited and limiting: my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives, and to everyone, forever. But one cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance.
>
> Therefore, when I began, seriously, to write—when I knew I was committed, that this would be my life—I had to try to describe that particular condition which was—is—the living proof of my inheritance. And, at the same time, with that very same description, I had to claim my birthright. I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all (1984: xix–xx).

Baldwin neither denies that history operates directly on his being (nodding toward internal relations) nor shies away from announcing the uniqueness and independence of his existence (nodding toward external relations). Per the former, Baldwin's "inheritance" is his location in a field of human relations that conditioned his life chances, being black and gay in mid-twentieth-century United States. He arrived from birth enmeshed in that relational field. However, conditions are not determinants. They are cards we are dealt. We can play them with as much wit and creativity as we can muster from where we stand. For this reason, Baldwin is "much more than" his inheritance. Per the latter, he is also his "birthright" expressed through the action of his creative writing. While he regards himself as an unfinished product, Baldwin still recognizes himself as a distinct person engaging the world that in turn recognizes him as an intellectual force.

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Therefore, Baldwin blends the perspectives of internal and external relations together and so escapes reduction to either one. He makes this move by recognizing his internal split and inner plurality that arises by virtue of his relation to the external world. The rock of his inheritance had created a split "between that self and me." That split revealed two voices—"me" and "myself"—that strove to reach an inner agreement about how to live as a singular self in the world he has inherited (see also Arendt 1978: 179–93). His struggle to unify that division marks the appearance of his particular self as a "vast" being "connecting [him] to all that lives, and to everyone, forever." Baldwin is both utterly unique from and inherently related to all others. He is a relational being and thus capable of sovereign action, inaugurating the new into phenomenal life. Hence, he sees the potential to exceed one's inheritance as a shared feature of humanity: "I am, also, much more than that. So are we all." Without the internal split, then Baldwin (like anyone) would have recognized no difference between the rock and himself. He would have unconsciously fulfilled the social role prescribed to him at birth. He would have lacked a distinct existence and been only a passive agent of historical processes that preceded his birth and continued past his death in the same direction. Or, conversely, he might have regarded himself as a world unto himself divorced as he would have been from what we regard as shared reality and thus becoming a prime candidate for insanity.

Given our need for literary insight to illuminate the relational subject, Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (2015: 5; see also Jackson 2012: 2–3) might be correct that anthropology, or any social science, cannot much grapple with the fact that "no life is ever completely assimilated to *or* alienated from the world." No one is either fully determined by or fully separate from it. Accordingly, they argue that the "minor modes of reality" and the "ethics of small things" remaining outside of theoretical concepts signify the "sovereign expression of life" (Jackson and Piette 2015: 7).[4] This expressive impulse to appear outside of social prescription and to confound theoretical explanation is the prerequisite of sovereign action. Zora Neale Hurston (2006: 7) describes it as "that oldest human longing—self revelation," as portrayed through the character Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. That longing is fulfilled through acts of mutual recognition, in either personal or political contexts, as Janie understood better than the other characters in the novel. She fully grasps that this expressive impulse does not effect itself through liberal self-assertion because the appearance of one subject depends upon its recognition by other subjects. Therefore, our distinct being resides not fully inside ourselves nor outside ourselves, but rather in the struggles and negotiations between the two as we present ourselves to each other in shifting relational fields.

The relational subject of sovereignty, then, is singular and coherent in public appearance (when we disclose ourselves to others) but always open to

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new possibilities, because it is reflective, internally unstable, and capable of reconstitution (Humphrey 2008; see also in phenomenological anthropology, Duranti [2010]; Jackson [2005]; Mattingly and Throop [2018]). To constitute the new does not mean that sovereign action fully creates something out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) or that other influences are not involved (see Zigon 2018: 9). Rather, it refers to the capacity of people to reorganize the ethical premises of their relational space as new and unforeseen circumstances push them to re-evaluate themselves as people striving to live at peace with themselves in the world. Since no conditions or influences are fully determinative, then the new is always a distinct possibility. In sum, the false dichotomy of internal and external relations not only precludes us from recognizing the phenomenality of being in the world with others. It robs us of understanding how people themselves willfully make history move in new directions (whether or not those directions were intended or desirable) as they struggle for a constituent place in the world. More than political action, this relational form of action signifies sovereignty as the modality through which people and the polity rejuvenate themselves.

