

Bonnie Mann

Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror

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Reviewed by Bat-Ami Bar On, 2015

Narrated by Kelsey Borrowman

*Sovereign Masculinity* is a well-crafted exercise (a term I use to gesture at both the experimental aspects of the work and its rigor) in what the book's author, Bonnie Mann, describes as political phenomenology, a phenomenological account of politics as its articulations are experienced in the present that is motivated by a commitment to justice. Mann is especially interested in experiences of the intersection of gender and sovereignty, relying for her understanding of present sovereignty on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's account, and developing her understanding of gender beginning with Simone de Beauvoir, whom she interprets with readings from Hannah Arendt. This intersection, among the markings of postmodernity, is quite different from what it used to be in modernity, when, as various feminist analyses have shown, sovereignty was quite manly, though in rather obvious, almost literal ways: men were the sovereigns in the private and public spheres alike, and in no small measure because they, but not women, had access to the means of violence or, at one remove, the control of such means.

The modern notion of state sovereignty assumes and is expressed in state control of a bounded territory and the populations inhabiting that territory. There is wide consensus that the modern version of state sovereignty has been eroding as a function of globalization. However, it is important to note that in the world system of states, there were always some states that were less sovereign in the modern sense and others that were able to control more than their bounded territory and populations. Hardt and Negri build on this observation in order to describe the postmodern world system, not as one where sovereignty is becoming meaningless, but rather as one in which the United States is the sovereign in Carl Schmidt's Hobbesian sense of the term, which Hardt and Negri take as particularly apt for the postmodern world system where the United States is the enforcer that stands outside of the laws that it promulgates.

For Mann, the picture that Hardt and Negri paint rather abstractly is especially vivid when she looks at the "war on terror," both literally, when she sees it (re)presented in the United States' media, and analytically, when she attempts to make sense of the media's (re)presentations. The (re)presentations that stand out for her more than others are of United States women members of the military police torturing Muslim men at Abu Ghraib. On the face of it, these (re)presentations, because they are of torture, are indeed of an enforcer who is not subjecting itself to the same rules as those to which it subjects others. In addition, and again on the face of it, they turn gender stereotypes upside down and yield support to Hardt and Negri's gender-blind analysis of sovereignty. But this is not just right for Mann, given her sense of the operations of gender, and she engages in an examination of gender in postmodernity that exposes postmodern sovereignty as masculine through and through.

It is tempting to move toward gender-blind analyses. In postmodernity, gender is multiple, performative, and fluid. Mann's challenge is to show that even so, gender is, nonetheless, a meaningful nodal category of experience that cannot and should not be ignored, especially

not when trying to make sense of present sociopolitical reality. In Beauvoir's work and especially *The Second Sex*, a book that Mann argues stands in a foundational relation to feminism in the Arendtian sense that it forges something radically new, Mann finds a suggestive theoretical methodology and rich concepts that can be reworked for the present. Borrowing from and developing Beauvoir's ideas of masculinity (and femininity), Mann shows how gender solidifies socially as men (first as boys) escape from freedom and its associated responsibility to act and become in the midst of the ambiguity that characterizes a plural social life. It is in the process of solidification that masculinity gets separated from femininity, now constructed as its opposite, and linked with sovereignty, though in a manner that hides the origins and continued maintenance of the connection.

The catalyst inciting vigilant compliance, and so both the surveillance of self and of others and the exacting repetition of gender norms, is, according to Mann, shame. No one occasion of gender-shaming is in itself powerful enough to incline any one individual this or that way. But when gender-shaming infuses a culture, it becomes basic to identity-formation. But one cannot live in shame. And so, for boys who become sovereign men, shame has to become something else, which it does as it gets converted into "rage, hostility, contempt, aggression" that are expressed through "hyperbolic self-assertion" (116).

Mann gives plenty of examples of gender-shaming. These examples are focused on the experiences of boys and men, a focus Mann must have, given that what she wants to clarify and explain is the production of masculine sovereignty. What, though, of girls who become women, especially women who seem to subvert sovereign masculinity by choosing to be soldiers, thus inhabiting the paradigmatic masculine role? Mann answers this and related questions with the suggestion that girls who become women soldiers actively distance themselves from most feminine practices. However, though they engage in masculine practices, at best they are allowed by military men to be something akin to a "third gender." At worst, and this is more common than not, they are reminded through verbal harassment and rape that they are vulnerable women and cannot escape being just that.

Mann resists judging girls who become women soldiers. She seems a bit more judgmental in the case of boys who become men soldiers but here too she resists blame. Despite their agency--and, therefore, choices--for her, individuals are quite caught in and interpolated by a systemic gender maze that is extremely hard to step out of since it operates on bodies, in language, and "is part of the way that meaning crosses between various levels of human existence," which is why it feels "profoundly real" (175). As a result, it can be easily used to mobilize people, sometimes very cynically, as in the case of the Iraq War (2003?officially 2011), which, following Naomi Klein, Mann describes as first and foremost a site of disaster capitalism and so an opportunity for the practice of economic shock therapy that brings yet one more area of the world under the neo-liberal agenda and the kind of free-market economics that is primarily about a predatory transfer of wealth.

