Peter H. Russell. *Sovereignty: The Biography of a Claim*. University of Toronto Press, 2021. 192 pp. ISBN: 9781487509095.

https://utorontopress.com/9781487509095/sovereignty/

Peter H. Russell opens *Sovereignty: The Biograph of a Claim* with two occasions that would bring him into conversation with the Dene Nation. The first occurs in 1974 when James Washee, then Grand Chief, contacts Russell seeking consultation on Canada's constitutional government and Dene efforts to draft a declaration asserting their rights as a sovereign nation. Russell accepts the invitation to visit Dene leaders, where he is stumped by the question from a Dene woman, who asks how Canada established sovereignty over the Dene. For Russell, this question spurred his investigation into European sovereignty and its dominance as a political instrument over Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Moreover, it leads to him to conclude that sovereignty is a claim, which should be understood as a "a relationship, not a thing" (10). And, as he states, in the context of the nation-state, this claim works to legitimate an absolutist form of governing power based on (internal and external) territorial recognition.

The second event that Russell describes occurs in 1999 when he is asked to serve as "Canada's envoy" to the Dene Nation. As envoy, he is tasked with producing a statement of shared environmental and governing principles that would be supported by both the Deh Cho Dene and Canada. While twenty-one principles could be agreed upon, it was the disagreement over sovereignty that returns Russell's attention to this subject, stating that sovereignty does the "pernicious work of preventing an Indigenous people from sharing its territory with Canadians in ways that take into account its interests and respect its principles" (9). Here Russell goes on to argue that the solution to limiting these harmful consequences is a robust federalism that can check the claims of absolutism by dividing governing power.

As these two arguments suggest, the biographical subject of the study is a European form of sovereignty that is in stark contrast with Indigenous articulations of self-determination. This focus on Western governance is reflected in the structure of the book, with early chapters swiftly moving from the medieval disputes between kings and popes to the eventual reforms of liberal democracy before turning to the adoption of sovereign claims by colonial governments. Chapter three opens on the conventional origin story of European sovereignty with Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes, whose major works on feudal governance loosely bookend the Peace of Westphalia in 1654.

The discussion on liberal democracy in chapter four continues its movement through European thinkers – specifically John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – to show how *the rule of the people* came to replace the divine right of kings as the legitimating logic underwriting nation-state sovereignty.

While this European story is well-worn territory, Russell offers a critical approach to "liberal sovereignty," which he suggests serves as a unifying force in the mythic construction of Europe's Democratic Age and aids in solidifying imperial power over colonial peoples. But as Russell notes, the blatant contradictions of "liberal sovereignty" not only emerge in the historic violence and oppression of colonial governance but in an illusory democratic nation-state where *rule by the people* persists as an imaginary construction. It is not difficult to recognize in this story the crucial role liberal ideals play in the articulation of nation-state sovereignty; yet the chapter does not fully draw out the consequences of this critique. Instead, the argument softens in the conclusion by stating that this liberal form of popular sovereignty "has had the benign effect of advancing equality by widening opportunities of all people to participate in politics and governance" (52-53). Such statements reflect the limits of the biography since "liberal sovereignty" may have the upshot of paving the way toward equality, an arguable claim in-itself, but the realization of this potential would need to account for Indigenous peoples, and other oppressed groups, actively organizing and calling for participation. Instead, the argument shifts from this general story of the birth of European liberal ideals to distinguishing between different forms of sovereignty as they take hold in colonial settings.

In the next three chapters, which respectively cover European imperialism, "settler sovereignty," and federalism, the implications of this implied progress toward equitable governance come into tension with settler colonialism (a concept not used or referenced by Russell). This is especially evident in the fact that colonial practices predate European democratic reforms, which means Russell must return to the discursive justifications that denied Indigenous sovereignty, thus disrupting the historical trajectory established in the first four chapters. For example, chapter five focuses on European imperialism as a set of 17th- and 18th-century colonial logics and practices – such as *terra nullis* and the *doctrine of discovery* – that legitimized the dispossession of Indigenous land by framing Indigenous peoples as barbarous (less than human) and/or in need of civilization. In these moments, the book reveals what is at stake in articulations of sovereignty which, as in the case of "liberal sovereignty," can foster the illusion of a more equitable future in one context while in another denies the basic humanity of populations it deems as an obstacle to absolute power.