The Limits of Liberalism

Since this book aims to think past the liberal subject, an outline of liberalism itself is required. This book regards liberalism as an epistemology and an ideology that is deeply interwoven with the making of the so-called modern Western world. Certainly, liberalism contains plenty of contradictions and variations that do not lend themselves easily to generalization. Yet, something distinctive started to shift in Europe as it moved through the sixteenth century with effects that became global and hegemonic as the subsequent centuries unfolded. This shift has definitive features that we must understand. Epistemologically, liberalism entails, among other things, a belief that the natural and social world consist of discrete entities that are internally consistent and subject to knowable laws. Ideologically, it builds on the moral tenets that humans should have no limits imposed on them, except to prevent them from directly harming each other; that they are capable of achieving the unlimited; and that they have an obligation to self and society to make the attempt. From these contentions comes the ideas of liberation, progress, and mastery over all natural and social phenomenon, including mastery over human beings themselves. As a general concept, liberalism contains a variety of ideological positions that compose modernist political thinking such as individualism, nationalism, socialism, and communism, all of which share the objectives of human perfectibility, freedom from restraint, and an ever-improving future. Thus, for example, liberal individualism, a logical precondition of capitalism,

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and socialism both exemplify different variations of the broader modern project of liberation. This book uses of the term "liberalism" in the broad sense and also interchangeably with the term "modernity" unless otherwise noted.

Two key shifts from the medieval era had to occur to make liberalism possible. First, the standard of perfection had to shift from the idea of an infallible, unattainable, and ultimately unknowable God in the heavens above to the human being on earth as the measure of all things (i.e., Renaissance humanism). Second, Europe's economic base had to shift from mercantilism, in which a sovereign tried to maintain trade imbalances over other sovereigns based on the gaining and leveraging of a limited amount of wealth in the world, often in the form of bullion, to capitalism, which focuses on wealth creation thus imagining unlimited possibilities for accumulation and conjuring up an insatiable need for raw material, labor, and markets. That need intensified colonial expansion, which begat the bourgeoisie and offered it the globe, inclusive of its inhabitants and material resources, for scientific inspection and commercial exploitation. Liberalism starts to crystallize in the seventeenth century, as Europe's merchants struggle against feudal systems premised upon caste-based privileges and direct social reciprocities (equal or unequal).

Yet, over time, liberalism achieved much more than merely displacing the aristocracy from the top of the feudal order. It pushed for a world lacking any fixed order whatsoever for the sake of liberating individuals from encrusted social positions so that they may create wealth for themselves. Michel Foucault (2008: 301–2) described this orderless world as a "nonlocal" and "spontaneous synthesis of egoisms over the whole surface of the globe" in which "[t]here is no localization, no territoriality, no particular grouping in the total space of the market." Modernity imagined a world in which no two persons bore any permanent relationship to each other but merely combined together temporarily in what Aristotle called friendships of utility. This radical individualism was conceptualized within a new epistemology of objectification, the practical applications of which seemed limitless. That objectification has been directed at human beings as much as any other entity. William Harvey's 1628 treatise on the circulation of blood in living beings set the early standard for an empiricist approach to studying the body as a discrete, internally coherent biological entity, while Thomas Hobbes's 1651 *Leviathan* dedicates a quarter of its massive weight to explaining the human being as a bounded, internally self-contained, and entirely self-interested organic entity. Things became construed as objects, behaving according to internal laws, that would subsequently be understood as parts of systems. An understanding of those laws permitted the constant rearrangement of objects into new, artificial systems, eventually industrial ones, that would serve human purposes.

This scientific view of a world composed of discrete objects made liberalism both democratic and revolutionary but perhaps not in the ways intended.

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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(In fact, it injected the term "revolutionary" with its modern political meaning of the replacement of an old order with the new, thereby opposing it to its original astronomical meaning of lawful, irresistible, circular motions of celestial orbs [Arendt 2006a: 32].) Liberalism has always diligently focused on what the very word means: liberation from tradition, from prohibitions enacted by a monarchy, from the confines of social rank, from the confines of terrestrial space, from limits on wealth accumulation, and so on. Science became the epistemology available to all people (at least, in principal) under the contention that everyone is equally rational. Elite, authoritative knowledge of scripture could not compete with science either in terms of its practical understanding of the natural world or of its moral commitment to a highly stratified feudal society. Knowledge over things empowered people to instrumentalize those things according to their own plans. Liberal revolution is thus bound up with objectification because it frees people from the relations that bind them to history, to society, to nature, or, in a phrase, to all that is. As it removes the individual from all relations, all other entities get likewise interpreted as discrete objects available as resources to maximize individual well-being. Hence, liberalism regards economic activity as the vehicle for the individual's fulfillment, which, before long, created a class system to replace the medieval caste system. As many commentators have pointed out (for example, see Hardt and Negri 2009: 39–45), the formation of commonwealths after the seventeenth century were designed to politically secure the needs of a bourgeoning propertied class so that it could protect itself internally from its own members' competing interests (a restraint on the forces that liberalism itself unleashed) and externally from the non-propertied classes whom it alienated (i.e., the "multitude" in Hardt and Negri's provocative formulation).

