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Abstract

This paper explores one of the most pressing and challenging issues of our time -- the disjuncture between populist images of absolute sovereignty and its practical, functional and material operation. It seeks to connect post-modern conceptualizations of sovereignty to the challenges shaping national and global politics. Drawing on the work of Jean Baudrillard, it highlights the ways in which the operation of sovereignty has become conflated and confused with populist images / imaginaries of sovereignty. Through Baudrillard's lens of the hyperreal, sovereignty can be seen as increasingly functioning beyond a delusionary parody and instead as an unverifiable truth. The sovereignty of the hyperreal, which is explored in the first half of this paper, foregrounds a theoretical disconnect between truth and falsehood, while the latter half attempts to connect post-modern interpretations of sovereignty with Britain's efforts to exit the European Union and the negotiation of waning U.S. hegemony. Using the two case studies of "Brexit" and the "America First" Presidency of Donald Trump, the paper

analyses political speeches and media accounts in order to explore how the hyperreal provides a logic for decoding populist socio-spatial imaginaries of sovereignty, while also anticipating the fall-out from an eventual and inevitable realization of loyalty and obedience to an illusion.

Key words

Sovereignty, Hyperreality, Baudrillard, Brexit, United States

Introduction

In a world of enhanced ontological insecurity -- and the ever more rapid and dramatic destabilization of identities, economies, and political communities -- sovereignty has emerged seemingly unscathed, unshakeable and immutable in the imaginaries of populist politicians (for example, Hall 2016; Trump 2018; Haldevang 2017; May 2016a; Ocampo 2018; on ontological insecurity see Giddens 1991; Rumelili 2014). Sovereignty remains absolute in a world of inversions, where borders have become the center of spatial imaginaries; "tradition," imperial legacies, and origin myths are the future; and "taking back control" masks a disconcerting sense of insignificance and irrelevance. This paper presents possibilities for an exit from the illusionary idyll of absolute sovereignty by drawing on Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality in order to open up new terrains of thinking and practice. It suggests that through a condition of hyperreality we can explore alternative ways of approaching sovereignty and perhaps reach beyond its enduring presence as an irreducible principle of the world system.

Notions of sovereignty in crisis are not particularly new to the literature (Sidaway 2003, 159). Many have already noted that a sovereign-spatial order premised on a "claim to final and ultimate authority over a political community" has long been undercut by multiple factors, such as "national" currency values and interest rates being determined by the decisions of international markets, political citizenship reconfigured through calls for non-territorial forms of citizenship, and the granting of sovereignty to institutions that transcend states

(Flint 2009, 707; Russell 2005). The European Union (EU), for example, has been indicative of what John Agnew has termed an integrative sovereignty regime, whereby many of the founding states of the Westphalian system have "thrown in their lot with one another" to create a larger entity that "challenges existing state sovereignty in functionally complex and oftentimes nonterritorial ways" (2005, 445).

Saskia Sassen (2006) has charted the "partial 'unbundling' of the key constitutive ties between territory, authority and rights that made up modern nation-states," while the "unitary character of nation-states" has eroded due to the "rise of various cross-border regimes, instantaneous and difficult-to-regulate capital flows, and new assemblages of decision making power" (Jones and Johnson 2016, 194). Sovereignty is itself a term that has evolved to accommodate new entities with Stephen Krasner arguing that international system norms, "including those associated with Westphalian sovereignty and international legal sovereignty, have always been characterized by organized hypocrisy" (1999, 220), while others, such as Timothy Luke, have outlined a decentering of sovereign authorities and a post-Cold War world made up of "unfixed 'sovran' authorities against fixed 'sovereign' rule" (1996, 500). Why then, if sovereignty can no longer be seen as the exclusive domain of the state -- and in many regards never was (Agnew 1998) -- has there not been a corresponding shift in the way the political-territorial order is imagined (Agnew 2005, 2009; Murphy 2013, 1213)? For, while sovereignty's material and functional relevance has been destabilized, deconstructed and dislocated in academic debates, it has at the same moment become imagined by political classes as ever more precise and

perfect. This paper interprets this disjuncture as a shift to the hyperreal -- a condition that denies all of sovereignty's contradictions and inconsistencies, and one that prevents politicians, political actors, and populations acknowledging and negotiating disconcerting transformations in the socio-spatial order. What follows is a theoretical engagement with notions of the hyperreal and sovereignty, which are then explored through the case studies of Brexit and the "America First" Presidency of Donald Trump.

Sovereignty and the hyperreal

Drawing on the body of work associated with Jean Baudrillard (1976, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1988, 1994, 2004, 2006), and multiple interpretations of this work (for example, Debrix 1999; Gane 2003; Hehir 2011; Hussey 2003; Lalonde 2018; Lane 2009; Luke 1991a, 1991b; Lundborg 2016; Merrin 1994; Rubenstein 2008; Weber 1995, 2017), the hyperreal is broadly understood in this paper as a simulated world coming to replace reality; where a consciousness of things has become corrupted by a perception of something that never existed; and where the image of this world becomes imbued with characteristics it has never had and could not possess (see Hehir 2011, 1073-74). A hyperreal interpretation of sovereignty emphasizes its ideal and the ways in which its idealized image distracts and conceals inherent contradictions and hypocrisies. In the realm of the hyperreal, sovereignty demands increasing attention, iteration, and visibility yet all the while its disintegration and deterritorialization accelerates.

