Sovereignty and Absence in International Relations: Hauntological Performativity
Written by Tarsis Brito

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This essay poses the following question: can 'sovereignty' be duly grasped through a particular understanding of poststructuralism that equates the emergence and maintenance of the sovereign state with an *'absent',* although successful, performativity? I take, then, the poststructuralist literature on Sovereignty that flourishes within the discipline of International Relations (IR) at the end of the 1980s as a point of departure. My main argument is that poststructuralist scholars in IR have tended to simply reverse the binary 'absence/presence' in favour of the former when trying to make sense of sovereignty. Therefore, in lieu of critically questioning the oppositions 'signified/signifier, and absence/presence', that underpin the common ontological narratives on sovereignty, these scholars have been, paradoxically, reifying these binaries. Sovereignty, then, has been simply transformed from a transcendental ideal of closure, presence, and autonomy, into an entity that is 'never simply there' (Walker, 1995, p. 322), but that successfully *simulates* its presence through a discursive process of self-legitimation (Ashley, Walker, 1990a, p. 403).

In light of that, this work aims at engaging in a conversation with poststructuralist authors in IR, in an attempt to offer novel insights to the – relatively old – but still ongoing debates around the concept of Sovereignty. Towards this end, I draw on Derrida's notion of hauntology in order to critique the employment of the term 'ontological performativity' in IR – to be explained shortly – as a form of critiquing and/or making sense of sovereignty. I argue that it falls short in at least two important aspects. First, it risks essentialising sovereignty by conceiving it as the result of a *successful* performativity, one that, although solely based on absent 'text/sign', seems to be incontestably efficacious in producing a *sense of presence*. Second, and perhaps a consequence of the former, ontological performativity seems to downplay the *phantasmatic* character of those so-called *sovereign performative acts*. In brief, the fact that sovereignty is neither *present* nor *absent* but *spectral*, an entity that is always on its way, always to-come (Derrida, 2000, p. 467). References to 'hauntological performativity' throughout the essay do also draw to large extent on the work of Thomas C. Mercier.

For the sake of clarity, then, this essay is divided into three main parts. First, I briefly summarise some of the main contributions of poststructuralist authors on sovereignty within the discipline, trying my best to do justice to their critiques and insights. Second, I engage closely with Derrida's notion of hauntology, in an attempt to formulate some critiques of 'ontological performativity'. Instead of embracing 'absent' textuality as a form of making sense of sovereignty, then, I employ the concept of 'hauntological performativity' as being: (1) a better way to understand how 'sovereignty' is performatively enacted, legitimated and perpetuated, whether theoretically or in its practice – if there is a real distinction between them whatsoever; and (2) a possibility of evading the choice of a final side when addressing the paradoxical binary 'absence/presence'. Finally, I engage briefly with structural realism, so as to understand how this hauntological performativity of sovereignty is produced and perpetuated in that literature. I then point out that this neorealist conception of sovereignty is, not accidentally, an impossible project *a priori*, in that the *conditions of its possibility* – the elimination of the horizon of war that seems to circumscribe the state – become the *conditions of its very impossibility*. This realist conception of Sovereignty, in short, is considered to be a project that is, aporetically, doomed to fail and to succeed at the very same time.

Sovereignty, Absence, and Ontological Performativity

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The aftermath of the 'Cold War' witnesses the emergence of a significant debate around the concept of Sovereignty in the discipline of International Relations. Predominantly constituted of a series of reactions against neorealist conceptions of state and sovereignty, the debate was indubitably accompanied by a profound critique of what were (and still are, in a way) the main ontological, epistemological, and even methodological foundations upon which the mainstream theories of IR used to rely (Weber, 1998). Nonetheless, even though acknowledging not only the existence but also the importance of a plurality of perspectives which were critical to the old notions of sovereignty during this period, this essay deliberately concentrates on so-called poststructuralist conceptions and critiques of sovereignty in IR.

