



## Book review: *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919*

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Leonard's Smith's monograph on the implications of the Paris Peace Conference is indeed a timely contribution, most obviously because its publication coincides with the centenary of the end of First World War. However, the topicality of *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* also stems from its engagement with, as the title already insinuates, sovereignty as a political concept. In times of Britain's self-imposed removal from the European Union in order to restore a sense of popular sovereignty apparently lost to the 'diktat' of allegedly undemocratic, but definitely foreign, 'Eurocrats', the topic deserves full attention. Even more so as we witness that sovereignty has again become the watchword of the ethno-nationalist cabal throughout Europe. Smith brings us back to the 'laboratory of sovereignty' (p. 13) at the Paris Peace Conference that was going to shape nationalist politics for a long time to come.

Throughout his book, Smith chases the theme of sovereignty in the post-war years, elucidating in what ways the Conference, embodied by the 'Big Five' of Britain, France, Italy, the US, and Japan, redesigned not only the international system but also the agents populating it. Smith does not proceed chronologically, i.e. from the start of the Peace Conference in 1919 to the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, nor does he strictly follow the making (and unmaking) of the peace treaties that emerged directly or indirectly from its course – rather, the book unfolds conceptually, discussing a certain aspect of sovereignty in each of its chapters. The first topic that Smith turns to is 'justice', which is mirrored in the debates about reparations and moral responsibility at Paris. To invent 'justice' as a new political discourse meant to go beyond making the vanquished parties of World War I pay for their offences. It, for instance, opened the Pandora's Box of whether or not it was legitimate to arraign kings and emperor (p. 79). Here, Smith shows how the focus on Germany as a criminalised great power in the Treaty of Versailles made it possible for the German reactionary forces to turn Wilsonianism into a discursive weapon deployed against so-called 'Allied justice' (p. 91).

Chapters 3 and 4 Smith devotes to the 'unmixing' of both lands and peoples. He meticulously shows how the Conference created new states with new identities that required territorial agreements settling the painstakingly complicated question of how the people inhabiting these new states could be classified. Smith describes in detail how policies such as plebiscites, racial classifications of mandate populations, and population exchanges fulfilled this task of the 'unmixing' of people. This is followed by a chapter on 'revolution': Smith outlines how the Peace Conference attempted to master the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, whose legitimacy was not endorsed but finally grudgingly accepted, and similar uprisings in other post-war states (the developments there were either rejected or, as in the case of Czechoslovakia, actively encouraged). Smith uses constitutive and declaratory theories of state recognition to illustrate the interplay between the Peace Conference and the often-recalcitrant agents of the international system (p. 197). Two more 'revolutions' Smith mentions: the first threat took the form of anti-colonialism, which the newly established Mandate System tried to defuse by offering some form of self-government to former colonial territories; the second threat, the spectre of Bolshevism in Central and Western Europe, was banished by establishing the International Labour Organization in an effort to master the dangers of workers'



unrest. In the final chapter, Smith gives an overview of how the League of Nations dealt with these questions of sovereignty in the years from 1920-23.

What holds the respective chapters together is Smith's concern with the spirit of Wilsonianism, which the Peace Conference invoked to transform the international system in a radical fashion. Smith shows how states and great powers would continue as the main agents within the international system, but in a way that would mitigate the power game "now forever discredited" (p. 20) by the catastrophe of the World War. In this promised land of Wilsonianism all states, old and new, would produce a new form of 'world sovereignty' (p. 11), taking its legitimacy from the liberal individual uniting in a global community of commensurable citizens. The Conference, according to Smith, acted as a provisional world sovereign by producing successor states carved out of the disappearing Hohenzollern, Habsburg, Romanov, and Osman empires. State sovereignty was thus constrained by the transnational citizen interested in world peace. The newly founded League of Nations was meant to be the apotheosis of this ideal.

Smith approaches the Peace Conference and Wilsonianism primarily from the perspective of the historian. He does introduce a general constructivist framework at the beginning of Chapter 1, presenting the Peace Conference as a formal structure which, using the discourse of Wilsonianism, created new agents and a new understanding of sovereignty beyond a narrow focus on the state. However, Smith only returns to this topic in the conclusion, where the intricate relationship between history and a constructivist perception of IR is once more foregrounded. His engagement with IR theory therefore remains rudimentary. Although the author is clearly aware of this – Smith concludes in the final chapter that his "eclectic approach to IR" might have merely "poached" (p. 263) insights from IR theory – a deeper conversation between history and IR theory seems possible. A reader who approaches the book from the point of view of IR, and not as a historian, might therefore wish for a different structure that would weave the two disciplines more closely together.