In striving to free individuals from social rank and regarding all persons as equally rational, eighteenth-century liberalism endorsed the "psychic unity of Mankind" (Stocking 1982: 115). While this equality putatively extended to all "races" being drawn into Europe's colonial fold, the proposition was radical enough within Europe itself. Aristocrats and peasants had been regarded as carrying incompatible blood lines. The former's fear of a blood connection to the latter led many of them to resist growing French nationalism in the eighteenth century aimed at eliminating hierarchy and establishing social equality among a symbolic family of citizens (Arendt 1976: 161–65; Foucault 2003). Those citizens should collectively be sovereign by virtue of their natural affinity to the land they farm, rather than an aloof monarch by virtue of a false affinity to God. (The moral basis of sovereignty thus shifts from the divine/celestial to the profane/terrestrial.) The French Revolution became the original and definitive modern revolution because it smashed against any social force holding back the emergence of the nation as its own being. Within its short, checkered history, it foreshadowed much of the modern future with, on the

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FeldmanSubject
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one hand, its promise of *liberté*, *egalité*, *fraternité* and, on the other, its "reign of terror" in which those deemed to have insufficiently demonstrated their love of the nation were categorized as its irredeemable opponents. They met their death cleanly thanks to the guillotine's scientific precision. Liberalism, thus, contains within it an inseparable chord of absolutism as Domenico Losurdo rightly emphasizes (2014: chapter 1).

In this vein, liberalism gave birth to two binary oppositions that conditioned future political struggles. It saw inherent tensions between the individual and the collective and between one collective or another (nation versus nation; class versus class; race versus race). It spoke to allegedly discrete entities struggling in teleological fashion to *become* the fullness of their embryonic essence: nationalism (referring to the struggle of an abstract racial-cum-cultural entity), Marxism (referring to an abstract class), and liberal individualism (referring to an abstract individual). These movements all spoke of progress through the elimination of barriers to human *being* (individually or collectively) and through a technical mastery of the surrounding natural and human world (including, oddly, today's notion of "self-mastery"). They require a reductionist understanding of the "subject" as a self-contained entity even if they locate those entities in broader evolutionary processes of becoming. (Subjects, thus, become objects.) To be sure, liberalism opened enormous political and economic space for Europeans in their struggles against their own history of aristocratic hierarchy and of the theological knowledge propping it up. Over the stretch of several hundred years, it has achieved greater equality beginning with national revolutions, class-based movements, women's rights, civil rights for people of color, and rights in terms of gender and sexuality. These liberal movements should not be abandoned now.

Nevertheless, over the same time span, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century as Achille Mbembe (2017: 56–57) dates it, the above historic developments generated massive ecological destruction and human despair, and certainly not as a by-product or an accident of liberalism's ascent. From the beginning, the liberation of the discrete entity (individual, nation, race, or class) required its economic empowerment, which itself was enabled by the ruthless objectification and instrumentalization of peoples and lands absorbed into Europe's colonial fold. It required a staggering hypocrisy where the ethics of what liberals actually did with respect to the Indigenous, the enslaved, and the racialized betrayed the liberal ethics that they espoused on humanity's behalf (Césaire [1955] 2000: 49; Losurdo 2014; Mills 1997). The horrors of the systemic dehumanization that followed need no reiteration here. Predictably, the eighteenth-century "psychic unity of Mankind" was replaced with more qualified and attenuated versions during the nineteenth century as colonial exploitation intensified in tandem with industrialization, astronomical population growth, and the creation of consumer markets worldwide. Evolutionists

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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like E. B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan still accepted its broad parameters, but they also maintained that social or cultural conditions reinforced inferior brain capacity until sufficient contact with an allegedly higher civilization allowed its development to proceed again (Stocking 1982: 115–17). Herbert Spencer made the case in even more explicitly Larmarckian terms arguing that so-called primitive people "could not evolve these higher intellectual faculties in the absence of a fit environment . . . [and so their] progress was retarded by the absence of capacities which only progress could bring" (cited in Stocking 1982: 118).[5] Conservatives pushed these arguments to further extremes. Some acknowledged a common human species but divided it into a fixed hierarchy of subspecies based on "race," while advocates of polygenesis maintained that the world's races all had separate and independent origins. The failure of the colonized to adapt to white "civilization" provided negative evidence of their pre-programmed mental inferiority (1982: 119). A closed circle of tautological reason welded the ideology shut: they are inferior so they can be colonized; they have been colonized because they are inferior.

Uniting the full range of positions on social evolution is the belief that the colonized and the enslaved "Other" could not generate their own history: liberal evolutionists believed in their civilized potential but only with the helping hand of white society while conservatives believed that they lacked such potential altogether given that differences between races were absolute and incommensurable.[6] Colonialism could be justified on both ends of the spectrum, either as the necessary measure to civilize the "primitive" (Kipling's "White Man's Burden") or as the amoral practice of exploiting people who could not be civilized by genetic design (i.e., humanized).