Sovereignty, indeed, has not been foregrounded by poststructuralists by accident. After all, to speak about this subject is not only to address 'the state' itself. As Necati Polat (1998, pp. 453-354) reminds us, by referring to sovereignty, poststructuralists were also able to address all sorts of ideas in IR that relate to both *metaphysical presence* – such as essence, autonomy, and the like; and *autonomy* – especially those notions of free will that underpin many of mainstream concepts of rational agency – within the discipline (Ashley, 1988). By and large, poststructural scholars were then able to elaborate a deep and broad critique of all notions of *ontology* that were, not infrequently, a-critically assumed by mainstream authors. That said, I try below to very briefly summarise two common and very influential positions amongst poststructural scholars in International Relations when approaching Sovereignty: (1) sovereignty as the result of a modern 'crisis of representation'; and (2) sovereignty as the result of its self-legitimating performative acts.

The first group can be best 'represented' by the works of Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker (1990a, 1990b). According to them, sovereignty has no ontological existence in itself, emerging simply as a response to what they term 'crisis of representation', a phenomenon that traverses all domains of modernity, and can be described as the impossibility of tracing an origin or major cause to any form of presence, in a clear anti-foundationalist move (*Ibid,* p. 377). As a result, they argue, sovereignty can only come into being via the use of 'representations', those *empty* figures that create the *illusion* of its metaphysical existence. Nonetheless, because those 'representations' are the only *true* way through which we can really experience sovereignty, the authors end up concluding that the sovereign state cannot but be *the effects* caused by its own representations. More accurately, sovereignty is understood as an act of affirmation of a certain metaphysics via the *absence of its textual myths* (Walker, 1992, 1990). Sovereign presence, then, becomes only the *impression of presence*, and, hence, critiqued 'for being simply ideological, simply mimetic, for having no private object, no transcendental signified, behind the promise of a signifier' (Polat, 1998, p. 462). In short, as Doty (2000, p. 139) argues, 'the state, rather than being an essential entity that has desires, is itself a desire'.

The second group, in its turn, is particularly inspired by Foucault's (1997, 2004) works on genealogy and Butler's (1997, 2006) notion of performativity. Sovereignty, once more, is not treated by its authors as an essence, but as 'a discursively produced structural/structuring effect that relies on constant acts of performativity to call into being' (Dunn, 2010, p. 80). In other words, the state, *as a sovereign entity*, has to be daily enacted by its discursive mechanisms – such as border control, political speeches, military actions, and so on – in order to exist as such (Hansen, 2006; Doty, 1993). In this sense, they are not pre-given subjects, but 'subjects in process', inasmuch as they are, again, the 'ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted' (Weber, 1998, p. 78), a 'sign without referent' that keeps being written and legitimated by itself (Salter, 2008, p. 365, Edkins, 1999, p. 6). Within this group, thus, the accent tends to be put on the link between knowledge and performativity as well as on the daily (and historical) process of production and maintenance of sovereignty, which is treated as an *empty signifier* that is historically open, contingent, unstable, and self-legitimised by its own discourse (Bartelson, 1995, p. 5; Neal, 2008, p. 56).

In light of this quite 'artificial division' I have undertaken above, therefore, we can conclude that, whilst the first group focuses on the way this acknowledged crisis of representation – or the crisis of metaphysics *per se* – is, coarsely, the source of this process of simulation of sovereignty, the second one seeks to highlight the continuous enacting of sovereignty through its daily performative gestures. Those differentiations notwithstanding, what seems to be fundamental in all those works is the fact that sovereignty becomes merely its simulations. In brief, sovereignty stops being an incontestable metaphysical presence to become a performative entity that can but produce the illusion of its

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ontological existence. Central for those authors, thus, is the fact that there is nothing but *absence* in sovereignty, only *ideologies of sovereignty*, we may say, only *mimesi*s. This process of sovereignty-simulation advocated by IR poststructuralists is called 'ontological performativity', insofar as it points to the illusionistic creation of an *ontological presence* through nothing but *absent performance*.

Phantasmatic Sovereignty: Towards a Hauntological Performativity?

The term 'ontological performativity', then, seeks to give a general account of the understandings underpinning poststructuralist conceptions of sovereignty. All in all, it points to this, in a way, general interpretation in IR poststructuralism which tends to replace what was hitherto understood as 'presence' with 'absence'. As if 'ontology' were a mere (although successful) simulation stemming from the *void* of its inherent textuality. In other words, ontological performativity is the very process of *textualization of ontology*, insofar as ontology is turned into a mere effect of its *absent representations*.