To date, surprisingly few studies have attempted to relate the state of the hyperreal to sovereignty (though on hyppereality's wider applicability to

international politics see for example: Der Derian 1990; Hehir 2011; Luke 1991a, 1996b; Lundborg 2016; Merrin 1994). What follows in this paper is an explanation of how, in terms of sovereignty, citizens of advanced mediacracies have "lost the ability to distinguish between the model and the real" (Der Derian 1990, 299). In order to illustrate our condition of the hyperreal, this paper turns to an analysis of recent declarations and speeches on sovereignty by populist politicians and political elites, as well as media commentary and opinion reflecting on these pronouncements and policies. Using examples drawn from the United States and the United Kingdom, the aim is to analyze and interpret the ways in which the distinction between the real and its representation begin to be effaced (Gane 2003, 102). Or, in Baudrillard's terms, when it becomes a *Simulacra:* "a copy of a copy which has been so repeatedly acknowledged, referred to and disseminated, that it has come to be accepted as more real than the original" (Baudrillard 1994, 2).

In *Simulacra and Simulations* (1988 [original publication, 1981]), Baudrillard traces the annihilation of reality in stages, whereby "the distinctions between reality and virtuality, political practice and simulation are blurred to the extent that they are no longer recognizable." In a world of media saturation and obsession, Baudrillard argues that "electronic mediations of experience and meaning substitute the imaginary for the real" (Luke 1991a, 358). For Baudrillard, this occurs over four successive phases of the image: firstly as a reflection of a basic reality; secondly, the image masking and perverting a basic reality; thirdly, masking the absence of a basic reality; and, in its fourth and final stage, it "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum"

(1988). In this final state, in a condition of the hyperreal, "no adequate analysis of systems of representation can simply refer to the 'real' world, as if this was unproblematic", since "in each phase of representation a former, dominant conception of the 'real' is taken as the reference model of 'current' reality" (Gane 2003, 95). It is through these successive phases of the image that "the model takes the place of the 'real'" (Baudrillard 1976, 100, cited in; Gane 2003, 97).

To illustrate the point, Baudrillard draws on Jorge Luis Borges' fable of imperial cartographers who create a map of such perfection it overlays the entire territory of the empire, only to be left by subsequent generations to ruin by the elements until all that remains are frayed and tattered fragments in the empire's distant deserts. For Baudrillard the lesson is that:

> The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. *The desert of the real itself* (1988, 166 [emphasis in original])

The map's precedence to territory has not escaped the attention of geographers, with Stuart Elden noting how we find ourselves in circumstances where "the abstract space we have imposed over the world is taken more and more as real in itself, rather than as a reflection of something below it, something that it seeks to represent" (Elden 2005, 15-16). And for Baudrillard "it is no longer a question

of either maps or territory [...] It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (1988, 166-167).

This paper suggests that the sovereign image / imaginary is increasingly taken for the real, as the distinction between the real and the imaginary -- between truth and untruth -- is annihilated. In response to this world of hyperreality and hyperspace Baudrillard suggests that:

> Where the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. [...] It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle (ibid, 171-172)

To chart the demise of the real, Baudrillard draws on the examples of Disneyland -- and its presentation of an "imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" -- and the Watergate affair -- "a scandal-effect" concealing the fact that the scandal is not the aberration but the norm (ibid, 171-173). In the case of sovereignty, its invocation as absolute conceals a reality principle in distress, a striving "to revive a moribund principle" through simulation by "proving the real by the imaginary" (ibid, 176-177). Attempts to reanimate sovereignty with realness and relevance abound. The spell of sovereignty becomes a trick demonstrating how "simulation corresponds to a short-circuit of reality and to its reduplication by signs"; a false promise "to restore the truth beneath the

simulacrum" (ibid, 182). If institutions like parliaments, governments, and their bureaucracies were once the representatives of the sovereignty of the people (see Debrix 1999, 10-11 & 230 on Rousseau 1973, and Locke 1982) then, in the sovereignty of the hyperreal -- under conditions of simulation -- "it is no longer possible to distinguish between a good and a bad representation, a correct or an erroneous interpretation, a truth or a falsehood [...] The simulacrum, the real of/in simulation, is no longer the product of interpretive mechanisms, but, rather, the outcome of operative media" (Debrix 1999, 12).

For François Debrix, such a shift in our ways of perceiving the "objective" world (reality) is truly revolutionary: "The Cartesian cogito has truly been superseded. New relations of perception and knowledge have arisen [...] in simulation, visual signs lie. Or, they may tell the truth. [...] What is real is what, as Baudrillard puts it, is hyperreal" (1999, 210). In this sense the binary of "hyperreal" (appearance/falsehood) versus "real" (actuality/truth) collapses. The state of the hyperreal is no longer the illusion, and the real no longer affirms the truth. Appearance and actuality are no longer poles apart but instead fused together. In such conditions, and drawing on Baudrillard, Tom Lundborg suggests that: "Only when simulation is the master does the desire for total sovereignty become possible; only then can all ambivalence be removed; and only then does the world as such become 'perfectly impossible'" (Lundborg 2016, 264; Baudrillard and Noailles 2007, 47; see also Lalonde 2018).

The conditions for total, absolute sovereignty emerge in the proliferation of hyperreal environments, in the form of geographical information systems, war game simulations, global television emissions, and cinematic sign systems (Ó

Tuathail 1996, 179) -- all of which constitute a virtual world in which the absolute becomes possible. Aidan Hehir explores "a simulated world" whereby our perception of things is "corrupted by a perception of a reality that never existed. Thus entities and phenomena are imbued with characteristics they do not and cannot have, yet are treated as though they do" (2011, 1073). Hehir focuses on the desire of the West to create "liberal" and "democratic" political communities in the developing world which mirror idealized, unreal and unrealizable visions of the Western state (ibid). Within this conceit of perfection, sovereignty becomes presented as an ever more "idealized composite image" (ibid, 1074), a simulated form and "a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled" (Baudrillard 2004 cited in Hehir 2011, 1078). All threats and challenges are externalized beyond the unity and inviolable ideal of absolute sovereignty, which has become "an almost uncontestable article of faith despite the evidence to the contrary," a universal good "legitimised as progressive and emancipatory" (Hehir 2011, 1078).[1]

Anthony Ince and Gerónimo Barrera de la Torre have reflected more broadly on such articles of faith, suggesting that much to the detriment of equality and social justice, statism – which in their terms is an integrated set of socially-embedded organizational logics establishing the state as the dominant model of governing society -- has shaped, and continues to shape, "geographical epistemologies, producing structures of knowing that can generate epistemic distance between representations of the world and immanent experiences of it" (2016, 17). The examples of hyperreality and sovereignty that follow speak to this broader aspiration of freeing geographical epistemologies from statism's restrictive

patterns of thought and reflection. They seek to move beyond the "double-move" of state-making and its tendency to illuminate "ontological uncertainty (about identity, space, time and meaning) [while] positing the sovereign state as the solution to that uncertainty" (Dunn 2010, 86).

