Political Geography 28 (2009) 283–295

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Key West's Conch Republic: Building sovereignties of connection

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Keywords:
Conch Republic
Florida
Key West
Queer theory
Sovereignty
Tourism

A B S T R A C T

This article examines the Conch Republic, a semi-farcical micro-state that was established in Key West, Florida in 1982. Although the Conch Republic has its origins in a direct challenge to state power, it is now a relatively depoliticized statement of the island's eclecticism as well as a marketing tool for the island's all-important tourism industry. Thus, the Conch Republic could easily be dismissed as an entity that has little in common with actual sovereign states.

In this article, however, three literatures that shed light on Key West's culture and economy – the queer theory, tourism, and critical island studies literatures – are used to reframe sovereignty not as a stable category but as a strategic tool that is employed to improve the environment in which one engages in interactions. The story of the Conch Republic thus is used to demonstrate how sovereignty is sometimes less about the power to isolate and exclude than it is about the right to maintain some degree of control, or at least dignity, in a world of connections, inclusions, and fragmented, unstable identities.

Sovereignty and interdependencies

A dominant theme – perhaps *the* dominant theme – in critical social theory over the past decades has been the continual questioning of a world in which fixed and stable entities interact with each other in social, political, economic, and cultural practice. Just within the discipline of geography, "new cultural geographers" question the ontological existence of discrete things called "cultures" (Mitchell, 2000), scholars of critical geopolitics question whether states exist as such prior to their discursive construction (Ó Tuathail, 1996), and nature-society scholars urge us to abandon fixed distinctions between society and nature (or between human and non-human) (Whatmore, 2001). Geophilosophers take this critique to the heart of geography by suggesting that we abandon the idea of space as a stabilizing dimension that exists independent of, and in opposition to, time and instead conceive of spaces as inseparable from the processes that continually occur in and produce space (Massey, 2005). These shifts in geography, in turn, draw on broader movements outside of geography that seek to replace ontologies of *being*, *separation,* and *locatedness* with those of *becoming*, *connection*, and *betweenness*.

In this article, we direct these trends in social thought toward the institution of state sovereignty which, it is traditionally asserted, occurs when a government maintains control over the people and territory within its boundaries, polices its borders, and is recognized by other sovereigns as having sole authority (Kreijen, 2004). Recent scholarship suggests that this classic definition of sovereignty is as much a normative prescription for the image of the state that underlies realist geopolitics as an objective description of the powers that the state actually has. This literature questions whether the traditional model of sovereignty is appropriate given complex dynamics behind the construction of citizen-subjects, the uneven control that states actually have over their territory, and the role of interaction and mobility in the construction of state identities and power (Agnew, 2005; Biersteker & Weber, 1996; Krasner, 1993; Ruggie, 1993).

Poststructuralists expand on this critique by asserting that sovereignty is not a fixed relationship between a government, its territory, and its people (the nation), but an ongoing process of "reterritorialization" through which the identities of nation and state, the idealized link between them, and their association with specific territories are continually reinscribed (Albert, 1999; Doty, 1999; Mandaville, 1999; Newman, Ó Tuathail, & Luke, 1994). This reterritorialization occurs not only through the renegotiation of the relationship between the state's constitutive elements but also through the continual production and crossing of boundary lines between the state and its external "others" (Sparke, 2005). From this perspective, sovereignty is less about erecting and policing

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doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2009.08.001

borders (and controlling the territory and people within those borders) than it is about exercising power when making connections across those borders, or when engaging in the relations that construct or destroy borders or the idealized spaces (or identities) within (Weber, 1994). Sovereignty thus is understood as *relative* and *negotiated* – a *strategy* and a *process* – rather than something that is *fundamental* and *absolute*: "Less a territorially defined barrier than a bargaining resource for a politics characterized by complex transnational networks" (Keohane, 2002: p. 74).

While we generally endorse this perspective, it all too often leads to a focus on exceptional acts of border-crossing, whether by the diplomat negotiating a trade pact or the bureaucrat designating an offshore island as a semi-incorporated detention center for immigrants or asylum seekers. To place border-crossing (and its role in the production of identities, institutions, and, ultimately sovereign power) in context, we combine the poststructuralist perspective outlined above with one that stresses how sovereign power is constructed not so much by state fiat as by the everyday actions of individuals who reproduce ideas of nationhood and citizenship (Billig, 1995; Foucault, 2007). For Billig (1995: p. 6), "Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition." We agree with Billig, but question his identification of a singular, pre-existing state that is "flagged" (and whose sovereignty is thereby reproduced) through these acts of "banal nationalism." Rather, we suggest that while ideals of sovereignty are produced (and challenged) through everyday practices these ideals themselves rest on continual negotiations and crossings as individuals seek to determine their identities and affiliations and "map" these identities to space. In other words, our aim in this article is to take the basic insight of Billig – that nationalism, and thus the ideological basis of state power, is reproduced through everyday acts – and fuse it with the insights of poststructural theorists who assert that the "state" that is reproduced through these acts is itself one of perpetual crossings.

