Before the Summit: Representations of Sovereignty on the Himalayas

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The flight towards the summit (which is the constitution of knowledge—dominating the realms themselves) is but one of the routes of the labyrinth. Yet this route, which we must follow, false lead after false lead in search of being, cannot be avoided by us, no matter how we try.¹

Knowledge of the Himalayan region, which in itself...scarcely bears the urgency of historical truth, should convince us that it is necessary to allow ourselves to be guided not by an egocentricity like that of existentialism, but only by a general perspective.²

In one of those moments of poetic licence, of sheer diplomatic ingenuity, the personal representatives of heads of state or government, responsible for the arrangement of the Group of Seven (G7) Summits, came to be known in the profession by the name of ‘Sherpas’—the Himalayan people living on the borders of Nepal and Tibet, skilled in mountaineering.³ These newly baptised Himalayans currently roving G7 capitals, meet officially three or four times a year to set the agenda of the Summit, prepare formulae for agreement, and release press communiques. Though remaining in the background and out of media focus, it would be wrong to dismiss the Sherpas as dignified, but essentially insignificant, escorts and helpers who ascend summits by

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3. As modestly stated in G7 accounts, ‘credit for this convenient label for those who prepare the way for the summiters is generally given to one of the British participants’. Robert D. Putnam and Nicholas Bayne, *Hanging Together: Cooperation and Conflict in the Seven Power Summits* (London: Sage, 1987), p. 61.

default. They are already held responsible for gradually changing the original G7 idea of the leaders’ ‘fireside chat’ into a more or less formal system of negotiation.⁴ Yet, the rationale behind the employment of the term ‘Sherpa’, reserved for that exclusive summit of the powerful industrialised states, should not be neglected.⁵ The adoption of a vocabulary associated with the Himalayas is a means of giving further credence to the accustomed metaphor of summitry and the peak representation of sovereignty. The use of such a highly specific term, however, locates this particular type of summit diplomacy in the politically ethereal, highest, and most difficult of terrains, rhetorically tying G7 meetings to—and legitimising them as—‘the summit of summits’. In other words, this metaphor fosters conventional ways of ordering the world, celebrates hierarchy, and works to shape the global imaginary by recollecting popular stories or images of mountaineering, of high or noble objective, of control, of progress, of fortitude, and of human mastery.

In this respect, one needs perhaps only to remember the story of how the pioneers historically negotiated ‘the summit of summits’, and how its ascent was ultimately seen to bear imperial emblems and exemplars of sovereignty.⁶ The reported success of the British expedition in climbing the top of Chomolungma (Everest), on the eve of the Coronation Day of Queen Elizabeth II, was quickly declared by the media as the ‘brightest jewel of courage and endurance... added to the Crown of British endeavour’ and as ‘the seal on a new Elizabethan age’.⁷ The New Zealand Prime Minister, Sidney Holland, also linked the event to the Coronation, and ‘as a symbol that there are no heights or difficulties which the British people cannot overcome’.⁸ That the climb of Chomolungma summit was linked to the Crown was not just a lucky coincidence, but a calculated diplomatic ploy. The message reporting the success was sent by the expedition in code to the British ambassador in Kathmandu, Christopher Summerhayes, who forwarded the news to London, ‘ensuring that Her Majesty the Queen should receive it first’,⁹ treating it as top secret for more than a day, and, to the dismay of many, not even informing King Tribhuvana of Nepal.¹⁰ British diplomacy

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5. Though initially used exclusively for G7 Summits, it recently began to be employed in a few other summits as well, cashing in on the rhetorical currency of the term.
8. The Times, 2 June 1953.
10. James R. Ullman, Man of Everest: The Autobiography of Tenzing (London: George Harrap & Co, 1955), p. 277. Before reaching the British ambassador the message reporting the climb was delivered to the Indian ambassador in Kathmandu, as the radio link used by the expedition at Namche Bazar operated through the latter’s embassy, but it appeared of no particular interest since the Indian ambassador was not aware that it was coded. See Izzard, op. cit., in note 9, p. 244.
coded the whole event as a hieroglyph, a pictorial metaphor interlacing historical ascents, crowning mountain, and royal heads. In addition, the marks of British sovereignty were made evident in the highly political/colonial discourse of ‘the conquest’ of the summit: ‘Everest—Everest the unconquerable—has been conquered. And conquered by men of British blood and breed’.\textsuperscript{11} Climbing the highest peak on earth symbolically annexed a final frontier, an enchanting and inaccessible territory, whose significance had already been inscribed in the colonial imaginary. For this was a terrain already mentally invaded by the Europeans, being made cartographically accessible through British sovereign practices, and even known to the West through an imperial vocabulary, bearing the name of Sir George Everest, the Surveyor-General of the British empire in India. It is not surprising, to that extent, how the ascending traces of the 27 Sherpa porters of the British expedition and of their chief, Bhoutia Tenzing—accompanying Edmund Hillary to the very top—were erased by a media concerned with glorifications of national sovereignty.\textsuperscript{12} This suggests that, to invert the famous summit slogan, one of the problems with sovereignty and its representations is precisely that it—the Other—is never there.\textsuperscript{13} The Other only prepares the way for the summiteers. It has no foothold in the forefront. It cannot occupy the summit.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted from Tiffin and Lawson, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 7, p. 1. Typically, the Head of the 1953 British Everest expedition was a regular army officer, Lieutenant-Colonel John Hunt, who had served in India and had experience of mountaineering in the Himalayas. Hunt published a detailed account of the expedition. See John Hunt, \textit{The Ascent of Everest} (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1953). This was a last-minute change from his original title, ‘The Conquest of Everest’. The military discourse was not peculiar to this expedition, but has been characteristic of mountaineering vocabulary in general, such as the common use of terms like ‘attack’, ‘assault’, and ‘capture’.

\textsuperscript{12} Although Sherpa Bhoutia Tenzing was upgraded to an ‘exceptional’ Sherpa and often ‘domesticated’ as a full member of the British expedition, that was not done without problems. To start with, Tenzing was disappointed by a statement made by John Hunt shortly after the Everest climb, that Tenzing was not that good a climber after all. He was also disappointed by the way in which the media (including British, Indian, and Nepali) twisted the facts and tried to politicise the issue of who climbed the peak first. It ended with both Hillary and Tenzing having to sign a statement prepared by the Nepali government certifying that they ‘reached the summit almost together’. In addition, Tenzing felt that Hillary’s account of how they reached the summit (published in Hunt’s report of the expedition) was ‘not quite fair’ to him, since it gave the impression that Hillary was in charge and that he could have climbed the peak without Tenzing’s help. For a summary of these events, see Ullman, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 10, pp. 264-66 and 285-86. For Hillary’s account of how Tenzing ‘finally collapsed exhausted at the top like a giant fish when it has just been hauled from the sea after a terrible struggle’, see Edmund Hillary, ‘The Summit’, in Hunt, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 11, p. 204.

\textsuperscript{13} When asked why he wanted to climb Everest, George Mallory who eventually died in the 1924 attempt, replied: ‘Because it is there’.

\textsuperscript{14} Ironically, the photograph we have of the first man on the summit of Everest (29 May 1953) is that of Tenzing with an oxygen mask holding aloft, from top to bottom, the flags of the United Nations, Great Britain, Nepal, and India. A small crisis followed as to the political meaning of this order and it was exacerbated by the fact that only the British flag is clearly pictured. Tenzing subsequently said that he was ‘glad the UN flag was on top. For I like to think that our victory was not only for ourselves—not only for our own nations—but for all men everywhere’. Ullman, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 10, p. 271. It should be noted that the issue of registering national sovereignty was not limited to the British media and politics. In his autobiography, Tenzing gave vivid accounts of how Nepali and Indian nationalists approached him
The language and the logic of the summit are neither neutral nor disinterested. Nor is the discourse of sovereignty a simple, direct, and literal articulation, restricted to appear in preconceived epistemological sites. Their trappings, consequently, need to be investigated not as an aberration of transparent speech, but rather with an awareness of the tropological mode of language—that is, the figurative, rhetorical, and ironic twist of the words we use. Tropes are metaphoric. Metaphors are, like Sherpas, in the business of transportation, connecting signs and sites, moving by analogy and similitude to establish signification. The summit may turn out to be, for instance, a general metaphor for sovereignty: politically, as a highly dramatised meeting point of sovereigns; ethically, as a high moral ground (e.g., the ascent of Jesus, the Christian sovereign, to the mount and cross); scientifically, as a grand or final theory reaching the ideal limit of knowledge, the construction of which, as Albert Einstein says, ‘is rather like climbing a mountain, gaining new and wider views, discovering unexpected connections between our starting point and its rich environment’; 15 philosophically, as an omnivoyant space of revelation (e.g., Nietzschean philosophy: ‘[p]hilosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary living in ice and high mountains’.16 Divulged only to a superman or supermountaineer: ‘In the mountains the shortest route is from peak to peak, but for that you must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks, and those to whom they are spoken should be big and tall in stature.’) 17