To progress beyond such a double-move means first recognizing the state of the hyperreal and the condition of post-modernity that paradoxically maintains and sustains an illusionary territoriality of modernity. It is a state whereby sovereignty becomes ever more absurd and delusional, an ever more vivid and valorized image no matter what shifts and reconfigurations take place in the political-territorial order. Wendy Brown has noted such a process in the case of border walls, suggesting that they "function as symbolic and semiotic responses to crises produced by eroded sovereign state capacities to secure territory, citizens and economies against growing transnational flows of power, people, capital, religions, ideas or terror" (Jones et al. 2017, 2). Yet, for Brown, these "walls do not merely index but accelerate waning state sovereignty." They represent "a last vestige of a dying system of territorially bounded sovereignty [...] a political-theatrical response to eroding nation-state sovereignty" (Brown 2010; Jones et al. 2017, 2) -- a territory of the real "whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map" (Baudrillard 1988, 166).

Over the following pages, two case-studies are explored, which highlight the (il)logic of sovereignty, and how the evocative imaginings and invocations of a pure and absolute sovereignty belie an impossible and fantastical fiction. In the case of Britain's decision to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump, this paper highlights the significance of Baudrillard's work for guiding

research about "national" sovereignty and democratic decisions driven by false hopes, resentments, and unrealizable promises. In two of the world's leading liberal capitalist democracies, voters cast their ballots to affirm a hyperreal sense of the absolute sovereignty of imagined national communities. Leaving the European Union or electing a billionaire reality TV-star appeared to equate to "taking back control" and somehow a recovery of full sovereignty. In the realm of Brexit and Trump, the scale, scope, and speed of simulation generation is all immersive and all pervasive. Through leading the TV news day after day, front page coverage, nocturnal tweets and live feeds, all audiences are consumed and subsumed as the hyperreality of taking back control inundates empiricity.[2]

"Taking Back Control:" Sovereignty and the Great Brexit Debate

> We have voted to leave the European Union and become a fully independent, **sovereign** country. We will do what independent, **sovereign** countries do
>
> Theresa May, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, 2016 [emphasis added]

In the months before the referendum on Britain's future in the European Union, held on 23 June 2016, *The Financial Times* reported that: "The neuralgic word in the British debate about Europe is sovereignty" (Stephens 2016). Campaigners advocating Britain's exit from the EU exhorted voters to reclaim a sovereign idyll by "taking back control." Indicative of this was an article published on the eve of

the referendum in *The Sun,* Britain's best-selling newspaper, which declared that "leaving the EU on 23 June will save our sovereignty." In the article, Daniel Hannan MEP explained that "Britain's greatest export, our chief contribution to human happiness, is parliamentary democracy […] But we are losing it at home […] Britain has lost its sovereignty to the EU" (Green, Hannan, and Minford 2016; Farand 2017). In the run up to the referendum, the former Mayor of London, Boris Johnson MP, stated that voters had a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" to "take back control of this great country's destiny" (Hall 2016; Wilkinson 2016). He and other leading campaigners gave speeches from podiums with the slogan: "take control," and took photo-calls in front of a bus emblazoned with the claim: "we send the EU £350m a week - let's fund our NHS [National Health Service] instead" (the head of the UK Statistic Authority later stated this figure was inaccurate and "a clear misuse of official statistics" [Asthana 2017]). As *The Telegraph* newspaper summarized in the days before the referendum: "At heart, the Brexit vote is about the supremacy of Parliament. All else is noise." The vote was presented as an "elemental choice" over "whether to restore the full self-government of this nation, or to continue living under a higher supranational regime" (Evans-Pritchard 2016).

Reminiscences for an earlier sovereign era that never was; for a real that was "no longer what it used to be" framed the Leave campaign. As nostalgia assumed "its full meaning" (Baudrillard 1988, 171), the EU and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) were presented by "Brexiteers" as posing "a deep threat to the ancient sovereignty of their courts and MPs" (*Charlemagne* 2017). David Davis MP, and later Secretary of State for Leaving the EU (2016-2018),

insisted that the primary reason to leave the EU was "so that the United Kingdom, the first great liberal democracy of the modern era, the fifth largest economy in the world, can recover control of her own destiny" (Davis 2016). Nigel Farage, the leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) at the time, and a long-term supporter of leaving the EU, insisted in August 2016 at a rally for the then presidential candidate, Donald Trump, in Jackson, Mississippi, that through the Leave campaign: "We reached those people who [...] have never voted in their lives but believed that by going out and voting for Brexit they could take back control of their country, take back control of their borders, and get back their pride and self-respect" (Cooper 2016).

In February 2017, Farage added that: "This concept of sovereignty, of nation-state democracy, this mattered to our forebears so much, they went to war over it [...] We fought two world wars to preserve liberty, freedom, and democracy, and yet the social democratic politics that have overtaken Britain, Europe, and America were happy to give that all away" (Wolf 2017). Such nostalgia for a mythical pre-EU golden age of sovereignty also long predates the referendum and was evocatively captured in 1990 by Lord Denning, former Master of the Rolls, and the second-most senior judge in England and Wales, when he described European law as no longer "an incoming tide flowing up the estuaries of England. It is now like a tidal wave bringing down our sea walls and flowing inland over our fields and houses—to the dismay of all" (Denning 1990, 48 cited in Ringeisen-Biardeaud 2017).