Correspondingly, we must recognize that liberalism necessarily had to perform its work of objectification, alienation, and oppression at home (in Europe and in its settler colonies) for it to be so effectively deployed against the colonized Other. Aimé Césaire's ([1955] 2000: 42) apt mathematical formulation that "colonization = 'thingification'" could be geographically expanded by simply adding "modernization" to form a three-part equation. White folk excluded from the bourgeois male activity of wealth accumulation also had their marginalization explained to them in scientific terms lest they somehow make a legitimate moral claim against the newly created class and gender hierarchies. The criminal, the poor, the laborer, the woman, or the sexually deviant, all became the expert domain of criminologists, sociologists, economists, and psychoanalysts just as anthropologists became responsible for the colonized Other, the "savage slot" in Michel-Rolf Trouillot's (2003) well-known phrase. Even the white bourgeois male, the greatest beneficiary of liberalism, had to confront his own isolation and the meaninglessness of his life, reduced as he now was to a producer or a consumer of commodities. (Hence, the themes of white middle-class alienation have received full coverage in novels, art, and

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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film for well over a hundred years.) Psychology became the academic discipline to guarantee middle-class discipline and help them cope with their alienation lest it preclude them for contributing to the economy (Rose 1998, 1993). Those unable to carve out a niche in the capitalist economy at home were left with the option of trying their luck abroad. Indeed, superfluous Europeans, along with superfluous capital, departed to the colonies in droves by the late nineteenth century to try to find fortune that would elevate their status back home (Arendt 1976: 188–89). They were free to plunder with sovereign impunity given that the colonies were regarded as zones outside the pale of European jurisprudence (Mbembe 2017: 59; see also Césaire [1955] 2000: 41–42). The numerous small colonialists among them might succeed in finding limited fortunes abroad but they ultimately propped up larger, deeper interests by those much more powerful than themselves. As Memmi ([1957] 1965: 11) puts it, "though dupe and victim, he also gets his share." Meanwhile, labor (enslaved, indentured, or waged) was inserted directly into industrial processes that generated unprecedented profit margins by re-engineering natural processes in ways that had never appeared on earth. (Coal does not burn itself to create energy to say nothing of atoms splitting themselves unprovoked.) Thus, natural and human resources were both valued in terms of capitalization so both were reduced to exchangeable commodities. Frederick Winslow Taylor provided the "how to" guide for resource optimization, including human resource, in his book *The Principles of Scientific Management* ([1911] 1919) while Charlie Chaplin satirized it in his film *Modern Times* (1936).

With no disrespect for its gains, liberalism has created conditions in which we become instrumentalized to the logic of order, efficiency, and productivity. While this situation has certainly led to the greater oppression of some people more than others, a distinction that cuts largely across racialized, gendered, and class lines, it has, oddly, depoliticized everyone regardless of the degree of material comfort and security any one person might enjoy. To this point, Ashis Nandy ([1983] 2009: 99) identifies the modernist trap of thinking about oppression in binary terms: "This century has shown that in every situation of organized oppression the true antonyms are always the exclusive part versus the inclusive whole . . . not the oppressor versus the oppressed but both of them versus the rationality which turns them into co-victims."

Therefore, the enduring solution to contemporary disempowerment is not the continued proselytization of liberal promises of freedom and progress to all corners of the earth. That solution exacerbates the problem by reinforcing liberal epistemological and ideological assumptions. Instead, new ideas will require thinking *relationally*, thus building from the fact that any one person's *distinctive* being is inseparable from all distinctive beings. To incorporate relationality into our understanding of sovereignty requires a shift away from the modern definition of equality. Obsessed as it is with categories, modern

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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equality is understood in terms of homogenization. It refers to the sameness of all entities placed into the same category: all people are the same because they are all part of humanity and have the same "human nature"; all citizens are the same because they are all specimens of the same national species; all refugees are the same because they were expelled from the system of nation-states and share a contentless negative existence; all workers are the same because none own capital apart from their labor power; all women are the same since their emotional coordinates are biologically pre-determined, and so on.[7] Equality as homogenization generates a negative egalitarianism aimed at the eradication of difference through categorization (along with the essentialization of differences among categories) even if difference remains nominally represented.[8] Equality as homogeneity might succeed in more fairly distributing precious resources or in providing more opportunities to less privileged groups. We should further add to these important gains. It does not, however, provide for the political appearance of people as particular beings because a plurality of categories organizing human beings en masse has been mistaken for the plurality of actual human beings living on earth. Sameness implies replaceability, thus denying relationality, and creates superfluous people who will be either saved, damned, or ignored only as a matter of political expediency.

Relational sovereignty, in contrast, requires the institutionalization of an equality of differences if the particular actors constituting the polity are to mutually constitute themselves through sovereign action. However, as David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021: 73–77) note, equality is notoriously difficult to define and identify in real human affairs. Among other questions, they ask if it refers to equality of "cash income, political power, calorie intake, house size, number and quality of possessions?" And, furthermore, does it "mean the effacement of the individual or the celebration of the individual?" (2021: 74). These are fair questions, but Graeber and Wengrow's final decision on the matter is somewhat cynical, if understandably so. They conclude that equality lacks real analytical value and instead is only a holdover from earlier speculations on the "state of nature" that reduces all persons to a "protoplasmic mass of humanity" when "the trappings of civilization are stripped away" (2021: 75). They are surely right that such base equality allegedly rooted in biology never existed. Yet, spaces appear, and certainly appeared in the past, through peoples' efforts to guarantee an equality of differences that have an energizing effect about them. (Graeber seems to have understood this point quite well in his writings on anarchist politics.) They may be either practiced implicitly within formal hierarchies or premised upon an explicit agreement among equals. Indeed, Graeber and Wengrow's research points to many different accounts of Indigenous societies throughout history and prehistory alternating seasonally between tyranny and possessiveness, on the one the hand, and equality and altruism on the other. Even in the most tyrannical moments, leaders would ex-

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FeldmanSubject
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ercise some restraint knowing that they would have to appear as equals before others when the season turned (2021: 107; see 98–111 overall).