Nevertheless, despite the indubitable significance of those engagements with sovereignty in International Relations, I want to offer two general critiques of the concept of 'ontological performativity' so far. First, in lieu of deconstructing the binary 'presence/absence' – or signifier/signified –, as many argue to be doing, a great number of those authors seem to be merely reversing the opposition in favour of 'absence'. This 'textual turn', I argue, ends up only reinforcing the opposition 'presence/absence', for its major change is only to turn what used to be the 'signified' ('performance') into the 'signifier', whereas the hitherto signifier (sovereignty) becomes the signified. More accurately, 'text/performativity' is transformed into a form of original locus from where all our meanings would flow, in the form of a 'textual positivism' (Polat, 1998, p. 466). The figures of the signifier and the signified, however, are still present, despite the change in order of importance. Second, drawing on Mercier (2016, p. 378), ontological performativity risks both essentialising sovereignty and/or giving too much credit 'to the performative gesture by conceiving it as successful – even when the intent is to criticise it'. By and large, those acts are treated as being indeed able to effectively produce its (illusion of) ontological presence, as though sovereignty were indeed a *successful* by-product of its performative acts (*Ibid*, p. 378). This purported 'acknowledgement', therefore, perhaps unconsciously, ends up contributing to the very process of legitimation of sovereignty. Bearing those critiques in mind, I now intend to develop the term 'hauntological performativity'.

In a book titled *'Spectres de Marx'* (1993), Derrida presents for the very first time the concept *hantologie,* which was later translated into English as 'hauntology'. Accordingly, this term is to be grasped as a supplant of its 'near-homonym' ontology, replacing our notions of 'presence' and 'absence' with the figure of the 'ghost' (*Ibid,* 1993, p. 30). The 'ghost', says Derrida (1994, p. 32), 'is this first paternal, as powerful as it is unreal, a hallucination or simulacrum that is virtually more actual than what is so blithely called a living presence'. *En bref*, the figure of the ghost is, at the very same time, present and absent*, present because it is absent, and absent because it is present* . Its paradoxical existence, it is argued, springs from the fact that the conditions of its possibility are the very conditions of its impossibility, as if the only way through which the ghost could come into being were by pointing to its very *unsuccess in becoming present*: 'At the bottom, the spectre is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back, in the future' (*Ibid,* p. 36).

The figure of the ghost, says Derrida, perpetrates all our ontological notions of existence, even those *illusionistic figures* derived from 'ontological performativity'. Accordingly, that which is usually termed 'performative act' is not only the making of an *ontological presence*, but also the making *of absence*. For, it is argued, only the *lack* of that what is said to be present can justify its very presence, its necessity. In this sense, 'presence' – as a metaphysical existence that is independent from the world – is, in fact, an 'ideal' that *guides* the event but that can never be realised, because as soon as it is fully realised, it loses its necessity. An example of this hauntological performativity may be found in how 'security' is enacted. When political leaderships say their country need to be/remain *secure*, this act can only be justifiable if *insecurity* (or the lack of security) remains as a possibility, as a horizon that impedes security to be *fully there*. For if a performative act of security were indeed able to make the state secure *par excellence*, security would simply lose its necessity. This is why security can only be *ghostly* performed, as something that is indeed *presen*t – because it has *real* effects – but that needs to remain *absent* in its very 'enactment'. After all*, its success is responsible for its failure, as much as its failure is responsible for its*

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success. This idea is, then, also faithful to Butler (1997, p. 151), to whom "the failure of the performative is the condition of its possibility: That performative utterances can go wrong, be misapplied or misinterpreted, is essential to their "proper" functioning".

If applied to the concept of sovereignty, hauntology implies understanding sovereignty as a 'ghost', an entity that is simultaneously present and absent, that *presents* itself by *pointing to its lack* thereof, by promising to arrive in the future (Davis, 2005, p. 373). In this sense, I argue, the production of sovereignty cannot be equated with its success, as in ontological performativity, because its performative existence is always accomplished via its failure, via the production of its own absence, which comes to be the very justification for its necessity (Derrida, 1988, p. 17). In sum, sovereignty produces and, then, legitimates itself by its own impossibility, by this desynchrony with 'today' that turns the sovereign state into its very *telos* – even if its 'end' will never truly arrive.