However, the summit can also figure—admittedly, by imposing this image as the crown of my text—as a more specific metaphor for the intersection of the discourse of sovereignty with the Himalayas. This coming together of the two, takes the metaphor seriously and at its word, signalling that the tropological mode is not external to the very process and discourse of investigating it (i.e., a caveat to the reader to be aware of the writing, of the figurative language of the critic, which discloses something only by concealing something else, which carries one to the summit only by denying one an alternative view or revelation). The summit, just like any metaphor, orients thinking by telling a story. Since the metaphor is a story of signification, it provides an opportunity to prise routes of thematic repatriation and outlook, that is, to consider the political ontology of metaphor itself by grounding it

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(Tenzing was a Nepali Sherpa living in India) and how they tried to make him sign or make political statements intended to diminish the role of the British expedition and his co-climber Hillary. There was no photographic evidence that Hillary reached the summit, though the taking of Tenzing’s picture suggested that somebody else was there. In effect, Nepali and Indian nationalists sought to reduce the role of the British as that of escorts and helpers to Tenzing’s ascent. In other words, the nationalists sought to assign the role reserved for the Sherpas to the British.

empirically on the Himalayas, and so, also to examine, in some detail, how different claims to sovereignty in the region are tropologically staged and argued. In the maze of language, metaphors are close companions: guides, helpers, and co-travellers. They work, like Sherpas, in a discreet and unstated fashion towards the summit that is our search for meaning. Metaphors mark out the space of representation, the horizon within which concepts, like sovereignty, are formed and defined.

This article seeks to explore the discursive contours of sovereignty by looking into altered, marginal, and neglected forms of its Himalayan exposition. It assesses the political role that certain metaphors (e.g., gun-salute rating, durbar protocol, and reincarnation principles) perform, by drawing together different domains to give meaning to sovereignty and contrive its presence. The article argues that a putatively lucid but problematic notion of sovereignty has been conventionally employed as an extralinguistic or timeless given to reify the Himalayas, to objectify the region in particular ways and then proceed to read it politically in terms of this very objectification. First, I examine how claims to sovereignty are politically allied to logics of representation. Second, I consider how the discourse of sovereignty objectified the Himalayas during the British colonial period, and how it currently frames debates concerning control over the issue of the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama of Tibet. In conclusion, I suggest that knowledge about sovereignty tends to highly underestimate—and so urgently needs to be informed by and reconsidered through—the rhetorical-power effects of the language employed in the signification, conceptualisation, and interpretation of sovereignty.

The Sovereignty of Representation

Sovereignty is presence, and the delight in presence.

It is often contended that illustrations such as the above tell us more about the language or metaphors of sovereignty and less about its real value, everyday application, and political effects. Such reservations seem to follow either from restrictive interpretations of sovereignty, or simplistic understandings of language, or both. On the one hand, sovereignty is not only a question of who monopolises legal

19. For one such example, see Fred Halliday’s reading of R.B.J. Walker’s work in Fred Halliday, Rethinking International Relations (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 42-43. Halliday first makes the assumption that Walker’s critique of sovereignty is limited to showing ‘the historically constituted, and contingent, character of theories of sovereignty’, thus, ignoring what Walker primarily discusses, namely, the philosophical and political implications of claims to sovereignty. Subsequently, Halliday criticises Walker for not anchoring his thinking ‘in either social reality, or ethical and historical necessity’, without recognising that sociological, ethical, and historical contexts are not empirically and objectively given, but constituted in and through language.
violence, nor just: an issue of internal supremacy, external equality, and political independence, nor simply a channel for pursuing the highest form of self-government. Nor is it only an acclaimed principle for resisting foreign intervention and neocolonialism. Nor even is it only a device of domesticating certain matters and morally excluding others. This is not to deny that the discourse of sovereignty does address and does refer to such questions in theoretical debates and political arenas.\textsuperscript{20}

On the other hand, significantly, claims to sovereignty presuppose, or prescribe, in all these instances, as I argue below, a way of confidently thinking about truth and knowledge, of speaking and ordering the world in terms of a metaphysics of presence. This is not to say that the issue of sovereignty is purely a philosophical one and, in essence, non-political. It is highly political and has serious implications on what politics is or entails and how it is approached, for it foregrounds a strategic, Cartesian device—masked as rational or common-sensical thinking—by which meanings get stabilised and references fixed. Political practices and international actions may be subsequently legitimated, based on such reified, static, and already framed understandings.\textsuperscript{21} The philosophical-political move of thinking of sovereignty as primarily ‘sovereign’ thinking—that is, the dominance of technical, calculative or instrumental discourse typical of policy oriented, or total and systemic renditions of world politics—has only recently begun to be explored in International Relations (IR) theory with the advent of critical theory, feminist, post-colonial, and postmodern critiques.

The sovereignty-representation problematic can be approached in two interlinked ways: first, by looking at how sovereignty is implicated in the question of how the Other is represented, or misrepresented, or denied representation altogether; second, by looking at how sovereignty cannot be dissociated from the question of representative thought, that is, the promise of language to deliver—by indicating that something ‘is’—historical presence or essence at will. By critically examining sovereignty and representation not separately but jointly, we examine, on the one hand, the exclusionary effect of dominant interpretations, and on the other hand, the essentialising tendency of political discourses.

\textsuperscript{20} These issues remain in the midst of renewed theoretical and policy interest in the question of sovereignty—following assessments on the impact of international organisations, multinational corporations, and new social movements; the challenges of religious politics; discussions on the effects of the communications revolution, the globalisation trend, and the acceleration in the movement of people, information, capital, and culture; the post-Cold War self-determination claims and counterclaims; the debates concerning the rights and ethics of intervention; and the reconsideration of the Westphalian legacy of territorial allegiance. For a good account of such debates, see Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk, \textit{The End of Sovereignty? The Politics of a Shrinking and Fragmenting World} (Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar, 1992).

\textsuperscript{21} On framed theoretical discussions in International Relations, see Costas M. Constantinou, ‘Diplomatic Representations...or Who Framed the Ambassadors?’, \textit{Millennium: Journal of International Studies} (Vol. 23, No. 1, 1994), pp. 1-23.
In this vein, it has been suggested that the discourse of state sovereignty reproduces assumptions and treats as answered fundamental questions about the nature of political community and world politics. In the process, political representation gets locked by practitioners and analysts into ‘the more general paradigm of a sovereign identity; that is, within a spatiotemporal metaphysics governed by a logic in which universality is both distinguished from and privileged over difference and diversity’. State sovereignty is normalised as a tight fit universal despite varied circumstances around the globe rendering political uniformity unsuitable or difficult to wear. In a special issue of *International Studies Quarterly*, Richard Ashley and R.B.J. Walker suggest, in addition, that the question of sovereignty should be extended to cover the scientific sovereignty of the IR discipline, a discipline which currently seems to function through ‘sovereign centers of interpretation and judgment’. They argue that the practices of the discipline do often emulate those of the sovereign state, in the way they seek to exclude ‘alien’ problematisations, police interpretive limits, and generally control epistemological processes and their legitimation. The authority of disciplinarian, or other interpretive communities, works effectively, constantly to produce and stabilise the terms of reference. The notion of sovereignty is therefore proposed as neither ontologically independent of knowledge, nor its scholarly study an epistemically unhegemonic field.

State-scientific sovereignty is not exercised separately but predicated on ‘the sovereignty of man’. The sovereignty of man is deeply linked to the idea of the Enlightenment, and as put by one of its early proponents, Francis Bacon, it far


24. On this point, see, Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1996). Furthermore, the term ‘sovereignty’ has not been applied uniformly in interstate practice. It has often been employed differently, and with exceptions or ‘anomalies’. For example, the constituent republics of former Yugoslavia were in name ‘sovereign’ although not recognised as such internationally at the time. Another example is the Knights of Malta currently treated as a ‘Sovereign Order’, having diplomatic relations with many states, enjoying the right of active and passive legislation, despite the fact that the Order does not occupy or claim any territory.