Graeber and Wengrow cite these examples not only to upset the unidirectional view of so-called political development from band to tribe to chiefdom to state in which inequality is said to increase as political organization becomes more complex. These also show that people have—or have had—rich political imaginations in which they both conceive of living in an alternate political form and routinely effect the change to do so. They explain that "[w]ith such institutional flexibility comes the capacity to step outside the boundaries of any given structure and reflect; to both make and unmake the political worlds we live in" (2021: 111). For them, this flexibility can inspire us to think outside the limits of conventional explanations for modern inequality that insist that we are destined to live in a singular political form until another somehow replaces it. Finding greater flexibility requires a subtler definition of equality that does not superficially regard it in terms of the presence or absence of hierarchy. Hierarchy is necessary to organize, for example, the procurement and distribution of resources, the mobilization of people in a large-scale task, and the education of the neophyte. At stake in the equality of difference, however, is only the opportunity to present one's self to others on one's own terms for fair consideration and to be able to likewise consider others as equals in the joint constitution of our shared space. This kind of equality, which can certainly appear within a formal hierarchy, cannot be measured or legislated and so falls outside of traditional academic categories of political organization. A less formalist approach is necessary to understand it such as those taken in ethnographic research, literature, and film.

The Methodology of a Non-Specialist: Tectonic Plates Make the Mountains

The criticism started long ago that we—academics—know more and more about less and less thanks to the intensification of research specialization. It matters not how radical or conservative the scholar's political orientations are. Rather than crack open new vistas on the human condition, most published research offers variations on themes, counterpoints exchanged among established scholarly networks, and revisions or expansions of accepted theories in light of particular case studies. The resulting publications are well crafted. The right turns of phrases appear at all the right junctures; questions are posed in a recognized aesthetic style; and deference is paid in citations to elite agenda-setting professors (despite the anti-elitist politics of all involved). The demand to build a CV for junior scholars and to maintain professional status for senior ones pushes us to reproduce hegemonic scholarly discourse in a steady output

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FeldmanSubject
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of golden publications that we must generate, Midas-like, from any material we touch. Yet, all this specialization generates enormous knowledge within tightly circumscribed limits. High productivity is contained within a narrow range of inquiry, and each range becomes a foreign territory to anyone not specialized in it. We dare not leave our own territory lest we embarrass ourselves by clumsily stepping into someone else's. The borders still get jealously guarded to protect our long-term professional investments in them. A certain intellectual predictability creeps into the aesthetic style. Elizabeth Cullen Dunn (2021: personal communication) only half-joked when lamenting that there are only "three paradigmatic papers in anthropology: 1) 'These people suffer'; 2) 'But they are still agents!'; 3) 'Whatever you're thinking, it's more complicated than that.'" I would gamble that the pattern is not unique to this particular discipline.

Bypassing the problem of specialization is not solved by becoming an expert in multiple subfields with which we would hope to gain a wider view of the totality from above. This logically and logistically impossible approach would only compound the original problem. Instead, one needs to read deeply at a foundational level from below. The question is not necessarily "where is the latest research in subfields X, Y, and Z?" but rather "what transformative ideas are changing research orientations across disciplines; who best articulated those ideas (even if they did not single-handedly invent them); and how did they do so?" The task is to read the pivotal works that enable new disciplinary directions, thematic topics, and paradigm shifts. These works are far fewer than the voluminous specialized publications that ride in their wake, but that fact, fortunately, shortens the reading list necessary to do the job. Unfortunately, these works become known mainly from the standard, repetitive citations they receive in secondary literature. Yet, when read directly they invariably offer up more thoughts and critical angles than that literature ever represented. (Foucault is still over-cited and under-utilized.) They increase our critical imagination precisely because they take on fundamental questions about human struggle in an array of writing styles (novels, essays, major tracts).

This book, then, engages with several familiar works but from refreshing angles of inquiry. To use a geological metaphor, the methodological project is to examine the tectonic plates below the earth's surface to understand how the variety of geographic features visible on the surface became possible in the first place. Those features appear rather different, just as the ghats of east India are not the downs of southeast England, and the Himalayas result from a different series of subterranean events than the Andes. One would be hard pressed to claim expertise in all these mountain ranges. But, with an understanding of plate tectonics, rock formation, and erosion, the fundamental similarities and differences become comprehensible and more efficient critical engagements becomes possible.