However, the focus on history is also one of the book's decisive strengths. Smith's rich historical descriptions convincingly capture the "then-ness" (p. 267) of the conference proceedings, restoring agency to the "Flesh-and-blood people staggering through confused times" (p. 267) in a way that bread-and-butter IR theory cannot. The reader is constantly reminded that the *dramatis personae* in Paris acted purposefully, seeking to redesign an anarchical international system in a meaningful manner. In the author's own words: "The Paris Peace Conference sought fundamentally to change the way the international system functioned, and did so in highly complicated and historically specific ways" (p. vii). Smith thus sides with, and repeatedly invokes, the Wendt-ian maxim that the workings of international relations are 'what states make of it'. His emphasis on the Conference as a historically conditioned enterprise 'to do something' about the prevailing anarchy in the international system puts Smith firmly into the constructivist camp, even if his theory disappears at times behind the unfolding historical drama. By restoring agency to the Conference as a provisional world sovereign, Smith argues against the perception of the post-war peace-making endeavours as preordained failures. The League of Nations following the meeting at Paris was, again, "always going to be what states make of it" (p. 266).

Smith paints, nevertheless, a rather bleak picture of Wilsonianism-in-practice, emphasising the degree to which Wilson's Elysium was inherently flawed. The reader is left wondering how much leeway existed for such a radical transformation of the international system and its agents. This becomes especially clear in Chapter 4, which is concerned with the 'unmixing of people' that followed the Peace Conference. By insisting on necessarily murky plebiscites and by tolerating – if not supporting – population exchanges in the name of national self-determination, the Great Powers wedded sovereignty to the worship of ethno-national aspirations. As Smith shows, this



externalisation of self-determination was a far cry from the Wilsonian idea, which saw sovereignty residing with the liberal, transnational individual – with grave consequences in regions like Upper Silesia and Teschen, where ethnic clarity did not exist and subsequently was established through inter-communal violence, as Germans and Poles began to retreat into clear-cut ethnic categories. Smith uses these examples to create a vivid example of Wilsonianism-gone-awry, introducing each case study with a certain clarity that makes it easy for the non-specialist reader to follow the overall argument.

Crucially, Smith also shows how Wilson's programme suffered from bouts of organised hypocrisy. For Wilsonianism to flourish, the Great Powers would have had to alter their own identities as great powers, subjecting themselves to a higher moral (and in the end) legal order. This, clearly, did not transpire. As he crisply points out, even Wilson did not take his Wilsonianism seriously; why, then, should Poland have accepted infringements of its national sovereignty by agreeing to the League of Nations as an external guardian of minority rights, when Wilson would have never agreed to take orders from the League regarding Jim Crow (p. 38)? How could the Mandate System, a concoction created to deal with the territories formerly occupied by the German and Ottoman imperial powers, hint at the possibility of self-determination for Black Africans, while the Allied powers fought hard to deny the same possibilities to the non-Europeans inhabiting their own colonies (p. 187)? Similarly, the 'unmixing of people' in the Middle East and Central Europe followed the dictates of petty national interest, as the Great Powers sought to rejuvenate their aging empires (p. 107).

By exposing the shortcomings of Wilsonianism, Smith demonstrates how the new international system designed, and the agents conjured, still bore the hallmarks of great power interests, those powers strategizing in Paris. The implementation of Wilsonianism was therefore far removed from the lofty idea of a new sort of sovereignty endeavouring to end great power politics. Although Smith explicitly renounces the narrative of the Paris Peace Conference and the League of Nations as stillborn entities with the carnage of World War II already written into them, it is difficult to image for the reader how the Conference and the peace treaties that emerged from it were not, in the light of the mistakes made, destined to fail. Smith's own constructivism would therefore benefit from an evaluation of the internal and external constraints that the agents of 1918 had to face. Societies cannot be constructed "any old way we like" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 69), and Smith's account of the botched transformation of the international system clearly shows this. An account of the boundaries which – at least at that point in time – could not be pushed, would give the reader a clearer idea of why the radicalism of Wilsonianism was spectacularly unsuccessful, but avoid the realist trap of a pre-determination in an international system irrevocably shaped by the invisible hand of anarchy.

In the end, *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* constitutes a compelling plea for the constructivist paradigm of international relations. If the post-war order failed, then this was also due to the lack of the will of the people – the transnational, liberal citizens on which Wilsonianism as a political ideology rested – to build an international society that would look, for the benefit of all, beyond the petty interest of the nation state. One hundred years after World War I, as sovereignty is again increasingly linked to ethno-national vanity, Smith's book is a powerful reminder that popular sovereignty can, and indeed should be, imagined beyond nation and nation state. Linking the past to the politics of today, Smith concludes: "Understanding the 'then-ness' of the Paris Peace Conference would surely suggest a need to rethink its relationship to problems that afflict our world today. [...] But what the 'then' has to tell us about the 'now', must begin with a proper understanding of the 'then'" (p. 267). By reconstructing the complicated workings of the Paris Peace Conference, Smith indeed "tell[s] contemporary society some things it might benefit from, even if it is reluctant to learn them" (Hobsbawm, 1998, p. 47). Smith himself remains reticent in regard to what these



lessons are. His book is therefore an open invitation to return to the 'laboratory of sovereignty' and to reconsider the implications of sovereignty for the international system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## ***Bibliography***

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