26. As put in another work by Cynthia Weber, [s]overeign foundations are produced as signifieds in order to make representational projects possible, in order to allow sovereignty and the state to refer to some original source of truth. This is a fundamental way in which power and knowledge function in a logic of representation’. Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention the State and Symbolic Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 123.
surpasses even the dominion of monarchical absolutism, implying that the latter is in constant need of the former to maintain command and control:

[t]herefore, no doubt, the sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge; wherein many things are reserved, which kings with their treasure cannot buy, nor with their force command; their spials and intelligencers can give no news of them, their seamen and discoverers cannot sail where they grow: now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity; but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her in action.\textsuperscript{27}

State, scientific, and human sovereignties are accomplices. The claims of the state cannot be interrogated as if the claims of the other two were not part of the scene. With modernity, the thinking ‘individual’, the Cartesian reasoning subject, becomes as much an indivisible locus of sovereignty as the state claims to be. By authoritatively re-presenting, confidently rationalising its relations and environment, the modern subject manages to control ideas, classify objects, produce knowledge about identities, and, thus, secure meaning about them. Discursive practices put into operation representations which, by being taken as truth, render courses of action possible, natural, and unproblematic. To that extent, modern statecraft is modern mancraft ‘as an art of domesticating the meaning of man by constructing his problems, his dangers, his fears\textsuperscript{28}, assuming or prefiguring ‘a version of human subjectivity upon which sovereignty is predicated’.\textsuperscript{29} Sovereignty becomes, in effect, a principle for organising (political) reality into separate domains implicated but treated as objectively distinct.\textsuperscript{30} Sovereignty figures also as the condition for fully, and without loss, duplicating the presence or essence of these domains, that is, disseminating knowledge and certainty about them, rather than weak thought or opinion. Claims to sovereignty, thus, propagate regimes of truth which are regimes of power.

At this point, it must be clarified that there is nothing wrong \textit{per se} with representation. Neither the act of naming things, nor the interpretation of phenomena, nor the practical necessity of delegation are problematic in themselves. What can be a cause for concern, however, is when high (scientific, ethical, political) authority is associated with representation, which can subsequently finalise events, systema tise


signification, reinforce absolutes, and determine relations between humans. Dominant representation is incidentally what is lacking, at least by some accounts, from the Eastern philosophical language: ‘[i]t lacks the delimiting power to represent objects related in an unequivocal order above and below each other’. By contrast, as graphically put by Paul Valéry’s Chinese scholar, for the Western mind human ‘intelligence is not one thing among many’, but worshipped as if it were an omnipotent god....A man intoxicated on it believes his own thoughts are legal decisions, or facts themselves born out of the crowd and time. He confuses his quick changes of heart with the imperceptible variation of real forms and enduring Beings.  

This is not to say, however, that in the absence of a Cartesian equivalent the Eastern mind does not or cannot engage in total and absolute representations when thinking or theorising, or that there is no counter-tradition in Western philosophy developing in parallel and challenging Cartesianism. The legitimacy of the ‘objective’ representations of human subjectivity may originate from Western philosophical sources associated with the project of modernity, secularising divine omnipotence, radicalising Plato’s philosopher-king, but its methodological application, far from remaining regional or civilizational, has spread worldwide.

Representing Sovereignty on the Himalayas

The Lotus-Born One, upon seeing a crow chasing a partridge, which took refuge under a raspberry bush and escaped, thought to himself, ‘The raspberry bush represents the kingdom, the crow represents the king, and the partridge represents myself; and the significance is that I must gradually abdicate from the kingship’.

There are some serious implications emanating from the expansion of thinking within the metaphysics of presence, within the paradigm of sovereignty, through an authorial, complete, and indivisible identity. Simply put, in the case of the Himalayas, the paradigm of sovereign (national) identity, when adopted, reifies the region as a space of contesting state sovereignties—be it Bhutanese, Nepalese, Kashmiri, Pakistani,

Indian, Tibetan, Sikkimese, or Chinese ones—that are subsequently presented, rationally re-presented as geographically normal, historically evident, and politically inevitable. Consequently, ‘realistic’ political action gets formulated, practically contextualised and ethicalised, through reasons and interests of sovereignty, and within the ambit of representative thought, confidently reading past presence and authoritatively restoring final presence. What follows is but a short, preliminary excursion of the problems encountered in struggles to stabilise reference and impose meaning, in events where logics of representation are allied to claims of sovereignty:

- The Chinese government opens to foreign inspection the magnificent and inaccessible Potala Palace in Lhasa, the now vacant, official residence of the Dalai Lama, and points to Tibetan frescoes showing the Dalai Lama lowering himself before the Chinese Emperor. (Is this an instance of protocol? Is the Chinese Emperor ‘Chinese’ [were the Manchus a domestic or a foreign dynasty]? Should this be seen, as officially suggested, to be symbolic of subservience? Does this—should this—rationale apply equally to all other states whose rulers or their representatives lowered themselves, and even kowtowed, before the Chinese Emperor, or for that matter the Mongolian, or Byzantine or Ottoman, in the past?)

- British Prime Minister John Major refuses to meet the Dalai Lama, the leader of the Tibetan government-in-exile. US Vice President Al Gore meets him, and US President Bill Clinton ‘drops in by chance’. The Chinese government issues an official complaint. (What does the Dalai Lama represent? A sovereign, a religious leader, a political refugee, a Chinese criminal, an incarnate deity? Under what status should foreign governments receive him, at what level of representation, and with what purpose? Can political, religious, and social matters, or private or accidental meetings be clearly separated from each other? How far do they affect explicit or implicit recognition of Tibetan sovereignty?)

- In Ladakh, India and China assume the existence of a ‘traditional boundary’ separating them, but in order to discover where it lies they have to resort and fight over incomplete British maps and fanciful colonial delimitations. In the disputed area of the Siachen Glacier—a frontier that no one mapped during the 1947 partition—India and Pakistan continue to fight an unreported war. (The problems of places left unmarked or obscurely marked by sovereignty in a region already divided, objectified, and represented in terms of sovereignty.)

- The Bhutanese government accuses India of ‘cartographic aggression’. In an Indian government official publication, a map of Bhutan suspiciously looks like another federal state of India. (This is not just an innovative, but perhaps a proper use of the term ‘aggression’, for the map is constitutive of territory and identity, rather than just representing them, as is commonly held. Still, the representation of Bhutanese
sovereignty is not unproblematic. Was the Maharaja of Bhutan historically any different than the other Indian princes? How is the special Bhutanese relationship with India—including Indian guidance in foreign policy and security matters according to the 1949 Indo-Bhutanese treaty—to be coloured? To what extent does this treaty represent the ‘limited sovereignty’ of Bhutan? How far is the light yellow colour of Bhutan on the map then appropriate or sufficiently different from the white colour of India to mark the quality of its sovereignty?)

- Nepal, a Hindu kingdom, marks its territorial distinction from India. It decides on a 15-minute time difference from the single time zone of India. (In other words, the Nepali government uses the rights of sovereignty to reinscribe a condition for sovereignty, to simulate the presence of ‘national’ difference through temporal divergence.)

- The traditional architectural planning of the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, is irrevocably changing. Before the Indian merger/annexation, it used to have all of its buildings facing Mount Kanchenjunga, the protecting deity of the kingdom mythically associated with its independence, power, and destiny. (Does mythical topography matter in modern ‘rational’ representations of sovereignty? If not, why is it then rhetorically appropriated and diluted by state architects concerned with inscribing, re-orienting national sovereignty?)

Contemporary regional and international debates become, in this respect, essentially concerned with the validity of claims and counter-claims made in the names of these sovereign identities—thus, accepting the reality of their presence—subsequently attempting to mediate their problems through negotiation or to resolve them through intervention.\(^{35}\) What is less examined, however, are the paradoxical effects of sovereignty—from dominant conceptualisations of power to struggles for freedom from foreign domination—on our very understanding of the region, and on the kind of politics sovereign claims could incite and prescribe. Presented as a universal, state sovereignty homogenises and essentialises political identities, and grossly simplifies the complex network of historical relations among the Himalayan people.

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The discourse of state sovereignty is a borrowed language, a colonial legacy to this region.\textsuperscript{36} That is not to say, however, that there was no imagery or underpinning of supreme authority in the region before, or that mythological and artistic depictions of such authority were defunct of power implications.\textsuperscript{37} Rather, this is to recall that there was no geo-graphical discourse of sovereignty, imposing supreme political meaning upon space, charged technically and developed legally and morally as a condition for governance and independence.\textsuperscript{38} Demarcated states and national boundaries as we know them today have been the result of Western imperial knowledge and strategy, specifically, in the case of the Himalayas an extension of the British occupation of South Asia. In the early nineteenth century, officials of the East India Company travelling for trade missions to the Himalayas assumed that the authority of local rulers with whom they had agreements was or could be translated territorially. Thus, they were ‘constantly watching for signs of the frontier’, observing where the rulers’ authority began and ended.\textsuperscript{39} This led to arbitrary drawings of ‘traditional’ boundaries. For example, the frontier was thought to be ‘reached’ if the natives denied the British officials further accesses despite local letters of recommendation, or if the natives could not convey any knowledge of what lay beyond, or simply on the basis of when and where taxes had to be paid.

