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Book review: on kings by David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins

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Review of David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins. 2017. *On Kings*. Chicago: HAU Books.

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Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, two of the most important anthropological thinkers of our time, have published a collection of essays on kings. Its unfortunate association with HAU notwithstanding, the book is bound to become a classic. Sahlins and Graeber make good on the promise of developing an anthropological theory of kings. They work through an impressive range of ethnographic data and develop theories of universal validity on the same basis. Even though some concepts and conclusions come close to classical ideas of European political philosophy, about sovereignty, states of exception, or the king's two bodies, the names of Hobbes, Schmitt, and Kantorewicz are almost never referred to, and for good reasons. What Sahlins and Graeber achieve in their essays is the change of perspectives that is the benchmark of anthropological theory. Rather than smuggling in some European Enlightenment thinker through the back door, they develop their own anthropological theories on the basis of their review of ethnographic and historical sources.

The fundamental tenets of the theory of kingship that Graeber and Sahlins develop are the following:

1. Kings are imitations of gods rather than gods of kings.
2. Stranger-kingdoms and galactic polities are the dominant form of the state before the nation-state.
3. The politics of kingship always rely on connections, imitation, and foreign relations, and hence the continuation of the principles of stranger-kingdom and galactic polity, such as serial stranger-kings, galactic mimesis, and the schismogenesis of galactic polities.
4. Sovereignty is based on a constitutive war between the people and the king.
5. 'Divine kingship' proper can be established only after the king has won over the people, whereas 'sacred kingship' (or 'adverse sacralization') corresponds to a situation in which the people win against the king

The fundamentals of these arguments have been laid out in two essays previously published in HAU: Sahlins' lecture on the original political society, and Graeber's long essay on the divine kingship among the Shilluk. The book unites those two texts (now chapters 1 and 4) with several further essays from each author, in particular the long concluding text by Graeber on the 'prehistory of sovereignty' under the Hocartian leitmotif of the transition from ritual to kingship.

Only the introduction is co-authored, and, at least in some chapters, the reader is left wondering what one author would have said to the other? There is a lot of overlap, for instance on sinking states, on stranger-kings, and on divine kingship – but then also quite some divergence, as might be expected. One might wonder, for instance, whether it would be

possible to re-interpret Graeber's constitutive war between the people and the king as 'culture in practice' à la Sahlins?

Sometimes the impression arises that actually there are two books here: one is Sahlins on stranger kings and galactic polities (especially chapters 4 on the Mexica and 6 on core-periphery relations), and another one is David Graeber on sovereignty (especially chapter 2 on the Shilluk and chapter 7 on the genealogy of sovereignty). Both Graeber and Sahlins beg the reader's indulgence for repeating themselves (e.g. xv, 402) – yet they still do it. While sometimes it might be necessary to re-state important points, some repetition might have been deleted by a more thorough editor (e.g. the summaries of the galactic polity including the same references, Ekholm, Friedman, Southall, Gewertz, Harrison, and Tambiah – in fact, the same paragraph long quote from Tambiah is printed on page 233 and on page 355).

But these are minor quibbles that have nothing to do with the world-historical questions that Graeber and Sahlins ask, from the 'original political society' to the 'prehistory of sovereignty'. Every single essay in the volume deserves its own set of responses and debates. The state of the 'original political society' is obviously not what is commonly understood as a 'state'. So, if there are indeed hierarchies and command structures in the cosmos in egalitarian societies, what does that mean for the politics of egalitarianism among humans, who do not make fundamental distinctions between humans and spirits? Would it be possible to create an inventory of cultural and social patterns that allow for the exercise of sovereignty (e.g. kings as strangers, scapegoats, infants, and clowns). What are the implications of the temporal and spatial limitations of sovereignty, and the constitutive war between the people and the king, for our understanding of popular sovereignty? Graeber and Sahlins have made a series of brave suggestions about the power and glory of kings in this book, ranging from the beginnings of human history to the present day, and every anthropologist should read it.