However, it was in the referendum campaign that a "proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity"

(Baudrillard 1988, 171) concerning sovereignty flourished. Maria Kendrick described how questions of sovereignty were "prayed in aid by the Leave campaign," which was done so "in many semantic forms and epithets" (2016, 367). Theresa May's new government quickly promised a "Great Repeal Bill" in the wake of the referendum result that would absorb EU legislation and, for the new Prime Minister at least, mark "the first stage in the UK becoming a sovereign and independent country once again" (Pitas and Piper 2016). A long-standing Eurosceptic MP, Bill Cash, declared that with this bill: "What we will be doing is returning sovereignty to this house" (Hughes 2017). It was a reiteration of a claim made throughout the referendum campaign, perhaps most notably by Johnson, who argued that EU membership was incompatible with parliamentary sovereignty (Dreaming of sovereignty 2016), while Michael Gove MP, co-chair of the campaign group Vote Leave, asserted in the months before the referendum that "the British people ought to know it [...]: your government is not, ultimately, in control in hundreds of areas that matter" (Gove 2016). Gove later sought to undermine forecasts on the economic implications of Brexit by refusing to name during a television interview any economists who backed Britain's exit from the European Union, saying that "people in this country have had enough of experts" (Mance 2016).

Such moments capture the sovereign terrain of the hyperreal, and a "logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons [...as...] all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all are true" (Baudrillard 1988, 175). Through the blurring of fact and fiction, of truth and untruth, notions of sovereignty as absolute are detached from socio-spatial configurations and operations. This blurring requires both simulation through

the circulation of signs of the real that "mask the absence of the reality principle,"
and dissimulation, whereby "signs of the fake are circulated for the same
purpose" (Baudrillard 1983; Weber 2017, S-136-37). In a flurry of simulation
and dissimulation, sovereignty is but a "copy of a copy," so transformed and
indistinct from its original that it is now an image beyond realization. Brexiteers
are seduced by the simulacrum of sovereignty, by the promise of "liberty,
freedom, and democracy" outside of the EU. Instead, as Jo Murkens has
suggested, rather than reasserting parliamentary sovereignty, the Act to Repeal
the European Communities Act (the Great Repeal Bill) submerges the entire UK
legal system within EU law; subjects this system to enhanced judicial powers;
and empowers the executive to alter newly incorporated EU law (2016b). As
Murkens puts it,

> the sovereign body of the UK has ceded power to three other branches –
> first, to the undemocratic and unparliamentary prerogative powers of
> government; second, to a national referendum it knows to be purely
> advisory; third, to a court of law (ibid)

For Murkens this "is parliamentary submissiveness, not sovereignty" (ibid) and
as Vernon Bogdanor also noted on the issue of leaving the EU, "the people have
become a third chamber of Parliament, which can issue legislative instructions to
the other two" (2016, 315).

Murkens suggests that the desire to restore sovereignty to parliament and
Westminster has come twenty years too late with devolution to Scotland, Wales,
and Northern Ireland having already transformed the British constitution

(Murkens 2016a, 1). He notes that the language of a pure and perfect sovereignty advanced by Brexiteers "is laced with golden ageism in which […] the UK is still conceived as a unitary and centralised state. That sovereignty argument ignores the structural and institutional changes to the operation of the British constitution that have taken place since 1998" (Murkens 2016a, 2). Political and legal powers have been devolved, and new institutions created, such as the United Kingdom's Supreme Court (2009), with "jurisdictional competence regarding the delineation, definition, and dispute resolution over devolved and reserved matters" (Murkens 2016a, 19; Masterman and Murkens 2013). In short, devolution has "laid to rest any remaining Victorian notion that the British parliament is the supreme law maker […] It is simply no longer possible to restore sovereignty and to take back control" (Murkens 2016a, 15-16). Therefore, it is perhaps little wonder that an "ethereal quality" (Gordon 2016, 334) to sovereignty has emerged, one which memorably infiltrated the government's White-Paper on exiting the EU, published in February 2017, when it attached a sense of loss to the sovereign idea, stating that: "Whilst Parliament has remained sovereign throughout our membership of the EU, it has not always *felt* like that" ([emphasis added] Sommers 2017; The United Kingdom's exit 2017, 13).

Such feelings of a sovereignty lost manifest in a nostalgic yearning for the past amongst some. In Sunderland, in the northeast of England, a city which voted 61 percent to leave, Bromley-Davenport et al. noted the increasing difficulties that older working-class white men -- a demographic much more likely to vote leave than remain -- were facing "in maintaining the lifestyles to which they have

become accustomed and desire" (2018, 2; Ashcroft and Culwick, 2016; MacLeavy and Manley, 2018). Their paper documented a genealogy of Brexit structured around what Gamble (2015) has termed the "Thatcher myth" and the neoliberal project associated with Britain's Prime Minister between 1979 and 1990, which for one respondent "killed everything in this town" through the loss of collieries and ship-building (2018, 8). Since then the material realms of neoliberalism have come under increasing pressure and strain, reconfiguring emotive geographies and generating loyalty and obedience to a sovereign illusion.

In Bromley Davenport et al's interviews, nostalgia came to the fore with respondents reflecting that through Brexit "we can get back to how it used to be;" "I want to get the North East back to being self-sufficient. I want the country to become more self-sufficient;" "[Brexit is] gonna make the English economy more viable, more domestic;" a return to the "good old days" when Sunderland "used to have a happy buzz about the town;" "*the idea is real* – let's get our country back" ([emphasis added] 2018, 8-10, 12). Out of the "vacuum of employment and money in the local supply chain" (Bromley Davenport et al 2018, 10) emerges an infatuation with Sunderland and Britain's industrial glory days. Here illusion occludes reality as respondents express their hopes for Brexit to "spur domestic production and rejuvenate regional employment prospects for men" (ibid, 13) while the North East's largest firm, Nissan -- its Sunderland plant the largest and most successful in the history of UK car production -- warns that a sudden change from EU rules would "have serious implications for British industry." Its former head of Nissan Europe, Sir Ian Gibson, cautioned that "the most likely outcome" is that Nissan will stop investing in the plant (Conn 2018;

Douglas 2017; Whitfield 2017) and in February 2019 the company confirmed that its X-Trail model, previously planned for production in Sunderland, would now be produced at its Kyushu plant in Japan (Ford 2019).