Subsequently, the British empire imposed the frontier on ‘strategic’ grounds, while at the same time trying to get the Himalayan rulers and the Chinese empire involved in Boundary Commissions. As Lord Curzon admitted, the idea of a demarcated frontier is ‘an essentially modern conception’ and in Asia ‘there has always been a strong instinctive aversion to the acceptance of fixed boundaries....It would be true to say that demarcation has never taken place except under European pressure and by the intervention of European agents’.\textsuperscript{40} According to Walter Leifer, not only for the Himalayas but ‘for the majority of Asiatics’, the state was (and for some still is) ‘something strange, inimical, something to be avoided’.

Typically, when the British authorities sent delegates to survey and mark the northern colonial frontier with Tibet in 1902, the Tibetans sent not a native, but a certain ‘rascal’ and ‘clever scoundrel’ from Darjeeling who ‘knew their ways’\textsuperscript{41}. This

\textsuperscript{36} If anything, the Himalayan religious and philosophical tradition, commonly associated with Buddhist teachings, directly challenges notions of real entity, unitary selfhood, and pretensions to earthly or spiritual omnipotence. See, for example, Padma-Sambhava. \textit{op. cit.}, in note 34.


\textsuperscript{38} Contrasted, of course, to the European discourse of sovereignty as jurisprudentially developed by Jean Bodin in the sixteenth century, and tied to the territorially-bounded state as codified in the Treaty of Westphalia, 1648.

\textsuperscript{39} See Woodman, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 35, pp. 18-46.


\textsuperscript{41} Leifer, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 2, p. 160.

\textsuperscript{42} J. Claude White, \textit{Sikkim and Bhutan} (Delhi: Sagar Book House, 1992), pp. 82-93.
event signalled not just the problem of marking boundaries with people untrained or unconcerned with territorial delimitation, but also registered the distinctive mark of a new era for the Himalayans, the globalising and normalising of Westphalia. During the process of decolonisation, sovereign political authority began to be transferred to territorial entities—spaces charged with collective representation—with which the people of the Himalayas were increasingly called upon to identify with, as well as, and sometimes as opposed to, their religious rulers and local dynasts.

Today, the principle of sovereignty and territorial statehood has become an instrumental feature for both local and global expressions, for resisting imperial domination, as well as a licence for objectification, control, and gagging. In strictly legal terms, of the ancient Himalayan polities currently only Bhutan and Nepal ‘enjoy’ sovereignty, while the claims of Tibet, Kashmir, and Sikkim have been superseded by Chinese, Pakistani, and Indian claims of sovereignty. In practice, however, whether sovereignty effects expression or repression, power or disempowerment, radically depends on ‘who’ and ‘where’ one is: whether one is an ethnic Nepali in Bhutan, a committed Hindu in Nepal, a marginalised Lepcha or Bhutia in Sikkim, a persecuted Muslim in Kashmir, or a privileged Chinese in Tibet.

The presence of state sovereignty figures in the political debates of the Himalayas as both obvious and necessary. This is rendered so through systematic forgetting. To reiterate, state sovereignty has not always been the principle the various people of the Himalayas employed to describe their political organisation. That is, they did not employ the term before their encounter with the colonial reification of sovereignty and the violence of territorial delimitation. Nor did the discourse of sovereignty, as partially employed by the colonial powers in the Himalayas and in their adventures around the globe, necessarily have the same sense of domestic, final, and complete jurisdiction, of constitutional and political independence, of external legal equality, of self-determination or contractuality between the rulers and the ruled, as it has in conventional IR debates today. This prompts the classic question of where—if anywhere, if such a locution is still of the order of knowing—does sovereignty ultimately refer to? Or, a more critical array of questions: what sort of references does the discourse of sovereignty on the Himalayas produce? What altered sites and what kind of metaphors does it use? How have these been employed in practice? How is the presence of sovereignty contrived, its representation effected?

The Rating of Sovereignty

All sovereigns are equal, but some sovereigns are more equal than others.⁴⁴

The British encountered in South Asia a complex system of princes (rajas and maharajas), spiritual leaders (gurus), sages (maharishis), and castes that had both fragmenting and unifying tendencies, with power centres that were both territorially dispersed but integrated at different levels. Knowledge had to be produced regarding this system in order to articulate, understand, and ultimately control it. What is especially interesting, for our purposes, is that British imperial knowledge in this instance did not involve the typical colonial denial of pre-existing sovereignty, which would automatically legitimise occupation—either by declaring the Indian subcontinent terra nullius (belonging to no one), or as one not effectively governed by any other sovereign. Instead, the colonial process of reification was more of a concerted effort to re-employ and redefine the meaning of sovereignty. The words sovereign and sovereignty, were used both to describe the ‘Paramount Power’ of the British Crown and the ‘local authority’ of the numerous Indian great princes, the maharajas. However, the latter found that, in different historical periods their power had to be negotiated with a variety of colonial, legal, and political devices, such as the British ‘sphere of interest’, the ‘sphere of influence’, the ‘extraterritoriality’ of British agents, the limitations of the temporary or perpetual ‘lease’, the British ‘protectorate’, and, in the end the British ‘empire’.⁴⁵ The South Asian rulers were therefore sometimes treated as ‘complete’ and at other times as ‘partial’, ‘semi’, or ‘imperfect’ sovereigns. That is, the rulers were neither treated as undisputed ‘civilised’ non-European sovereigns, like the Ottoman sultan or the Chinese emperor, nor reduced to ‘uncivilised’, African or Aboriginal chiefs. The ambiguity of this situation did not escape the attention of the Foreign Office, which by the 1880s realised that, ‘[i]n India the practice had been worked out but it had not yet been embodied in theory or law. The time had arrived for the British government as a matter of policy to decide what

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⁴⁴ A catchphrastic paraphrase of George Orwell’s famous motto, ‘[a]ll animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others’. George Orwell, Animal Farm: A Fairy Story (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 114.

⁴⁵ Lord Curzon was very clear about the necessity and ultimate end of such instruments. ‘Of all diplomatic forms or fictions which have latterly been described, it may be observed that the uniform tendency is for the weaker to crystallise into the harder shape. Spheres of Interest tend to become Spheres of Influence; temporary Leases to become perpetual; Spheres of Influence to develop into Protectorates: Protectorates to be the forerunners of complete incorporation. The process is not so immoral as it might at first sight appear; it is in reality an endeavour, sanctioned by general usage, to introduce formality and decorum into proceedings which, unless thus regulated and diffused, might endanger the peace of nations or too violently shock the conscience of the world’. Curzon, op. cit., in note 40, p. 47.
the [international] law should be'. 46 In short, the discourse of sovereignty was put to practice in the Indian subcontinent—particular representations were put into operation—without being given ‘positive’ legal reference or foundation. Sovereignty was yet to be theorised.

Specifically, in the pre-Mutiny (pre-1857) period, Roland Inden informs us that the East India Company related with ‘the states [sic] of South Asia as though they were sovereign states’. 47 During this period, British scholars also described and theorised the Indian maharajas as ‘feudal sovereigns’ (James Tod) or ‘sovereign despots’ (James Mill), thus, only temporally—and as a matter of degree, rather than principle—different to the post-feudal, nation-states of Europe. 48 However, this approach to princely sovereignty changed with the official incorporation of India into the British empire. Scholars subsequently tended to define princely sovereignty as ‘tribal’, ‘clan’, or ‘pre-feudal’ (Alfred Lyall, Henry Maine, and B.H. Baden-Powell), thus, shifting it further back historically and weakening its association to the European nation-state. 49 What is more the gun-salute rating system, that the British officially adopted in 1857, provided South Asian princes with varying degrees of ‘sovereignty’ or ‘nonsovereignty’ (21, 19, 17, 15, 13, 11..., down to no gun-salutes). 50 This rating system was not finally or absolutely fixed, but was constantly manipulated by the Viceroy-Governor through underrating and overrating to signal disapproval or reward loyalty. Colonial protocol offered no doubt however who the ‘Sovereign of Sovereigns’ was, for in the Coronation of Queen Victoria as ‘Empress of India’ in Delhi on 1 January, 1877, a salute of 101 salvos was fired feux-de-joie. 51 Thus, the gun-salute arithmetically and unambiguously inscribed paramount sovereignty in colonial India: perhaps as an apology for theory, ceremoniously greeting the advent of the law that was to support the regime of representation thereon.