Ontological performativity, then, should be replaced by 'hauntological performativity': a textual performance that results in ensuring its presence by failing in being present, in creating its own absence, which is also, aporetically, the only form by which it can become present. However, by saying that sovereignty is not a successful event – for its presence is neutralised in the very event through which it comes into being (Derrida, 2000, p. 467) – I do not intend to say that the ghost 'does not have 'undeniable consequences' (Mercier, 2016, p. 383), but only that sovereignty is always escaping by its very definition from the event in which it is inscribed. After all, it is exactly because sovereignty is a promise of a *presence to-come*, that it is successful in driving the world towards its 'linear completion', as a *telos* that keeps guiding – not to say haunting – its performances.

A perhaps obvious example of 'hauntological performativity', can be found in Britain's exit from the European Union in 2016, so-called Brexit. During the debates that preceded the final result, the opinions were divided between those who supported the 'Remain Campaign' and those who supported the 'Leave Campaign' (Hunt; Wheeler, 2016). Despite the different opinions, however, one thing was never put into question, namely: Britain's sovereignty. None of the sides seemed to be willing to advocate against the fundamentality of sovereignty to Britain, which was grasped as something they could never give up upon, not even for a second – even though their understandings about how to ensure sovereignty were different (Riley-Smith, 2016; BBC, 2016). Moreover, both sides also seemed to agree upon the fact that sovereignty seemed to imply some notion of 'full control', be it the 'full control' of its borders, the 'full control' of its economy, or the 'full control' of its security. In short, sovereignty was equated with the *full control of its own existence.*

I think it's legitimate to say that if people feel they have lost control completely, and we have lost control of our borders completely as members of the EU, and if people feel that voting doesn't change anything then violence is the next step (Nigel Farage, The Guardian, 2016).

Sovereignty, in this case, seems to be both missing and present, performatively brought into its presence/absence. After all, even though no one would say Britain was not a sovereign state in 2016, yet, sovereignty was still seen as something in need of being recovered or, at least, *ensured*. Far from being a particularity of Brexit, I would say that the very notion of 'control', equated with Sovereignty by both campaigns, requires, quite essentially, 'something yet in need to be controlled', a kind of horizon of uncontrol-ness that justifies the very existence of 'control', without which there is not even need of control. For full control (or sovereignty, if you will) can never be *sufficiently full* up to the point where this 'uncontrol-ness' is not a threat anymore. There must always be something yet to be controlled if state control is to make any sense. Consequently, those performative acts of 'sovereignty' do not successfully create its ontological presence through the absent text, as poststructuralists have been pointing out in the discipline. Contrariwise, their success relies, paradoxically, *in them not being able to succeed*, in ensuring that the control is never full indeed, in being an impossible event. In brief, sovereignty is always *legitimated* and *legitimating* itself, both a principle of foundation and conservation (Mercier, 2016).

This section has sought to offer an alternative to 'ontological performativity' in order to address Sovereignty in International Relations. Contra most of the poststructuralist work addressing the issue of sovereignty within the discipline, then, I have argued that the idea of 'hauntological performativity' can ensure we do not fall into the trap of choosing a definitive side in the binary 'absence/presence', which would be nothing but to reify the very opposition

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one is intending to critique. Moreover, because it does not treat sovereignty as a successful creation, this approach, by emphasising 'the fallibility of homo-hegemonic monopolisations' (Mercier, 2016, p. 380), remains suspicious of all notions of ontological presence.

Structural Realism and the Horizon of War: a Sovereignty that is Doomed to Unsuccessfully Succeed.

Among states, the state of nature is a state of war. (Waltz, 1979, p. 102).

(…) but the only assumption dealing with a specific motive that is common to all states says that their principal objective is *to survive* (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.).