While nostalgia for a recoverable and absolute sovereignty of the past is a captivating and beguiling image, it is also worth reliving that golden age before Britain "lost" its sovereignty and joined the Common Market on 1 January 1973:

> From the mid-1940s to mid-1970s, Britain was the heaviest user of IMF resources […] Britain had emerged from world war two with heavy debts and an unsustainable initial exchange rate in the Bretton Woods system. There was also the problem of sterling balances, private overseas holdings of the currency used to finance trade in the sterling area. As holders sold sterling when the exchange rate looked vulnerable, they accelerated declines in the currency (Coyle 2017)

It is hardly a sovereignty of objectivity and authenticity when political decision making and the national economy of the day were hostage to IMF bailouts and private offshore holdings. But, in the realm of the hyperreal, nostalgia opens up new histories of possibility.

As alluded to in the preceding discussion, the strength of feeling associated with parliamentary sovereignty is also related to, and often conflated with, the idea of national sovereignty and the UK's role as "a state engaged in supranational and international systems and relationships" (Gordon 2016, 335). As former UK Prime Minister, John Major, put it in an interview shortly before the referendum: "If you want undiluted sovereignty, go to North Korea" (EU referendum 2016). It

was a perspective shared by the remain-leaning *The Economist* newspaper whose *Bagehot* column recounted how, outside of a North Korean context, any notion of state sovereignty is inevitably diluted, for

> in today's post-Westphalian world, real sovereignty is relative. A country that refuses outright to pool authority is one that has no control over the pollution drifting over its borders, the standards of financial regulation affecting its economy, the consumer and trade norms to which its exporters and importers are bound, the cleanliness of its seas and the security and economic crises propelling shock waves—migration, terrorism, market volatility—deep into domestic life (*Bagehot* 2016)

The same outlet noted that as a member of NATO, the United Nations, and other regional and global bodies, the United Kingdom has signed "some 700 international treaties that impinge on sovereignty" but it can be worth ceding this independence to gain international influence (Dreaming of sovereignty 2016). Only in the realm of the hyperreal can a pure essence of state sovereignty be somehow distilled from the fluid networks of "overlapping national, supranational and international legal norms" (Gordon 2016, 342); and leaving the integrationist regime of the EU would almost certainly involve less influence on these norms, with the decisions of sovereign wealth funds, central banks, business lobbies, and multi-nationals limiting the choices of the United Kingdom's supposedly renewed sovereignty (Jones 2017). For Brexiteers, waiting in the wings is a world of opportunity outside the EU, even while Wilbur Ross, U.S. Secretary of State for Commerce, has cautioned that Britain would need to scrap certain food standards if it wants a successful post-Brexit deal with

the United States (Cox 2017). Nick Giordano, vice president and counsel for the U.S. National Pork Producers Council, an industry that has adopted growth promoters and animal welfare conditions which are banned in the UK and EU, advised that: "The UK has to decide whether it's really leaving the EU or not. [...] We expect the UK to accept our product without equivocation. Americans eat it, so it's good enough for our friends across the pond" (Levitt 2018).

For Vernon Bogdanor, any "policy of unilateral free trade would have the ironic result of exposing Britain more to the forces of globalisation, not less" (2016, 322), and in the case of World Trade Organization rules being implemented to govern trade with the EU,

> ECJ case law will continue to matter because for UK businesses to sell their products and services in the EU single market they will have to respect the standards set by the ECJ. This operates as a permanent limit to the control that Britain can take back and degree of sovereignty it can restore (Jancic 2017)

Despite asserting that Britain "will not have left the European Union if we are not in control of our own laws" (*Charlemagne* 2017), Theresa May -- in a moment of presentiment prior to the referendum -- appeared to concede some last vestiges of the real when she admitted that any negotiation to leave "could well be about accepting EU regulations, over which we would have no say" (May 2016b). As *Bagehot* noted in *The Economist* in October 2018, the Prime Minister, after her tortuous negotiations with the EU and fierce criticism from her own party, had herself come to represent "the reality principle in a political world dominated by

fantasy and wish-fulfilment […where Brexiteers…] are furious that reality has proved to be more stubborn than they imagined" (2018, 30).

However, it was the words of May's predecessor, David Cameron, that perhaps best captured the essence of our hyperreal times when in the months before the referendum he pointed to the dangers of pursuing the "illusion" of sovereignty (Cameron 2016; Dreaming of sovereignty 2016). In a television interview, Cameron outlined the power that the UK has as an EU member in terms of helping British businesses in Europe, its ability to insist on European partners sharing border information on criminals and terrorists, and its access to dispute resolution mechanisms in the case of unfair trade practices. In his words, "if Britain were to leave the EU that might give you a feeling of sovereignty but you have got to ask yourself is it real? […] You have an illusion of sovereignty but you don't have power, you don't have control" (2016). Intentionally or not, Cameron had precisely captured our hyperreal times, where the terrain of the real dissipates and illusion becomes all there is.

America First

The sovereignty delusion is by no means restricted to Brexit, and the blurring of fact and fiction, of reality and illusion, has been accelerated in the United States with the ascendency to the presidency of reality TV-star, Donald Trump (for examples beyond Brexit see, Dunn 2010; Juss 2017; Cocks 2014; Backman 2011). In our age of the hyperreal Trump has been called a "sovereign father" for our times (Connelly, 2016), a leader who has risen on the tide of a sovereignty myth.