The colonial reinterpretation of sovereignty, or the theoretical distinction the British authorities ultimately made between internal and external sovereignty (South Asian princes at best having the former, but definitely not the latter), was essential for

48. See ibid., pp. 165-76.
49. See ibid., pp. 176-80.
51. As one scholar notes, ‘[t]he noise of the cannon and rifle fire stampeded the assembled elephants and horses; a number of bystanders were killed and injured, and a large cloud of dust was raised which hung over the rest of the proceedings’. Cohn, op. cit., in note 50, p. 205. While her Coronation as Empress of India was celebrated in India, Queen Victoria never actually visited India.
legitimising British imperial sovereignty in the region.\textsuperscript{52} What constituted princely, or imperial, responsibility was defined by the colonial authorities according to colonial interest and convenience. The term \textit{sovereignty} was, therefore, given distinctively different tones and meanings by the colonial authorities. British sovereignty was presented as of a different quality, authority, and value to that of the South Asian princes. Lord Curzon used legal rhetoric to argue his way out of the problematic of multilayered and unequal sovereignties (what John Austin described as ‘a political mongrel’),\textsuperscript{53} suggesting that even though ‘the sovereignty of the Crown is everywhere unchallenged; it has itself laid down the limitations of its own prerogative’.\textsuperscript{54} On the question of the status of colonial treaties with Indian ‘Sovereigns’, Lord Reading maintained that, ‘[t]he sovereignty of the British Crown is supreme in India and therefore no ruler of an Indian State can justifiably claim to negotiate with the British Government on an equal footing’.\textsuperscript{55} Still, just a few months before the declaration of Queen Victoria as Empress of India, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli described India as ‘an ancient country of many nations’, noting that ‘this vast community is governed under the authority of the Queen, by many Sovereign Princes, some of whom occupy Thrones which were filled by their ancestors when England was a Roman Province’.\textsuperscript{56}

The British colonial authorities were masterful in setting up a hierarchical system that manifested not only their own difference from the princes, but also differences between the princes themselves. They utilised and charged the system of durbars (\textit{i.e.}, the imperial assemblages and audiences of the Indian princes with the Moghul emperor) where the ranking of ‘Sovereigns’ was ceremoniously negotiated, and where not only the Viceroy-Governor but the ‘Sovereigns’ themselves, in effect, assumed the role of Sherpas, assisting the rise of the sovereignty of the British Crown. Specifically,

\begin{quote}
[a] code of conduct was established for princes and chiefs for their attendance at the durbar. The clothes they wore, the weapons they could carry, the number of
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\textsuperscript{52} The Earl of Halsbury, the standard authority on English law, explained the legal position as follows: ‘The Indian States, ruled by native princes, did not form part of British India. Although they lacked international personality, in constitutional law they were endowed with attributes of independent states and their rulers enjoyed sovereign immunity from the jurisdiction of English courts. Their subjects were treated as British protected persons. All the States were subject to the suzerainty of the Crown. Paramountcy was exercised on behalf of the Crown by the Governor-General through his agents and residents in the States. The powers of the Crown always included control over foreign relations and responsibilities for defence and the maintenance of internal order’. Lord Simonds (ed.), \textit{The Laws of England}, Volume 5 (London: Butterworth & Co., 1953), pp. 528-29.

\textsuperscript{53} John Austin, \textit{Lectures on Jurisprudence or the Philosophy of Positive Law}, Volume 1 (London: John Murray, 1911), pp. 252-56.

\textsuperscript{54} Quoted from William Barton, \textit{The Princes of India} (London: Nisbet, 1934), p. 271.

\textsuperscript{55} Quoted from \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{56} Quoted from Cohn, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 50, p. 184.
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retaines and soldiers that could accompany them to the viceroy’s camp, where they were met by British officials in relation to the camp, the number of gun salutes fired in their honour, the time of the entry into the durbar hall or tent, whether the viceroy would rise and come forward to greet them, where on the viceregal rug they would be saluted by the viceroy, where they would be seated, how much nazar they could give, whether they would be entitled to a visit from the viceroy, were all markers of rank and could be changed by the viceroy to raise or lower their rank.\textsuperscript{57}

British general policy and detailed measuring of sovereignty in South Asia at the time objectified the Himalayan region within the same context of colonial practice. However, the relationship of the Himalayan princes to the British ranking system proved to be neither uniform nor consistent. Partly because of the inaccessibility of the Himalayas, and partly because the colonial authorities strategically defined the region as a natural barrier-buffer zone, they did not always figure or fully participate in the political and politicising processes of the British empire.\textsuperscript{58} The rulers of Sikkim and Bhutan did not attend durbars in the nineteenth century, and only reluctantly began to send delegations in the early twentieth century. Sir Claude White, the first British political officer to Sikkim and Bhutan, managed to arrange a visit of the Maharaja and Maharani of Sikkim, the Tongsa Penlop of Bhutan, and even the Panchen Lama of Tibet to the 1904 assembly of chiefs that were gathered in Calcutta to pay homage to the Prince and Princess of Wales. In White’s words, the three rulers with their retinue were an extraordinary collection of wild, only partly civilised creatures, especially those from Tibet, and most picturesque….It was a new departure, as none of the chiefs on this frontier had ever before left their mountain homes, nor had they, with the exception of one short visit of the Maharaja of Sikkim to Darjeeling, been guests of the Indian Government, neither had any high Tibetan lama before visited India.\textsuperscript{59}

Following this visit, where they were impressed and were impressive, the Himalayan rulers, with the exception of the Panchen, joined in the future durbars, and so joined officially in the colonial ranking system which rated their sovereignty.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 180.
\textsuperscript{58} As Lord Curzon put it, ‘[h]acked as they are by the huge and lofty plateau of Tibet, the Himalayas are beyond doubt the most formidable natural Frontier in the world’. Curzon, op. cit., in note 40, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{59} White, op. cit., in note 42, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{60} The Maharaja of Sikkim had already sent his son to the Delhi durbar, albeit reluctantly, the year before.
The British colonial discourse of sovereignty had to presuppose, or through policy sought to install, unified centres of decision-making where there were often only disparate political practices. For instance, there is still uncertainty among historians concerning the first British Mission to Bhutan in 1774, that is, whether the mission ever visited the place, or whether Bhutan was mistaken as a name for Tibet. Nonetheless, this mission was confidently dispatched with letters of accreditation to the Panchen Lama in Lhasa, whom the British knew from previous correspondence regarding trade routes and so casually granted him the status of ‘The Sovereign of Bhutan’. Subsequently, the British colonial authorities discovered that the area of Bhutan was actually ruled by a diarchy of lay and religious rulers. They bypassed this complex system in 1902, when they patronised the crowning of the first Maharaja, and the Viceroy-Governor’s complimentary letter confirmed that ‘the Maharajaship is not only a gain to Bhutan, but is of great advantage to the British Government, who will henceforth have a settled Government....to negotiate with’. In Sikkim, the British faced the unpredictable shifting of dynastic ‘sovereignty’ that the polyandric system created, as well as Sikkimese rulers who had to be ‘persuaded’ to spend more time in their ‘own’ country. A country that nonetheless, according to the first British political officer, ‘was a new one and everything was in my hands’.

In the case of Nepal, as William Barton suggests, while initially Nepalese rulers allowed [its] sovereignty to be diminished in favour of the British Indian Government[1], they increasingly followed a more independent policy. The British government apparently accepted Nepalese ‘independence’ in the 1860s, and in 1923 officially changed the designation of the British representative in Nepal from ‘Resident’ to ‘Envoy’, and the ‘Residency’ to a ‘Legation’. This situation was, of course, a direct result of the very good—post-1816—relations between Nepalese rulers and British authorities, rewarding Nepalese loyalty during the 1857 “Mutiny” and also due to the fact that Nepal remained available as a Gurkha recruiting ground for the British Army overseas. However, the British-Nepali pact of perpetual friendship of 1923, though confirming Nepal’s ‘independence’, significantly left out the word ‘sovereignty’. The choice of words was a deliberate legal move by British diplomacy to upgrade the political status of Nepal when compared to the other South Asian principalities, whilst denying it full equality of status enjoyed by sovereign independent states in the West, or the British Empire, the paramount sovereign in South Asia. It was not until the Indo-Nepalese treaty of peace and friendship of 1950 that ‘the complete [sic] sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence’ of Nepal

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61. White, op. cit., in note 42. p. 236.
62. Ibid, p. 229
63. Ibid., pp. 19 and 26.
were formally enshrined and pledged to be respected by India, the colonial successor.65

The marking and quality of sovereignty on the Himalayas involves a historical and highly problematic imperial vocabulary. However, it concerns and informs contemporary political rhetoric as well. The debate concerning the political status of the Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim offers one recent example. Following a process that culminated in the Indian ‘merger’ with or ‘annexation’ of Sikkim in the 1970s, Indira Gandhi’s government resorted *inter alia* to past colonial representations to reject Sikkimese claims to sovereignty. In their claim to supremacy, Indian officials pointed out that the British gave the Maharaja of Sikkim only a fifteen and not a twentyone gun-salute that was saved for ‘more important’ princes under the Raj. The Maharaja of Sikkim further sat in the Chamber of Princes, something that the Maharajas of Nepal and Bhutan never did.66 That Sikkim was six gun-salutes short of independent statehood, or that the air of sovereignty was stifled inside particular spaces of consultation, apparently reveals the wide range of rhetorical armoury available for claims and counter-claims to sovereignty.