Structural realism in International Relations, whether in its defensive or offensive variants, seems to have two main assumptions: (1) the international system is an anarchical '*state* of war'; (2) and the primordial goal of any *sovereign state* is to *ensure (secure)* its survival (Hamilton, Rathbun, 2013). Nonetheless, as realists make it clear, to say that the International system is akin to a *state of war* is not tantamount to saying that war is always happening somewhere. It basically means that *because* there is no international central authority above the states, as in Hobbes' state of nature, and, hence, each state is 'deciding for itself whether or not to use force, war may at any time break out' (Waltz, 1979 p. 102). Those two assumptions seem to complement each other very compellingly in neorealism, for if states want, above all things, to survive, and anarchy – the lack of an international government – cannot guarantee that states will not seek to destroy each other, the international system cannot but be a Hobbesian state of war (Lande, 2017, p. 3). Bearing this scenario in mind, how, then, can hauntological performativity make sense of this experience of sovereign existence in neorealism?

Before formulating an answer to this question, it is worthy looking closely at the neorealist concern with 'survival'. If the state's survival, as neorealists assume, must be daily *ensured* – and that is the word that both Waltz and Mearsheimer use – by its government, we can conclude that the state can never become *confident enough* up to the point it takes its existence for granted. After all, to exist *as a* sovereign state, in neorealism, is to never assume its existence as something accomplished, something unquestionable, secured, in short, to be always anticipating the possibility of this anarchical *horizon of war* to turn into *actual* war. In this sense, the very notion that a state exists requires the presence of an anarchy that renders its very existence endangered, as if sovereignty depended essentially on the possibility of its destruction in order to make itself present. For sovereignty, as Waltz (1979, p. 96) unconsciously implies, is both *present* and, yet, in need of being ensured, always demanding a constant effort, a certain horizon of death (anarchy) that impedes it from being entirely present, and which justifies the very search for sovereignty (Derrida, 2007, p. 112)

By assuming that sovereignty is always something in need of being ensured, then, neorealism becomes able to *unsuccessfully succeed* in performing sovereignty. More accurately, and this is pivotal, neorealists, such as Waltz and Mearsheimer, are not justifying the existence of 'sovereign states' by pointing to its full presence, nor by creating the *illusion* that states are really there. Quite the contrary, states seem to become present *because* they are never 'actually present', as if this constant *need of ensuring (securing) its sovereignty,* this struggle against a certain *absence of sovereignty* were exactly that which made them, strangely, present. Only the constant failure in finally securing its full sovereignty – a failure that is perpetuated by a form of theoretical a-historicism in the case of neorealism (Hobson and Lawson, 2008) – thus, guarantees the (im)possibility of sovereignty. For the neorealist conception of 'Sovereignty' assumes, unwarily, the form of this Derridean *ghost*, inasmuch as it keeps haunting the structures of the state without ever being fully actualised, always to-come, justified by its own absence, by a certain horizon of war that, by rendering full control virtually impossible, creates and legitimates sovereignty.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to contribute to the poststructural debate around the issue of sovereignty in International Relations. It has argued that poststructuralists have tended to use an approach called 'ontological performativity' when addressing sovereignty. This approach seems to have operated a simple reversal of the binary 'absence/presence' in favour of the former rather than critically engaging with the opposition, transforming

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sovereignty into an 'absent ontology' – a 'successful simulation'– that is the very result of its performative acts. Moreover, as above-mentioned, ontological performativity has also been overly 'optimistic' with regards to the success of this ontological simulation of sovereignty, as if sovereignty were indeed a *successful product* of its 'absent' performance.

Contra those arguments, thus, I have proposed, drawing on Derrida's notion of hauntology, the usage of 'hauntological performativity'. This approach, by deconstructing the binary 'absence-presence' that still seems to underpin a great deal of poststructuralist works, understands sovereignty as an entity that is neither absent nor present, but *spectral*. This *spectrality*, I have argued, is what underpins both the process through which sovereignty *comes into being* in International Relations, and the way it is perpetuated as a powerful discourse. In order to show this process in its practice, I chose to engage very briefly with neorealism. I have pointed out, therefore, that sovereignty is only enacted in that literature hauntologically, as an entity that depends on its very failure so as to become *successful*. Nevertheless, there are still other ghosts that need to be *unearthed*. For sovereignty – albeit pivotal – is but one amongst a multitude of ghosts that insist in inhabiting our discipline.

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Written by: Tarsis Daylan Brito
Written at: London School of Economic and Political Science (LSE)
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