It was a myth outlined by Trump at some length during his maiden speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2017, in which sovereignty dominated and defined his address, with the words "sovereign" or "sovereignty" mentioned 21 times (Tatar 2017). In the speech, Trump repeatedly equated sovereignty with global harmony, declaring that: "Our success depends on a coalition of strong and independent nations that embrace their sovereignty, to promote security, prosperity, and peace, for themselves and for the world" (Haldevang 2017). He declared that "strong, sovereign nations allow individuals to flourish in the fullness of the life intended by God" (Miller 2018), and talked of a "great reawakening of nations, for the revival of their spirits, their pride, their people, and their patriotism." That this has historically not been a recipe for "harmony and friendship" went unnoted in the speech (Chhabra 2017).

In the *Washington Post*, Greg Jaffe and Karen DeYoung suggested that in his appearance at the U.N., Trump had "cast his presidency as an avatar of international renewal," a catalyst for a renewed patriotic spirit, national self-interest and cooperation among sovereign nations, which are posited as the solution for all international ills (Jaffe and De Young 2017). Trump asked in his speech: "Are we still patriots? Do we love our nations enough to protect their sovereignty and take ownership of their future?" He also invoked sovereignty to attack the "mammoth multinational trade deals" that have supposedly empowered faceless global bureaucracies over nation-states, sent factory jobs overseas and hollowed out the middle class (Jaffe and De Young 2017). Trump railed against the "unaccountable international tribunals and powerful global bureaucracies" that sap the sovereignty of nations (Jaffe and De Young 2017),

and as a counter offered a passionate and populist defense of the principles of sovereignty and patriotism, which in his words could spark a "rebirth of devotion" across the world (Jaffe and De Young 2017). It is a devotion to a sovereign idyll and illusion; a missionary zeal anchored in the ether of hyperreality.

As Vali R. Nasr has pointed out, Trump's definition of sovereignty in the speech is derived "from a very narrow domestic prism" (cited in Landler 2017) out of which the United States emerges as the first amongst equals. It is a foreign policy doctrine that has been interpreted by some as the fusion of sovereigntism with "a style of big-power nationalism," and in an echo of earlier presidencies, one that has been labelled by the president and his advisors as "principled realism" and "America first" (Bierman and Lauter 2017). For Stewart M. Patrick it represents an invocation of sovereignty to "assert universal truths and to deflect messy realities" (2017a). Patrick suggests that Trump's speech should be seen as part of a broader "sovereigntist" critique of the global order, which has been evident in policy stances from leaving the Paris Climate Agreement, to renouncing the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the criticism of alliances like NATO, threats to ignore the World Trade Organization, and moratoriums on any new multilateral treaties (2017b).

It is in Trump's sovereigntist agenda that we glimpse a mourning for the waning of U.S. hegemony in the face of "messy realities;" a lament for the absence of power, which "for some time now produces nothing but signs of its resemblance [...] an obsession with its death; an obsession with its survival which becomes greater the more it disappears" (Baudrillard 1988, 180). Baudrillard writes of a

"[m]elancholy for societies without power," whereby "power is no longer present except to conceal that there is none" (ibid, 180-181). It is out of this melancholy for power, and a rage against its loss, that the sovereigntist agenda materializes in ever more disturbing ways. One such moment occurred on 4 April 2018, with the release of a memo by Trump titled *Securing the Southern Border of the United States* in which National Guard troops were ordered to the U.S.-Mexico border in response to a "caravan" of refugees travelling to the United States from Central America (Jacobs 2018). The first paragraph sets the scene of a sovereignty principle in peril:

> 1) The security of the United States is *imperiled* by a *drastic surge* of *illegal activity* on the southern border. Large quantities of fentanyl, other opioids, and other dangerous and illicit drugs are *flowing across our southern border* and into our country at *unprecedented levels, destroying the lives of our families and loved ones*. [...] *deadly transnational gangs* are *systematically exploiting our unsecured southern border* to enter our country and develop operational capacity in American communities throughout the country. The anticipated *rapid rise* in *illegal crossings* as we head into the spring and summer months *threatens to overwhelm* our Nation's law enforcement capacities ([emphasis added] Trump 2018)

The memo stresses a border regime where the ability to ensure the sovereignty of the nation is in doubt (see Miller 2018 on Trump's preference for the term "nation"), with it suggesting that: "Our American way of life hinges on our ability as a Nation to adequately and effectively enforce our laws and protect our borders. A key and undeniable attribute of a sovereign nation is the ability to

control who and what enters its territory." Throughout the memo a sovereignty principle in crisis is invoked, with paragraphs 4 and 5 warning that: "The lawlessness that continues at our southern border is fundamentally incompatible with the safety, security, and sovereignty of the American people [...] the highest sovereign duty of the President is to defend this Nation, which includes the defense of our borders" (Trump 2018). The memo's unsubtle generation of an existential threat to "*Our* American way of life" works to regenerate the sovereign Nation; it strives to revive a moribund "moral and political principle [...] in distress" (Baudrillard 1988, 172-173). From it emerges a pure and perfect U.S. sovereignty that contrasts with the disorder and chaos beyond, "a simulated real, which henceforth supplants the real and is its final solution, a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled" (Baudrillard 2004).

To maintain the illusion of sovereign perfection, in June 2018 children of asylum seekers were separated from their parents at the U.S. border, as Trump declared that: "The United States will not be a migrant camp [...] you look at what's happening in other places – we can't allow that to happen to the United States. Not on my watch" (Gambino and Lartey 2018). In the simulated sovereignty of Trump's America First the "circulation of hyperreal signs of *his* ability and often *his* ability alone [...] deliver what he defines as truly in the US national interest" ([emphasis added] Weber 2017, S-137; on Trump scripting himself as the superhero see Dittmer 2018). In one sense, Trump is a continuation of U.S. presidents since Ronald Reagan who have each told us "a meta-theoretical story about Baudrillardian sign theory where presidents [...] mark different moments

of the simulacrum" (Rubenstein 2008, 11). For example, on George W. Bush's Presidency, Ron Suskind (2004) outlined a faith-based administration with a disdain for "the reality-based community." Karl Rove -- Senior Advisor to Bush at the time -- stated to Suskind that: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out." Suskind describes a presidency of "unflinching confidence [that] has an almost mystical power. It can all but create reality" (2004).