Interestingly, however, it is possible, through the same rationale that the Indian government used in order to deny sovereignty to Sikkim, to reach opposite conclusions. In other words, it can be argued that these signs (the number of gun-salutes and the participation in colonial chambers) do not necessarily signify the absence but the presence of sovereignty, not subserviency but instead conditions of supremacy. Namely, under the British Raj, the Maharaja of Bhutan received a fifteen gun-salute but still presides over a sovereign state today. Or one could point out the fact that the Maharaja of another Himalayan kingdom, Kashmir, received a twentyone gun-salute, but that this is neither a precondition nor an argument currently used by the Indian government to determine the status of this territory, though, in view of India’s position with regard to Sikkim, others could. Additionally, one could examine the extent to which participation in the Chamber of Princes was not presented at the time as a limitation of the ‘sovereign’ authority of a principality, but even as a dispensation of it. For example, the Conference of Ruling Princes and Chiefs which convened in 1919, two years before the Chamber of Princes was established, recommended that the term ‘Sovereign Princes’ be used for those princes joining the

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65. See Leifer, *op. cit.*, in note 2, p. 46. Even then, initial attempts by Nepal to join the United Nations in 1949 met the objections of the Soviet Union, which argued that Nepal was not a sovereign state. Although this was a general requirement for entry to the United Nations, this, of course, did not apply in the case of two constituent republics of the Soviet Union, Ukraine and Byelorussia, which by contrast were given seats at the insistence of the Soviet Union. On the Nepali response to the UN, see A.S. Bhasin (ed.), *Documents on Nepal’s Relations with India and China* (Bombay: Academic Books, 1970), section 1.

Chamber who had full and unrestricted jurisdiction in their ‘States’, and, subsequently, the proclamation of the Chamber specifically stated that ‘the existing rights of these States and their freedom of action will in no way be prejudiced or impaired’.  

In short, the colonial legacy of reification has left the region with many metaphors, multiple signs of sovereignty, which now serve as a semiotic pool available for pursuing national claims rhetorically. These signs cannot with finality resolve disputes over sovereignty for they cannot provide singularly or by accumulation ultimate references over either their own meaning or the meaning of sovereignty. However, as shown, this does not stop ‘realist’ scholars and state officials from trying to fix their meaning and stabilise their reference, or by working within a positivist view of language, objectively or empirically, reading fixed meaning and stable references in them.

The Reincarnation of Sovereignty

The conferring of titles on Tibetan religious leaders has always been a form of embodiment of the sovereignty of the Chinese government since the Yuan dynasty.

In a recent spiritual quest, a dignified group of Sherpas (of the native as well as of the naturalised, state-representative type) found themselves climbing, yet again, the mount of sovereignty. On 30 January 1989, two days after the death of the tenth Panchen Lama—considered by most Tibetans only second to the Dalai Lama in the religious hierarchy, and by some even above him—principles were laid down by the Chinese government for the location and confirmation of his eleventh reincarnation. Simplifying the complex historical trajectory of Sino-Tibetan relations as an ‘exercise of sovereignty’ and, like the Indian example with Sikkim, utilising an imperial economy of signs, the Chinese government defined the issue of reincarnation as another aspect of its sovereignty.

Still, as I suggest below, the intensity of the sovereignty debate over the Panchen Lama affair tells us less about who is sovereign under international law over a certain Himalayan region or who should have control over the reincarnation issue, and more about the multiple and absurd ‘reincarnations’ of sovereignty itself—all the different transformations and reformulations this term goes through in practice. The metaphoric transportations of state sovereignty, in respect of this issue, frame—and work to effect—the illusion of its real presence, its historical continuity and political inevitability, and the privilege of those who ‘have’ it in having a final say over all.

kinds of affairs. Additionally, these claims to sovereignty display dependence on representative thought. That is to say, the claims are made on the assumption that there are signs and practices which, when appropriated, can disclose, in an unequivocal form, the presence of sovereignty.

In brief, the events unfolded as follows. The Chinese government’s ‘Decision on the Funeral Arrangements and the Issue of Reincarnation’ in 1989 accepted religious tradition, specifically that the search group should be composed by the eminent lamas of the Tashi Lhumpo lamastery in Tibet. However, it added significantly that the search group was to be assisted by the advice of the China Buddhist Association, in effect bringing the questing lamas under the control of the Chinese state. The Tibetan government-in-exile, headed by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, announced in response its own search group, having being refused participation in the ‘official’ search efforts by the Chinese authorities. Following divinations and in secret collaboration with some lamas of the official group, the Dalai Lama announced on 14 May 1995, that he successfully identified a five-year-old Tibetan boy, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, as the eleventh reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. The Chinese government denounced the Dalai’s choice as an action which ‘negates Chinese sovereignty over Tibet’, and begins a ‘splitist’ process: kidnapped the identified Panchen, dismissed and branded as a traitor the head of the official group, silenced dissent among the members of the Tashi Lhumpo lamastery, which considered the matter resolved, and continued its search efforts. These efforts culminated in the declaration on 29 November 1995, of another Tibetan boy, Gyaincain Norbu, as the real reincarnation. The Chinese authorities endorsed the ‘choice’ of a new committee flown to Beijing specially for the selection, and enthroned Norbu amidst reported riots and arrests in Lhasa in December 1995. A month later, the Dalai Lama’s choice—the world’s youngest political prisoner—was enthroned in absentia by members of the exiled Tashi Lhumpo lamastery in southern India.

This is not the first time in the Buddhist tradition where opposing views have been strongly held about the reincarnation of major lamas (e.g., Dalai, Panchen, and

69. For a summary of the attempts by the Tibetan government-in-exile to join the Chinese search group, see the Official WebSite of the Tibetan government-in-exile, ‘Contact with the Chinese Authorities Regarding the Search for the Reincarnation of the Panchen Lama’. http://www.tibet.com/PL/index.html.
71. According to the central committee, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama’s choice, could not have been the real Panchen because he allegedly drowned a dog. See BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 30 November 1995, FE/2474 G/11.
72. The choice of the government was reconfirmed ‘scientifically’ by the official photographer of the late Panchen Lama who saw a striking resemblance between the deceased and the boy. See BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 4 December 1995, FE/2477 G/16.
73. Jiang Zemin, the Chinese Communist Party Secretary General, less concerned with the ideological irony thanked all relevant ‘monks and comrades’ for their work. See BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 14 November 1995, FE/2460 G/8.
Karmapa). Nor is it the first time in Tibetan history where foreign powers, be it Mongolian, Chinese, British, or Nepalese, have interfered to support particular reincarnations or particular sects against others.  

In view of this, the Dalai Lama’s position—that the Panchen’s reincarnation should be strictly treated as a spiritual issue—was perhaps more wishful thinking than a lesson drawn from history. Despite ironic accusations against the Dalai Lama for ‘politicising’ the issue, the Chinese government maintained all along that this was not simply a religious matter, but a test of loyalty and confirmation of national authority. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson and other government or party officials have on many occasions over the last seven years, consistently defined the search efforts and Panchen confirmation as a matter of ‘state sovereignty’ (safeguarding or exercising it), and accused governments, such as the United States, Australia, India, France, and Germany, of interfering in the domestic affairs of China by giving support to the Dalai Lama over this issue. Chinese scholars further endorsed the view that the Dalai Lama’s declaration of ‘the real reincarnation of the tenth Panchen Lama has damaged the sovereignty of the central government’. They also stated that the government should never give up its rights to sovereignty in this matter, otherwise the state will have no dignity as a state.

During the same period, the Tibetan pro-independence movement, and in particular the government-in-exile, began to consider the serious political implications if such a situation were to be repeated in the case of the Dalai Lama’s future reincarnation, since the Dalai is constitutionally the ex officio head of the Tibetan state. In other words, by ‘hijacking’ the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama (which is not just confirming a certain person to the post, but also being in charge of his special education from an early age) the Chinese government could also hijack, in effect, his


77. *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 24 May 1995, FE/2311 G/14; 8 August 1995, FE/2376 G/17; 21 September 1995, FE/2414 G/5-6. For the spiritual and historical role of the Panchen Lama, and a summary of the events from the point of view of the Tibetan government-in-exile, see *The Panchen Lama Lineage: How Reincarnation is Being Reinvented as a Political Tool* (Dharamsala: Central Tibetan Administration, Department of Information and International Relations, 1996).


de jure authority. To avoid this, the Dalai Lama recently announced that he will not be reincarnated inside a Chinese-occupied Tibet.