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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This is the methodology of a non-specialist, but not of a dilettante who combines eclectic knowledge with haphazard analysis.[9] In contrast, the non-specialist reads systematically at a fundamental level—again, the texts that define paradigms that enable specialized research. They learn how to capture key questions and issues on which debates across specialized areas pivot. If successful, they develop a consistent analysis that likewise moves across seemingly unrelated specialized terrains. They can potentially offer more durable pictures of issues that perennially hold our attention, such as "political action" or "sovereignty." True, the non-specialist's challenge is keeping up with the nuanced debates that animate cutting edge research. These might contain decisive breaks from the work that inspired them, but this challenge only complements that of the specialist who must avoid sinking into aesthetic repetition by neglecting the foundational issues that enable their own subfields.

Likewise, this non-specialized book about the relational subject of sovereignty examines arguments made by pivotal intellectuals whose work I claim no expertise with the possible exception of Hannah Arendt. Instead, I simply read their books and watched their films (or opera in the case of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*). I maintain that truly transformative writers can be read (and should be read) without the aid of interpretative secondary literature. The secondary literature is often more opaque than paradigmatic texts that inspire it since the former is regulated by over-stylized academic conventions while the latter directly craft their arguments for anyone committed enough to read them (Feldman 2019a). The effort leads to novel interpretations of those paradigmatic texts despite their familiarity. Therefore, even though I cite much secondary literature to augment key points and to benefit from ethnographic examples, this book primarily draws on "canonical" names ranging from Augustine to Francis Bacon to Adam Smith to Karl Marx as well as on more recent distinguished writers such as Frantz Fanon, David Graeber, and Judith Butler whose scholarly heft matches their powers of political inspiration. It also dives into the works of pivotal novelists, such as Chinua Achebe and Zora Neale Hurston, and film directors, such as Werner Herzog and Stanley Kubrick. By directly engaging authors recognized for their pivotal perspectives, I hope that this methodology results in a text that is more focused on key questions, leaner in prose, more synthetic in scope, and more accessible to a variety of readers, but no less sophisticated in critical insight than a specialized monograph.

Compared to an expert perspective, my commentaries on their work might seem historically decontextualized and severed from the contemporary debates in which they emerged. In reply, I suggest that what we regard as a transformative work's proper context changes as quickly as the current, fashionable interpretation of that work itself. We still rely on the expert to define it for us. Instead of striving to capture the elusive context that unlocks the hidden meaning of the text, why not just the read the text as it appears and credit

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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its author with the ability to explain themselves? While we can never fully free ourselves from our own context(s) as readers, we are at least giving the text more breathing room by not actively imposing preconditions for understanding it. The fact that these works live past the dense historical moments in which they emerged—that we read them as living texts rather than historical artifacts—suggests that they have far more to teach us than could ever be contained within the moments of their production. If Baldwin's birthright enabled him to exceed his inheritance, then surely books like his exceed the contexts into which writers like him were born. The engaged reader can also learn their lessons, and discover new ones, even if they are not, for example, experts on James Baldwin.

The Flow of the Argument

Drawing out the relational subject of sovereignty requires us to first understand how the bounded, liberal subject of modernity became the default mode of understanding the self. To this end, chapter 1 examines the rise of this autonomous entity seeking liberation from an increasingly obsolete medieval caste system. Riches arriving from the Spanish colonies by the sixteenth century helped to prompt its emergence along with the corresponding social and economic changes in Europe. That autonomy works in tandem with a new science—expressed in Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*—that sees nature and the cosmos not as a closed, stable, and integrated structure composed of interlocking parts, but rather as object-matter in open-ended space behaving according to discernible laws, the knowledge of which allows humans to re-engineer nature for their own purposes. This bourgeois approach to nature creates a certain contradiction. On the one hand, the new liberal subject separates itself from nature and the cosmos in order to know it, to master it, and to utilize it for the sake of greater material security and of increased accumulation. It confidently claims dominion over nature. On the other, through that same separation, the individualized subject reduces itself to a natural entity – the "human animal" – also governable by discernible natural laws. It thereby objectifies itself, along with all other entities, as a discrete, natural thing that can be mastered.

This contradiction endures throughout the modernist era in which the capacity to labor gets regarded as the natural human being's definitive characteristic as it endows people with a god-like power of creation through the manipulation of nature's resources. This power also enables people to manipulate those resources and each other for capital gain. Through the works of John Locke and Adam Smith, the chapter then shows how premising the polity upon the laboring subject diminishes the political realm for the sake of things

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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economic, specifically private interest founded on stable social reproduction. The chapter then examines Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* to demonstrate the inherent destructiveness, to both the self and others, of living life in accordance with acquisitive liberal individualism.