Although both the critical descriptions of the operations of gender more generally and of the operations of gender in war are, for Mann, connected to and form part of an ideology critique in the Karl Marx-Louis Althusser sense, I am not completely convinced by the connection that Mann creates. This is because Mann's argument for it is something like "the gender system makes us stupid," or as Mann phrases it, although there are "many factors" that "come into play in creating a populace like ours . . . at the heart of . . . contemporary American life is a deeply entrenched, viscerally lived fascination with sovereign masculinity," which is not only at the center of public discourses but also "for *enough* of us, (at the center of) private and personal strivings" (206).

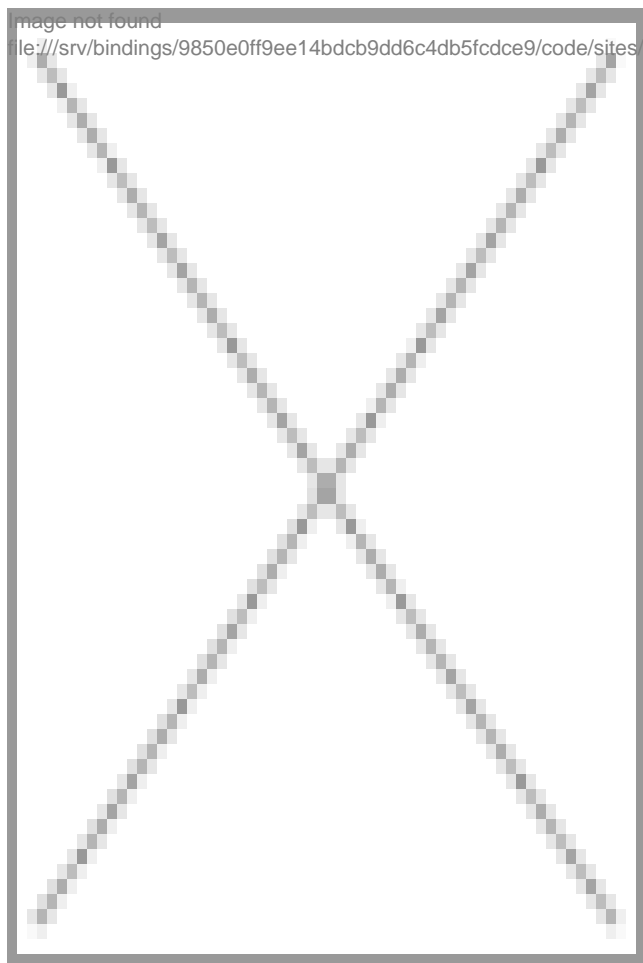
It is important to note that Mann's phrasing includes herself in the large subset of "stupid" people. It is among the virtues of *Sovereign Masculinity* that its methodology requires that we understand its author and ourselves as readers in just this way and remains aware of the fact that we all have biases and prejudices that we will not be able to discover and dislodge even through practices of ideology critique. Still, I think that Mann could have improved on her own argument about stupidity by turning to the feminist literature on the epistemology of ignorance. Part of what ideology does is produce large patterned patches of ignorance. We have a stake in our strong attachments to our ideologically produced ignorance: our ignorance serves most of us well most of the time. Mann could argue here that it actually does not. But, this will require developments that would make for an interesting appendix to *Sovereign Masculinity*.

I think another appendix could be interesting as well. As argued, *Sovereign Masculinity* binds itself closely to Hardt and Negri. But they developed their position regarding the unique role and function of the United States in a unipolar globalized world, and the world-system has since changed. Among the obvious marks of the change is that the United States has lost its hegemony. So, even if they were right about the new logic of capitalism (and there are critical suggestions that they were not), their position--and consequently dependent positions, including Mann's--needs updating. What, I wonder, happens when practices of sovereign masculinity have to be abandoned or at least revised because of realistic constraints on their expression in the international arena, such as those now experienced by the United States government as an international actor? How should one read the 2011 official end of the Iraq War or the 2013 official end of the War on Terror in light of this? And how is one to read the technological military intervention undertaken by the United States against ISIS since 2014 in light of this? There are many insightful observations that Mann makes in *Sovereign Masculinity* that she can build on to answer these questions, but these raise a suspicion for me that the tethering of *Sovereign Masculinity* to Hardt and Negri may not be necessary.

My suggestion that tethering *Sovereign Masculinity* to Hardt and Negri may not be necessary is not intended to imply a defeat of Mann's argument. At most it exposes a kind of overreach that many of us fall prey to as we try to forge and account for connections among feminism, critiques of capitalism, anti-racist critique, and other critical stances that we want to adopt because of our ethical or/and normative political commitments. In the case of *Sovereign Masculinity* the overreach does not undermine Mann's insightful contributions to and her welcome updating of the analyses of gender and gendering processes, gendered politics, and gendered violence.

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