Note that, similarly, the idea that sovereignty can be succeeded to or transmigrated from one political regime to another is the main assumption under which China historically justifies its current occupation of Tibet. The People’s Republic, notwithstanding its revolutionary rhetoric, is presented as a corporal ego, ‘embodiment of the sovereignty’ of the feudal imperial dynasties. Specifically, in this instance, the Chinese government has capitalised on its imperial inheritance to maintain that the principles enshrined in the Constitution for Coping With the Aftermath of a Disaster in Tibet as Compiled and Published by Imperial Order should be strictly followed in the reincarnation process. Article 1 of the ‘Imperial Order’ prescribes that the identification of short-listed major lamas (e.g., Hutuketu, Panchen, and Dalai) should be conducted by drawing-lots from the golden urn in front of the statue of Buddha Sakyamuni at the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. The Chinese government sought the strict observance of this rule for the identification of the Panchen Lama, pointing out that the eighth Dalai and seventh Panchen welcomed this condition in 1792, and that the deceased tenth Panchen reportedly made this his final wish five days before his death. This old rule offered a considerable advantage to the Chinese government of the 1990s. By being in control of Lhasa, it could ensure that the Dalai Lama’s choice was never put in the drawing-lot from the golden urn, and even if the golden urn was smuggled out of Tibet as feared at the time, it would still not meet the condition of the drawing-lot taking place in front of the statue of Sakyamuni, thus bearing divine judgment and authority.

The rhetorical play over the location of sovereignty has been extensive and deserves to be examined in detail. The Chinese authorities argued that the golden urn was indicative of their long established control over the reincarnation issue, since the urn had been granted to the eight Dalai Lama by the Chinese emperor. That an imperial gift, despite its functionality in an election procedure, can subsequently become a paramount sign and attain a political status signifying ultimate control, points directly to the core problematic of the simulated character of sovereignty. By registering the golden urn as a sign of sovereignty, the Chinese government rendered it as a front upon which contesting sovereignties were to clash, and in the process be constituted.

81. An interesting comparison of what could happen to the Dalai Lama authority was offered by Lee Feigon, suggesting that the Chinese government could gradually erode ‘any position of Tibetan leadership until its power was hardly greater than that enjoyed by the present-day descendants of the old Hawaiian kings’. Lee Feignon, ‘A Paper Tiger Picks a Panchen Lama’, quoted from The Panchen Lama Lineage, p. 86.
83. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 27 November 1995. FE/2471 G/7-8.
As the Tibetan government-in-exile argued, the golden urn was neither a fully historically endorsed nor a traditionally exhaustive symbol. It was only one of 29 suggestions made by the Manchu emperor to the eighth Dalai Lama, which were not original, nor mandatory, as the relationship between them was that of patron and priest rather than of sovereign and subject. Since the establishment of the system, only three Dalais (10th, 11th, 12th) and two Panchens (8th and 9th) were identified from the golden urn. More importantly, only in one case (that of the tenth Dalai Lama) was this done in front of the statue of Sakyamuni. In the case of the other four identifications, the drawing-lots took place in the Potala Palace. In other words, the use of the urn has not been a recent practice, which was proved by the fact that neither the deceased tenth Panchen nor the current fourteenth Dalai were identified from the golden urn under the imperial order. In short, the system of drawing lots from the golden urn was only one of many other ways of identifying short-listed candidates, though clearly (if defined as such) inscribing Chinese authority when it was followed, and resisting it when not doing so. As it happened, a different, equally authentic system in the Tibetan tradition was followed in the case of the Dalai’s identification of the Panchen Lama (i.e., identifying the reincarnation through the cake, rice-ball, drawing-lot). The abbot of the Tashi Lhumpo lamasery in Tibet, before his removal by the Chinese authorities and subsequent disappearance, repeated the drawing-lot and confirmed the identification in front of the stupa of the deceased Panchen Lama in question.

The Chinese government, however, registered another sign of sovereignty. It insisted that as far back as the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), Tibetan political and religious leaders were appointed by the Chinese imperial authorities, and that by the time of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) the search, confirmation, and installation of all Dalai and Panchen Lamas had to be reported by the Tibetan regents to the Chinese emperor. The Chinese government claimed that reporting the succession to the Chinese emperor was not a post facto announcement, but a means of seeking approval. Even the current fourteenth Dalai Lama, the Chinese authorities pointed out, reported and received confirmation from the ‘sovereign’ at the time, that is the Kuomintang nationalist government whose representative, Wu Zhongxin, presided over the enthronement in Lhasa on 22 February 1940. It must be noted, though, that the current Dalai Lama rejects the view that in reporting his ascent he actually sought government confirmation or approval to undertake his spiritual functions. It was the Tibetan National Assembly that confirmed the fourteenth Dalai Lama in 1939. As to the Chinese envoy, the Tibetan government-in-exile insists that he was one of many

86. For a detailed account of the process of identification as conducted by the Dalai Lama, see ‘The process by which the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama has been recognized’, http://www.tibet.com/PL/index.html.
guests at the enthronement, which included emissaries from Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and British India, and despite Chinese nationalist propaganda at the time, that this envoy ‘had no special role to play’.88

Claims to sovereignty also extended to the theological discussions, reading challenge to its exercise through religious hermeneutics. The Chinese discourse of state paramountcy sought not to exclude totally the value of religious principles on the matter of reincarnation. Instead, it employed these principles by offering absolute interpretations and authoritative judgments on their application. The authorities decided, for example, that there was a ‘deliberate delay’ by the Tashi Lhumpo lamasery to move from the so-called first stage search for the Panchen (praying, chanting scriptures, distributing alms, and observing prophetic visions in the holy lake, Chokhor Gyal Latsho) to the so-called second stage search (conducting secret searches and asking candidates to identify the Panchen’s belongings).89 The Chinese government was particularly critical of the decision of some lamas of the search group who wanted to view the holy lake once more. The government considered this to be an already completed task and branded their action ‘illegal’. Furthermore, it considered the search group’s seeking of any outside spiritual guidance other than the officially assigned advisory body as a scheme to undermine sound religious opinion.

These ‘problems’ dominated the second meeting that the central authorities convened on the search efforts on 20 July 1993. The meeting was aimed at laying down ‘requirements on accelerating the search efforts, seeking unity in thinking, and gaining a better understanding of the work’.90 On behalf of the Chinese State Council, comrade Luo Gan, state counsellor and secretary general, clarified to the participants the five principles that the search committee had to adhere to in its search: (1) patriotism; (2) carrying out the search only in China (thus, restricting the reincarnation to Chinese citizens); (3) accepting that the Tashi Lhumpo lamasery should be in charge (i.e., no outside intervention that was not assigned by the government was allowed); (4) requiring the approval of the central authorities for short-listed candidates and for the final choice; and (5) requiring the installation ceremony and training to take place in the Tashi Lhumpo lamasery (i.e., rejecting the Buddhist master-disciple doctrine, which would grant the Dalai Lama the right to get involved in the Panchen’s education).91 As evidence of government commitment, the search group was generously offered vehicles, escort, and other facilities, in order to move to and speedily complete the so-called second stage: the supposedly secret search for candidates.

88. See ‘Baseless Claims and Allegations of Xinhua News Dispatch’.
91. Ibid.
It is precisely at this juncture of the debate that one begins to realise the intense intertwining of sovereignty with representation. The political implications of the alliance of claims to sovereignty with representative thought were hereby exposed: specifically, in the attempt to stabilise the references that are to guide action and explain events. Again, Chinese government propaganda has been generous with illustrations of the point, this time in directly addressing Tibetans through a widely-circulated paper with 58 questions providing official answers to crucial points on the reincarnation of the Panchen. In this paper ‘the Dalai clique’ is accused of ‘messing up people’s thinking’ which, in turn, calls for the urgent need ‘to unify our thinking and deepen our understanding’.

Three questions and answers are telling in themselves, exemplifying how the Chinese government has sought to frame a particular representation of the reincarnation process, suggesting that any deviation is a direct challenge to Chinese sovereignty.

Question 52: In this struggle, on what basis should we unify our thinking?
Answer: On the basis of earnestly studying and comprehending in depth the relevant guidelines, we should deepen our understanding and unify our thinking. On what should we unify our thinking? We should unify our thinking on the principles and policies laid down by the central authorities concerning the appointment of a reincarnated child of the 10th Panchen, on the series of important instructions and plans set forth by the Party Central Committee since the Dalai announced on 14th May without authorization the reincarnated child of the 10th Panchen, on the historically established system and religious formality and procedures, on upholding our national sovereignty and the central authorities’ authority and prestige, on maintaining Tibet’s stability, and on opposing splitting and trouble making. As long as we unify our thinking on these things, we will have an extensive ideological foundation and assurance for Panchen’s reincarnation work.