The chapter next compares challenges to such individualism from Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. The former further naturalizes the subject as a laboring entity while the latter offers a more sophisticated perspective on the relational subject, the political angle of which Judith Butler makes clear. Each perspective influences today's critical ecological approaches (e.g., multispecies studies, vital materialism, ecology of materials perspectives, and actor-network theory), which showcase relationality through the inseparability of human beings, regarded as biologically entities only, from nature. As such, these perspectives ultimately dissolve this bounded subject into the surrounding ecology thereby denying the distinctiveness of each's own political perspective on the shared world. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* to demonstrate how the full dissolution of isolated, discrete humans into the ecology (be it organic, inorganic, or technological) results in their alienation and depoliticization.

This alienation creates a situation where all others are understood not as the distinct persons who appear before us, but rather as pre-defined objects (stereotypes, in colloquial terms) that break apart and mediate the relationships between otherwise particular selves and others. Stereotyping the Other inevitably results in stereotyping the self. In this light, chapter 2 draws out two developments in the modern history of racialization that have blocked our recognition of relational sovereignty and helped to reinforce the idea of the bounded and internally coherent subjects. First, stereotypes of racialized groups convert an otherwise plurality of people into frozen, bounded, knowable objects whose capacity to exceed the social limits into which they were born remains unimaginable. This point applies regardless of where a racialized group is situated in the social hierarchy. Second, the sovereign authority enjoyed by persons in the stronger social position ultimately leads them to insanity and self-destruction. The chapter illustrates these points through an extensive engagement with James Baldwin's essays compiled in *Notes of a Native Son* along some work by Frantz Fanon. Both writers articulate perspectives on human being that evade these traps.

The chapter then explores what Edward Said called the "world-conquering attitude" as distilled from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Much attention has been paid to how Conrad's critique of colonialism neglects the voices of the colonized, thereby advancing colonization despite itself. However, his book brilliantly showcases colonialism's destruction of the colonizer achieved through its denial of relationality with the Other. The colonizer projects its own vision onto the colonized leading to it to surround itself only with itself. This

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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self-imposed isolation results in the colonizer's madness and self-destruction. The sovereign in this arrangement can reconstitute the social field but at the cost of rejuvenating itself because it alienated itself from all other inhabitants. After unpacking this narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, the chapter highlights its different historical manifestations in Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre: Wrath of God*, Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, and Dennis O'Rourke's documentary *Cannibal Tours*. Lastly, through Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, the chapter concludes by showing the subtle shift from a sovereign world premised upon relational subjects to one premised upon the ostensibly discrete, liberal ones of British colonialism.

The enduring global appeal of Achebe's novel, I suggest, is not simply an effect of his richly nuanced presentation of a Nigerian village prior to its despoilment by colonialism. Rather, his novel resonates because he portrays the promise of relational sovereignty through the actions of Okonkwo, a flawed but believable protagonist. Achebe liberates our political imagination precisely because he shows us the promise, though unfulfilled, of a fundamentally alternative sovereign form outside the purview of atomized colonial society. Chapter 3, then, shows the deep state sovereign logics that came to deaden that imagination. First, it examines how the bounded, discrete liberal subject's rise depended upon two fusions in sovereign power. One fusion merges god and the monarch as the monarch is granted undifferentiated god-like power to rule the polity as expressed most clearly in Jean Bodin's *On Sovereignty*. The other merges sovereignty with the "people," as expressed, counterintuitively, in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. This fusion leads to a binary opposition between the undifferentiated, atomized individual and an undifferentiated homogeneous mass society. As both entities regard themselves as "outside the system," this arrangement allows individuals to swing between what we today call libertarianism and vigilantism, that is, between extreme individualism and the faceless blending in with a culturally homogeneous group that acts with impunity against others. This proclivity toward the latter, which can lead to Alexis de Tocqueville's "tyranny of the majority," expresses the terrors of sovereignty organized upon essentialized groups. Carl Schmitt advocated for such sovereignty in juridical terms, while Giorgio Agamben critiqued it as the basic modality of modernist dehumanization.

Second, the chapter then pivots away from the myopia of the Schmittian perspective by means of phenomenology. It highlights the importance of *intentionality*—that is, the orientation of one's *being* to other entities—in the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt to better understand relational sovereignty. It then demonstrates how intentionality informs two complementary and expanding areas of anthropological research. The phenomenology of ethics highlights relationality in daily life though with less emphasis on its political significance, while studies of political action as

The Subject of Sovereignty
Relationality and the Pivot Past Liberalism
Gregory Feldman
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world-building foregrounds action's sense of renewal and open-endedness, though without theorizing relationality among the actors involved. Examples draw from grassroots political action in Japan, India, Canada, and Slovenia.