Trump is also a continuation and confirmation of the practice of "statecraft as mancraft" (Ashley 1989; Weber 2016, 4), whereby the sovereign foundation of the modern state is presented as a "phantastical yet presumed-to-be-factual 'sovereign man' – as if it were the singular, preexisting, ahistorical ground that authorizes all sovereign decisions in its political community" (Weber 2016, 4-5). Applied to our own phantastical times, Trump as sovereign man could claim on 5 April 2018 -- without any corroborating evidence -- that in the caravan of refugees "women are raped at levels that nobody has ever seen before" (Trump cited in Wolf 2018). Then, in October 2018, as a group of mainly Honduran asylum seekers moved through Mexico towards the U.S. border, Trump called it an "onslaught of illegal aliens" (Darrah 2018). On 31 October he tweeted that: "We will NOT let these Caravans, which are also made up of some very bad thugs and gang members, into the U.S. Our Border is sacred […]" (Evans 2018). In a speech at the White House on the same day, Trump added that if: "They want to throw rocks at our military, our military fights back. I told them to consider it a

rifle" (Weaver and Manson 2018). In such hyper-masculine declarations and denunciations, a state of crisis and threat becomes the norm -- a form of "banal geopolitics," whereby crises and extreme remedy become "nothing out of the ordinary," "routine," "normal, taken-for-granted geopolitics" (Sidaway 2001, 606-607).

These episodes also recall Wendy Brown's interpretation of border walls and their paraphernalia and performance "as symbolic and semiotic responses to crises" (Jones et al. 2017, 2). For against Trump's refrain that "a secure border is a sovereign right" (Swoyer 2016), Joan Anderson has noted in *The San Diego Union-Tribune* that the immense efforts at securitizing the U.S.-Mexico border have had the counter-function of jeopardizing U.S. sovereignty and human security as "[s]trong, militarized enforcement has resulted in a stronger militarized response by well-financed drug cartels and increased corruption, violence and death, but not a decrease in the flow of drugs" (Anderson 2018).

Extreme violence and discipline are anticipated by Baudrillard who notes that power threatened by simulation "risks the real, risks crisis, it gambles on remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, political stakes. This is a question of life or death for it." It also becomes a question of life and death for those caught in the "collective demand for signs of power – a holy union which forms around the disappearance of power" (1988, 180). In the desert of "Making America Great Again" are the drowned of the Rio Grande and the missing of the arid U.S.-Mexico borderlands -- victims of a melancholy for a society without power. While hyperreality's scenario of power conceals the fact that the real power has disappeared (Baudrillard 1988, 181-182), simulation does not exclude the violent

counter convulsions of a sovereign tormented by the ebb of its power. As Baudrillard insisted, the simulacrum of war does not make it "any less heinous for being a mere simulacrum – the flesh suffers just the same, and the dead ex-combatants count as much there as in other wars" (Baudrillard 1983, 70 cited in Merrin 1994, 444). A condition of the hyperreal makes possible absolute sovereign authority and with it the full realization of sovereignty's devastating foundational logic -- the operation of a binary of those who are protected and those who could legitimately die (Agamben 1998).

For Weber, the Trump "campaign and presidency are part and parcel of earlier historical 'experiments' – in white, Western, heteropatriarchal authoritarian leadership, in neoliberalism and the specific modalities of citizenship, governance and reason" (Adorno et al. 1950; Connelly 2016; Bauman 2016; Brown 2003; cited in Weber 2017, S-134). Weber sees Trump's simulated form as President as akin to Alain Badiou's description of the function of the simulacrum under Nazism,

> in which a hyperreal national allegiance to the self-referential simulacrum as heteropatriarchal leader piles specific fictions upon fictions. It does so not only to mask [...] the absence of the reality principle but to generate a dangerous, materializable, national fantasy that depends upon particularizing, identifying and regulating abstract allies and enemies (Badiou 2001, 74; Weber 2017, S-135)

For Weber, Trump "opposes the 'righteous' to the 'unrighteous', who he variously named during the campaign as all or many of 'the blacks', 'the gays',

'the Mexican rapists' and the 'radical Islamic terrorists'" (Weber 2017, S-136). In her polemic, Weber highlights how simulation and dissimulation "recode sovereignty […] in the name of that particular abstract set of sovereign US subjects on whose behalf the administration (pretends to) claim(s) its authority to rule – 'righteous Americans'" (Weber 2017, S-138). In a haze of "fake news" and "alternative facts" (which are read by some as "real news") the administration's strategy is one "that attempts to overwhelm US democracy with […] representations, simulations and dissimulations of facts and fictions, so all that remains intact is the authority of Trump and Trump as our authoritarian leader" (Weber 2017, S-137-139). These hyperreal simulations and dissimulations of sovereignty are far from intangible, unreal or benign but effectively maintain violent exclusionary hierarchies through privileging "righteous Americans" and the elevation of "a particular people and its mode of life above those marked as alien" (Weber 2017, 136; Cocks 2014, 3). It is out of the sovereignty of the hyperreal that there emerge new terrains and possibilities for the "violent reactivation of a form of power that despairs of its rational foundations" (Baudrillard 1980, 110 cited in Kroker 1984, 58).