To develop this reconceptualization of sovereignty, we draw upon the case of Key West, a small island off the southwest coast of Florida that, in 1982, unilaterally declared independence from the United States, calling itself the Conch Republic. The Republic's assertion of independence always had a farcical element, which it maintains to this day. Indeed, one could easily claim that even though the Republic's leaders have chosen to use signifiers of statehood the Conch Republic has little in common with "real" states.

Although we are under no illusion that the Conch Republic is functionally equivalent to more conventional states, we use its self-positioning on the margins of sovereignty to engage three literatures that, in turn, can help us interrogate underlying aspects of sovereignty as an institution: tourism studies, queer theory, and island studies. In part, we have chosen these literatures because they are particularly pertinent to Key West, an island that is a popular destination for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) tourists.[1] However, we also turn to these literatures for conceptual reasons: they share a theoretical orientation that emphasizes how flexible identities are constructed in contexts of interaction, and thus they can facilitate a reflection on and application of the poststructural perspective on sovereignty outlined above.

Of these three literatures, queer theory probably challenges most directly the modern ideal of the sovereign state as an ontologically distinct, bounded unit. As Duggan (1996) notes, the state is particularly poorly suited for incorporating the constructivist performativism of queer theory because states assign their subjects to stable categories, which are then given bundles of rights. While this presents the state with a problem, it presents us with an opportunity: if our goal is to understand state formations that go beyond the imaginative construct of the state as a stable entity with fixed boundaries and uncontested meanings, it may be helpful to enlarge our thinking with insights borrowed from queer theorists who conceive of identities as perpetually under construction. Innovative work in this regard can be seen in Oswin's (2007) research in South Africa, which demonstrates how the opening of the state to multiple sexualities is having profound and destabilizing impacts on the construction and application of state power.

Insights from tourism studies similarly suggest a need to problematize the idealized ontologies that underpin modern notions of sovereignty. Although tourism is typically represented by the singular act of an individual traveling to and consuming a distant but distinct place, in actuality the tourism experience is supported by a complex web of applications and constructions of power as one makes connections through everyday practices and as tourists, marketers, and residents assign meanings and define normative behaviors for specific places (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Thus, tourism studies, like queer theory, provokes critical thinking about the ways in which identities and senses of belonging are produced through crossing, as well as policing, boundaries.

Finally, we turn to a growing literature in critical island studies that emphasizes how islands – much like states – reproduce their identities and livelihoods through dynamic connections across borders (Baldacchino, 2006). Critical island scholars stress that islands are inherently porous, despite their appearance as paradigmatic materializations of the ideal of the stable, bounded, autonomous state (Steinberg, 2005). In the remainder of this article, following an introduction to Key West and the Conch Republic rebellion, we use each of these literatures to investigate how the Conch Republic reinterprets the notion of state sovereignty.

The Conch Republic[2]

On 23 April 1982, the Florida Keys announced their secession from the United States. The new entity – the Conch Republic – was to extend for 210 km across the length of the island chain, from Elliott Key, just southeast of Miami, to Key West, 145 km north of Cuba (Fig. 1). Its capital was to be Key West, a former center for ship salvaging, smuggling, sponge diving, cigar rolling, transshipment, and U.S. Naval operations that now subsisted almost entirely on tourism revenues.

Although the declaration of independence came as a surprise to the U.S. government, its origins lay in a dispute that began earlier that year, when U.S. officials established a roadblock at the mainland end of the Overseas Highway, which links the Keys with the Florida peninsula. The roadblock, which was designed to disrupt narcotics smuggling routes as well as interdict undocumented immigrants from Cuba, resulted in a 27-kilometer traffic jam that, in addition to inconveniencing Keys residents, discouraged visits by tourists who were the lifeblood of the Keys economy. In response, Key West's mayor, Dennis Wardlow, filed for a court injunction to have the roadblock removed. When the injunction was denied, Mayor Wardlow declared that if Keys residents were going to be treated like members of a foreign country – being forced to pass through a "border-crossing" on the way to Miami – then they would assert their foreignness and secede. The next day, at a rally in Key West, now-Prime Minister Wardlow formally launched the rebellion by breaking a loaf of stale *pan de agua* ("Cuban bread") over the head of a man dressed in a U.S. Navy uniform. The rebels, who "surrendered" one minute later, named their state in honor of the island chain's first white settlers, descendants of British loyalists who had fled the American colonies