Therefore, the effort of *Sovereignty: The Biography of Claim* to provide a full biography can feel compromised by the centering of European forms of governance and legal precedents which structure this typological account of sovereignty. Take, for example, the distinction between "imperial" and "settler" sovereignty, which is problematic when considering the *long durée* of settler colonialism. Such distinctions yield interesting points worth considering, such as how sovereignty was not always claimed over colonial settings but was instead denied to Indigenous people for the purpose of global positioning and economic ends. But the lack of historical grounding for such distinctions ultimately results in conclusions that attempt to salvage "liberal sovereignty" against what it views as the more egregious abuses of "settler sovereignty." Such distinctions lead to claims – for example, "Indigenous people in colonial Canada did not experience the force of settler sovereignty until the 1830s" (72) – that seem out of step with contemporary scholarship on settler colonialism that emphasizes the structural impact of early settlers on Indigenous communities.

The critique of sovereignty as an absolutist form of governance that must be blunted by federalism (or shared governance between local and national entities) is further obscured in the final chapters where Russell argues for a global governing body capable of externally checking nation-state sovereignty. From this, the book concludes on a cautionary note that emphasizes the failure of nations to address the existential crises precipitated by global issues such as climate change. But here too, the limits of the critique – which cannot think outside the preservation of Western forms of sovereignty – become apparent when considering how little attention is given to the active role Indigenous and other local governing bodies play in attending to these global issues. As Russell argues, "it is only they [nation-states] who have the capacity to deal effectively with three gravest issues facing our planet…threats of nuclear war, climate change, and migration of people" (116). In an epilogue aimed at addressing the global pandemic brought about by Covid, these conclusions are pushed further with an almost full vindication of nation-state sovereignty alongside the clear need for international governance.

The early remarks on the "pernicious work" of sovereignty are eclipsed by the ability of nation-state sovereignty to police borders and impose national lockdowns. Russell still calls for international governing bodies, like the World Health Organization, to coordinate and guide the response to this global crisis, but federalism, he states, is more an obstacle than a possible solution. In a striking contrast to the introduction, Russell states that the claim of "sovereignty over territory and people has not had any

major harmful effects in addressing the pandemic" (143). It is important to note that Russell was writing in the early stages of the pandemic as control measures took precedence, but many will find the claim of "no harm" difficult to parse with unequal rates of mortality among Indigenous populations, increased numbers of migrants being denied asylum, and international inequities in necessary medical equipment and treatment.

Sovereignty: The Biography of a Claim ultimately offers an ambitious intervention into the study of sovereignty that takes a wide-ranging scope – from medieval to contemporary global politics – to foreground how European governance has come to dominate large portions of the world's population. The advantage of this approach is in telling a story of governance that coheres around the articulation of *sovereignty as a claim*, thus providing a useful overview for scholars and students new to this subject. Those familiar with this historical emplotment of European governance may find this structure less compelling and may look to studies with more historical and/or theoretical specificity. To Russell's credit, he provides a useful list of suggested readings at the end of the book for those seeking to delve deeper into this subject. For those engaged with and aware of Indigenous (and other non-state actors) articulations of sovereignty, the biography may seem to stop short of contemporary scholarship that decenters the state. As Russell mentions briefly, questions of sovereignty no longer rest solely with the nation-state (or territory) and now encompass people and movements whose works speak to a range of self-determined ontologies and practices: from food production and distribution of care to migration and autonomy over one's body. For this reason, *Sovereignty: The Biography of a Claim* provides a nuanced, even if at points conflicted, approach to nation-state claims of sovereignty that serve as a useful contrast to Indigenous and emerging articulations of self-determination, thus underscoring the relationships at stake in such claims and the practices these claims foster.

Jim Miranda, Bentley University