Conclusions

This paper does not seek to deny that sovereignty has tangible effects and lethal implications. Tariffs are extracted on borders, migrants die trying to cross them, and immense infrastructures emerge in the name of sovereignty and security. Yet, this paper has suggested that sovereignty also increasingly belongs to the

realm of the hyperreal. Through the case-studies of Brexit and America First, images of absolute sovereignty are underpinned by the logic of taking back control, in these cases from Europe and from the "unrighteous." It has highlighted the ways in which populist and prevailing understandings of sovereignty conceal and deny sovereignty's unintelligibility and the myriad of complexities, contradictions, and hypocrisies that constitute it.

However, rather than articulating alternative ways to interpret and order space in the face of a "dying system of territorially bounded sovereignty" (Brown 2010; Jones et al. 2017, 2), populist politicians and the desire for the spectacle have conjured ever more radical and absolute sovereign images / imaginaries. In the realm of the hyperreal, sovereignty demands ever more iteration and duplication in order to mask a model of "a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 1988, 166). In a media haze of repetition and recitation, sovereignty increasingly functions beyond a delusionary parody and instead as an unverifiable truth. Behind the sovereignty trick, simulation has short-circuited reality through "its reduplication by signs," and the false promise of power restoring "the truth beneath the simulacrum" (ibid, 182).

If sovereignty has at certain moments in time constituted a territoriality of the pre-modern (absolute monarchal rule), and at another the modern (the self-determination of a national community), then a sovereignty of the hyperreal brings with it new realms of possibility for interpreting a territoriality of the post-modern. However, as Ó Tuathail argues, in Baudrillard's nostalgia for lost authenticity he "exaggerates the break between the modern and the postmodern" (1996, 179), and it is through this nostalgia that a challenge

emerges to linear narratives of modernity as into our condition of postmodernity bleeds nationalism, traditionalism, nativism, religiosity, parochialism, and racism. Prevailing social constructions and distinctions of historical time and social reality begin to melt and merge as the putatively sovereign masses are overwhelmed by nostalgia for the modern,[3] which appears as the only route "to escape the postmodern world" (Heer 2017).

In Trump's America First and Brexit is an unrealizable promise of a return to an earlier, seemingly simpler era, where jobs were rooted in physical activity -- in manufacturing, coal mining, and ship building -- and where the economy and society were governed by the imperatives of nationalist solidarity and not globalization (ibid). In a state of ontological insecurity, Baudrillard's silent majority has become mesmerized by a utopian urge to reverse late capitalism (ibid) but, as Baudrillard noted in one of his last works: "In the New World Order there are no longer any revolutions, there are now only convulsions" (2006). The silent majority, the mass, has become "[i]naccessible to schemas of liberation, revolution and historicity; this is its mode of defense, its particular mode of retaliation" (1978, 22-23). Just over a decade after his death, we revel in the spectacle of Brexit and America First and the hyperreality of absolute sovereignty; "We dream of senseless events that will free us from this tyranny of meaning and the constraint of causes" (Baudrillard 2006).

Yet, perhaps through the very recognition of a blurring of past and present, and of truth and falsehood, we can also locate opportunities for reconnecting theoretical and post-modern conceptions of sovereignty with the material and functional challenges surrounding the end of U.S. hegemony and the future of

supra-national experiments in political power. By invoking Baudrillard and his notion of hyperreality, new pathways may open up for exiting imperiling images of an unrealizable future and reclamations of an out of reach past. For through the acknowledgment of the hyperreal there emerges a particular (il)logic to decode our prevailing socio-spatial imaginaries, while also anticipating the fall-out from an eventual and inevitable realization of loyalty and obedience to an illusion.

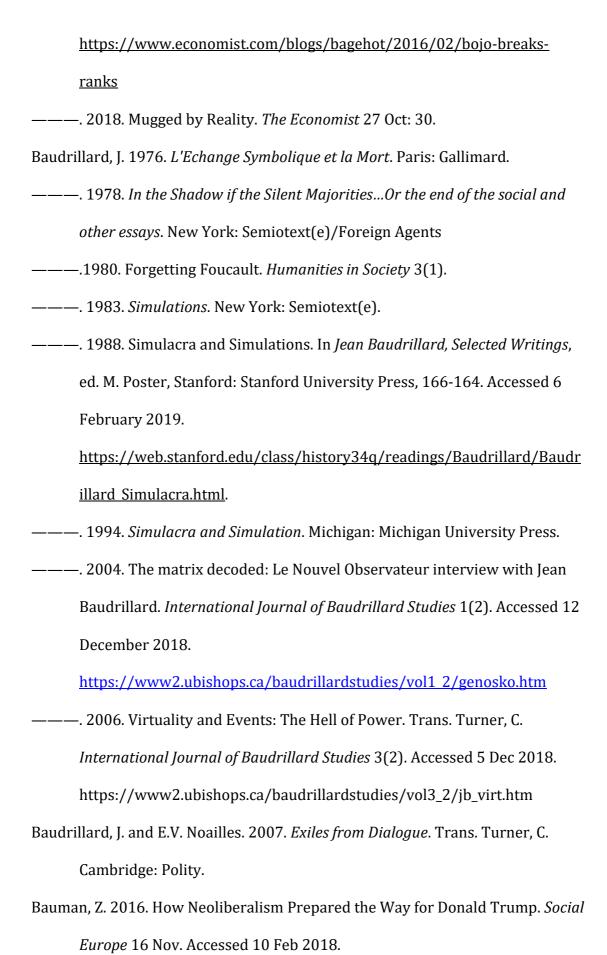## Acknowledgments

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[1] Hehir does not specifically address sovereignty, instead focussing on the dissemination and acceptance that free trade is a universal good benefitting all members of society

[2] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for insights and guidance on hyperreality and empiricity in advanced mediacracies. This helped shape this paper and much of the discussion in this paragraph owes a debt to this reviewer -- with all the inadequacies in interpretation being my own

[3] Again, thanks are due to the same anonymous reviewer for drawing attention to the revival of these tendencies and their implications for social constructions of historical time and social reality