Recognizing the relational subject as a sovereign actor capable of such renewal requires us to dissolve the liberal distinction between the secular and the divine. This move highlights the human possibility of unprecedented action in this world that renews the polity along with those who compose it. This achievement showcases the divine-like element of being human insofar people perform the god-like miracle of creating worlds through sovereign action that have not existed before. Chapter 4, therefore, begins with the founding of a black polity in the southern United States as presented in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, although the polity ultimately fails as its leading figure elevates himself above the other residents. The chapter then develops a template of relational sovereignty through Augustine's magisterial *City of God*, particularly Books XI and XII, so that we can abstract out some of its key features. Augustine sees the human being as a lesser copy of the Christian god. As that singular god is manifested through the plurality of the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so humans are also singular and pluralistic entities. Each is composed of an inner plurality, but each also appears as a singularity before a plurality of singularly appearing others. As a result, none are internally fixed or discrete beings, but rather each carries multiple possibilities for being with others that find different permutations of expression depending upon how people engage each other in the particular moment. This fluid relationality reveals the element of free will. It grants people the power of change so that they can conduct themselves among others by living in line with god's grace. This premise of *being* human, furthermore, means that time is contingent (not linear or circular), moving in ever new directions depending on human initiative. Relational subjects, thus, carry with them the god-like power to inaugurate new beginnings through historically contingent acts in public life that likewise rejuvenates the actors involved.

With help from Butler and Arendt, the chapter next theorizes relational subjects by linking their interior selves to the exterior world through language and the activity of thinking. It then explores examples of relational sovereignty from Russia, Hawaii, Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America that share similar themes with Augustine but appear in contexts entirely unrelated to his early medieval theology. Each also invokes the "divine" or the "natural" as an extraordinary, but not a separate, dimension of otherwise ordinary human lives. The chapter ends with the story of Skywoman and the creation of Turtle Island in Indigenous traditions around the Great Lakes of North America, as told by Robin Wall Kimmerer. It also portrays the key elements of relational sovereignty but with more attunement to a "natural" world that interweaves the "human" and the "divine." This story along with the chapter's

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ethnographic examples shows that what we can call relational sovereignty, or at least some of its key elements, has been a matter of course for people living either outside the liberal fold or in resistance to it. The book, therefore, concludes with a short call to emphasize questions of sovereignty over narrower questions of politics so that we broaden and deepen our sense of the extra/ordinariness of being together.

Notes

1. This formulation of the relational subject of sovereignty is prompted by Hannah Arendt's view on human plurality and the space of appearance (1998: 8, 192–201, 220). Arendt argues that sovereignty is politically oppressive (1998: 234; see also 2006a: 144; 1972: 229–233), but she refers specifically to European state sovereignty (see Elshtain 2008: 152–57). This view of relationality also resonates with Michael Jackson's existential anthropology (2012: 2–3, 19; 2017).
2. Political scientists and legal and constitutional theorists have often applied the term "Janus-faced" to describe any number of formal institutional practices in which the state conducts itself in contradictory ways (see, for example, Bomhoff, Dyzenhaus, and Poole 2020). They have also used the term to argue that the distinction between a state's sovereign independence and its simultaneous dependence on other states is anachronistic. In either case, the "state" is regarded as the basic unit of analysis (Kunčević 2013). In contrast, this book, as a work in anthropology-cum-critical theory, regards the "state" as an effect of ever-shifting human relations. Its basic unit of analysis is the human being as a relational subject with sovereignty appearing as its modality of being with others in public space.
3. Of course, scholars of International Relations have long moved past the Realist school that Latour critiques but does not mention by name. His example, however, nicely illuminates the limits of liberal epistemology that still underpin the default understanding of sovereignty.
4. Michael Jackson and Albert Piette's (2015: 20) regard for the unpredictable "sovereign expressions of life" also makes sense with respect to their critique of the "ontological turn." This turn assumes that "ontology mirrors epistemology in a constant, unilateral, and direct manner; on the contrary, the relation between being and thought is context-dependent, mutable, and indeterminate." With that assumption, actual human beings "tend to dissolve or disappear into metaphysical renderings of ontology itself" (2015: 21). The effect, then, is the inability to explain action as anything other than a derivative of ontology, that is, only as reaction, or pre-condition.
5. See also Lee Baker (2010: chapter 3) for extensive coverage of neo-Larmarckianism in early American anthropology.
6. Evolutionary thinking is hardly behind us in the twenty-first century. Yuval Noah Harari (2014: 55–56), the best-selling author of the book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, makes the comparison of hunter-gather societies to chimpanzees and bonobos, rather than other human societies, when speculating about life in the prehistoric era. He thus retains the nineteenth century idea that hunter-gatherers merely represented a transition from ape to human, rather than signified human beings in the full, (see Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 92–93).
7. This point does not apply to collective action taken, for example, in the name of race, class, or gender in which the participants agree that their common condition creates a

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need for a certain definition of solidarity. In this case the very deliberations about their common cause transpire on the basis of an equality among difference. If they agree to act in the name of a given category, then they are free to (re)define that category as they see fit.

8. Slavoj Žižek (2002: 10–11) explains nominal difference cheekily but accurately. He writes that we [liberals] want Otherness but devoid of its "malignant properties" ranging from "coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol . . . to liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness."
9. For a similar and inspiring plea in the academy, see Tim Ingold on amateurism (2021: 11–14).

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