In similar fashion, Question 53 deals with the principles that the Chinese authorities required adherence to in the reincarnation issue. The answer: ‘[w]e should adhere to the following points in our thinking, speech and action’ and denounce the Dalai Lama’s choice as ‘completely illegal and invalid’; insist that the issue should be ‘free from the Dalai Lama’s interference and influence’; insist on religious rituals and historical conventions and identification by drawing-lots from the golden urn; and insist that the results of the search ‘should be reported to and approved by the central government’. Finally, an ominous Question 54 asks ‘what policy boundaries should we attach importance to’ in the struggle against ‘the Dalai clique’? The answer:

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93. Ibid., G/8.
[w]e should pay attention to the following four boundaries. First, we should distinguish between those who are patriotic and those who are not. For those who are patriotic, we should welcome them and give them support and enthusiastic encouragement. For those who are not patriotic, we should educate and save them if they can be educated and saved....Second, we should distinguish the deeds of the majority from that of the minority. An overwhelming majority of monks and ordinary people in our region are loyal to the central authorities....An extremely small number of people, who are colluding with the Dalai Lama, are the scum of Buddhism. Third, we should distinguish those who have made wrong remarks from poor judgment from those who are stubborn. 'No man is perfect in every respect.' Those who have made wrong remarks or even made mistakes because of ignorance of the facts are to be pardoned and sincerely welcomed by the party and the people so long as they repent, take a firm position, and reveal the separatist deeds of the extremely small number of people....Fourth, we should distinguish normal religious activities from those which aim at political purposes under the disguise of religion....[W]e should resolutely crack down on those people who use religion for their own ends, attack the party and the government by using religion as a bargaining chip, attempt to split the motherland and sabotage stability and unity.\(^5\)

In sum, by marking the 'four boundaries' of thought, the Chinese government has sought to control how the reincarnation affair is represented and thereby to fix a specific version of events, a supreme interpretation reigning over alternative forms of thinking about it. False, unpatriotic, abnormal, stubborn, and unauthorised depictions crossing the boundaries are seen as directly challenging the exercise of Chinese sovereignty. The processes for safeguarding the unity of the state and the unity of thinking become indistinguishable boundary-setting activities, intertwining the Chinese nation and given context as endangered spaces requiring protection, policing, and violent enforcement.

**Dismounting Sovereignty**

Sovereignty lies only in the mastery of appearances, and complicity lies only in the collective sharing of illusion and secret.\(^6\)

Despite conventional presentations of its primordiality and utility, state sovereignty appears to be a historically specific, theoretically overdetermined, and often politically problematic rendition of world politics. The Himalayan example should not be


approached as the exception which proves the rule of sovereignty and effects the legitimacy of its norm. The illustrations discussed form part—a rarely reported and marginalised one—of the global architectonics of sovereignty and the subsequent political and verbal edifices they install worldwide. Of course, that is not to say this is how sovereignty is universally applied or rationalised. As shown from the Himalayan case, and contrary to positivistic accounts, the referent of sovereignty was not stable but constantly changing—recontextualised through the operation of metaphor—finding its way to the most altered spaces. The meaning of sovereignty had to be narrated, often articulated in contradictory terms, and explained by tracing other referents and producing new ones. These referents of sovereignty were essentialised and became dominant in different historical moments, not only by excluding other forms of political representation, but also by assuming that representational form, appropriating the presence or essence of sovereignty, was the only (meaningful) way of conveying political problematics and disclosing the ‘real world’ of the Himalayas. A map of the Himalayas displaying sovereign states also displays a cartography based on historico-topographical amnesia, and a global imaginary tied to specific theoretical and geopolitical, predicates. It is true that sovereignty is a useful word that commonly describes claims to final and absolute authority in the Himalayas and elsewhere, but what should not be forgotten is that it is a word also technically applied to effect just that. Those who have it mount high.

How should one, then, engage with the practices and current representations of sovereignty? It has been suggested that, in the absence of an ultimate referent, the problem of sovereignty is no longer of the order of representation—that is, no longer


98. An exceptional, and in many aspects excellent, documentary by the BBC on the issue of the tenth Panchen’s reincarnation had the unfortunate tendency of exoticising the problem ‘in the remote land of Tibet’ as that of the ‘Kingdom of the Lost Boy’. reinscribing the issue as a question of contested sovereignties: ‘Two small boys, two Panchen Lamas, two futures for Tibet. This struggle...is an epic one. It is bringing a 50-year conflict between China and Tibet to a tragic climax’. (BBC 1, 21 April 1996). Exoticism, the magic and mystery stereotype, has been a common feature of Western literary and popular imagination when dealing with Tibet. inevitably something that tells us less about Tibet and its people and more about ‘our’ ideological predicates. A good review is offered by Jamyang Norbu, ‘Dances with Yaks: Tibet in Film, Fiction and Fantasy of the West’. unpublished lecture, delivered at Harvard University (8 October 1997).

a task of trying to distill the essence of its referent or simply to examine critically how it is fabricated—but of simulation, that is, moving from one sign of sovereignty to another, from metaphor to metaphor, feigning its existence.\textsuperscript{100} Accordingly, I think that the theoretical task should be to point out this critical movement, exposing how it is rhetorically effected, disclosing what its power implications are, in other words, staging the staging of representation while dislocating the presence of sovereignty, the presence of dominant objects and identities. This approach may offer an advantage in bringing the debate beyond the crude observations of representational logic, such as the self-referential, self-sustaining truisms of how states exhibit the presence of sovereignty through policies enacted in the name of sovereignty, or always follow their own interests in performing functions contextualised as rational interest. It may also offer a strategic opening from which to prise foundational assumptions and rigid structures of more sophisticated representational projects, like neo-Marxist or cosmopolitan theses, which may substitute sovereignty and national interest with globalism and emancipation.\textsuperscript{101} The instability and manipulation of political referents, the constant shifting of contexts and chains of signification, means that our rich and complex experience of world politics lies beyond the fancy models or final vocabularies of IR theory. Global affairs cannot be securely represented or totally theorised, not because the existence of sovereign practices precludes normative analysis, as Martin Wight suggests, but rather because claims to sovereignty, individual or collective, can no longer (if they ever could) guarantee the stability of norms.\textsuperscript{102} In an increasingly postmodern world challenging the existence of secure foundations for acquiring knowledge, such claims can only pretend to validate paradigmatic standards of knowing. To that extent, we need to move to a more anarchic, less principled, less technocratic and systematic view of politics, and one where prose could provide a manner of speaking that is less indebted in negotiating the sovereignty of the discipline, or the sovereign presence of agents.\textsuperscript{103} Political prosaics could, thus, be a way of telling those other stories, retrace those tropological expeditions, that mark out the spatial imperatives within which representation is both made possible and tied to epistemic sovereignty.

\textsuperscript{100} See Weber, \textit{op. cit.}, in note 26.

\textsuperscript{101} An important contribution though liable to such criticism is the work of Martin Shaw. \textit{Civil Society and Media in Global Crises: Representing Distant Violence} (London: Pinter, 1996).


A critical attitude towards sovereignty, towards the logocentrism of representative thought, should, however, be cautious of not leading to a generalised anti-representative or mimetic hostility. Derrida explained this tendency elegantly.

A criticism or a deconstruction of representation would remain feeble, vain, and irrelevant if it were to lead to some rehabilitation of immediacy, of original simplicity, of presence without repetition or delegation, if it were to induce a criticism of calculable objectivity, of criticism, of science, of technique, or of political representation. The worst regressions can put themselves at the service of this antirepresentative prejudice.\textsuperscript{104}

The trap of delegitimising each and every act of representation in a grand theoretical sweep must be avoided, but at the same time the political and global implications of homogenising thought, speech, action, attitude, and way of living should be seriously addressed. In challenging dominant representation, it may not be appropriate or sufficient just to reject and reverse, just to provide opposing references and counter-representations, simply to shift meaning to new mounts and abodes, and declare the truths of a new logos. It may be necessary to infiltrate and subvert regimes of representation from within, that is, engage in radical hermeneutics, apply creative catachresis, accept non-teleological movement, and perhaps be content with a voyeuristic, meditative understanding, not always utilisable, not corresponding to specific philosophical or conceptual realms.\textsuperscript{105} This latter route, however, should neither take a methodological form nor acclaim para-mountcy, dismiss one set of political metaphors over another. For significantly, the politicisation of metaphor—the task of unfixing, staging the shifting of meaning from one context to another, manifesting the remainder of translation when one term replaces and is used for something else—is a practice required in order to keep investigating and deconstructing sovereignty. It should be acknowledged that if one chooses contingency or transcendence of spatial imperatives, one might not be able to determine who the real reincarnation of the Panchen Lama is, or resolve the dilemma


of the policymaker on whether Sikkim is a sovereign state or not. Still, one may achieve a small step—a politically enabling step—towards viewing the politicised Sherpa, that representative of sovereignty and fixer of summit deals, also as the metaphor of it; as the *metaphoreas* or carrier of tools and knowledge, which may be employed in servicing the ascendancy of sovereignty, but also for resisting it.

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