A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics

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26 Sovereignty

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Most theories of sovereignty operate at the level of states and nations. If we accept the common definition of sovereignty as the capacity to determine conduct within the territory of a polity without external legal constraint, then the "polity" in question is normally considered to be the nation-state and the "territory" a geographical space bounded by state frontiers. The dominant "realist" theory of international politics, stemming from Hobbes, posits that the system of sovereign states is inescapably anarchic in character, as each state, recognizing no superior authority or moral code, pursues its own interests (Held 1992:10–39). With regard to the interior constitution of the state, theories from the earliest philosophies of politics onward have focused on the forms taken by the sovereign authority (tyranny, monarchy, elective democracy, etc.) and their legitimacy. This raised in particular the issue of freedom. Isaiah Berlin (1997 [1958]:411), for example, argued that the crucial question was *how much* authority should be placed in any set of hands. Democracy in this respect might prove no more enabling in respect of freedom than medieval tyranny.

Foucault challenged the entire set of issues concerned with the nature of the juridical apparatus that invested sovereign power and the rights that could legitimately place limits on it. His essay "Power, Right, Truth" (1980) aimed to replace the analysis of sovereignty and legitimacy with that of governmentality, by which he referred to the complex of apparatuses, institutions, and regulations that can be exercised as manifold forms of domination within society. Foucault's attention thereby shifted from the forms of power at their central locations to a concern with power at the extremities, "in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions" (1997 [1980]:545). His paramount concern was with the point where power surmounts the rules of right that organize and delimit it and extends beyond them. "Biopolitics" was his name for the penetration of circulating webs of power relations into the very constitution of bodies, which become politically peripheral *subjects* as a result of the effects of power.

Yet the issue of sovereignty has reemerged with the work of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, for he argued that Foucault never managed to deal with the intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power (1998:6). At the end of Foucault's life a "blind spot" was left, where he was not able to reconcile his research into the *political techniques* of the state with that concerning the *technologies of the self* (the processes of subjectivization binding the individual to his own identity and to external power). These two analyses cannot be separated, Agamben writes. For sovereignty in the end rests on its capacity to threaten or even inflict death, which is historically linked to the Roman-law juridical concept of "life" as the simple fact of living (2002:15). It is in this light, he insists, that we must reconsider our idea of sovereignty, for "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power" (1998:6).

Agamben's thought-provoking line of thinking may be qualified in the light of anthropological concerns inspired at least partly by Foucault. Agamben begins his book *Homo Sacer* (1998) with the idea of "bare life," that is, the simple fact of living, which, according to Plato and Aristotle, was not to be confused with a qualified life, the "good life" proper to the *polis*. Modern languages do not distinguish these ideas. But Agamben reminds us of them, for he wishes to distinguish "bare life" first from "ways of life," the various customary activities of collectivities, and second – and above all – from something that seems for him to be an ideal, the "form-of-life." By this he refers to a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate bare life. "Form-of-life" denotes the concept of life in which acts and processes are never simply facts but always also possibilities and abilities, a life pursued through communicability with others, and a political life oriented toward happiness – for humans are the only beings for whom "life is irrevocably and sadly assigned to [achieving] happiness" (2002:14). This ideal of the form-of-life is "unthinkable," he writes, in the presence of sovereignty (2002:19). This is because sovereignty as a properly *political* form rests on its menace, that is, its ability to separate bare life from ways of life and its capacity in the end to snuff out life without regard to its sacral quality.

Agamben's work is about the politicization of bare life. But, unlike Foucault, he does not locate this process – the inclusion of "natural life" in the mechanisms and calculations of state power, that is, the emergence of biopolitics – straightforwardly with the modern era. It is true, he writes, that the modern Western state has integrated to an unprecedented degree the techniques of subjective individualization with procedures of objective totalization (1998:5). But what is the point, he asks, where the voluntary servitude of individuals comes into contact with objective power? This point cannot be identified with a historical moment – the inclusion of bare life into the political was there from the beginning. "The modern state does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, and reaffirms the bond between modern power and the most immemorial *arcana imperii*" (1998:6). Thus Aristotle's opposition between the good life and bare life must be reconsidered: bare life is always implicated in politically qualified life.

Sovereignty conceived in this way and for the contemporary period forces us to confront "the exception," an idea originally propounded by the political philosopher Carl Schmitt (1966 [1932]). For Agamben, "the exception" refers to those paradoxical spaces where bare life is excluded from political life and yet, simultaneously, is

included in it. He has in mind here the paradigm of the concentration camp. In the contemporary period, such "irreducible indistinction" (1998:9) is emergent all around us. "At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested" (1998:9).

Today, as state structures are compromised by global forces, as biopolitics becomes ever more invasive, as the emergency becomes commonplace, and the exception everywhere becomes the rule, bare life remains marked as subjection, Agamben insists, and it continues to be included in politics solely through an exclusion. Studies making use of his ideas have focused, accordingly, on sites of state-defined exception, such as borderland refugee camps, displaced persons, and detention centers. Yet Agamben also invites us to reconsider politics *as such*, that is, the emergence of sovereignty in *any place*, when he asks: "How is it possible to 'politicize' the 'natural sweetness' of mere living" (1998:11)?

Notwithstanding the importance of the Foucauldian literature on global governmentality, important dimensions to contemporary political processes are not captured by its ideas. I refer to these processes as *localized forms of sovereignty*. Although nested within higher sovereignties, these localized forms of sovereignty nevertheless retain a domain within which control over life and death is operational. Although such domains may be "exclusions" in terms of a central state, they may nevertheless construct the quasi-juridical terms in which exclusions can be made from their own body. Analysis of localized forms of sovereignty therefore enables us to come to a better understanding of the political life as such. Agamben's is a philosophical theory with a general and prescriptive character. Anthropology has to take a less programmatic tack.

In exploring the space opened out by Agamben's questions, an anthropological approach draws attention to the *actualities of relations* within the ways of life that exist under conditions of sovereignty. The deficiencies of Agamben's somewhat pallid notion of ways of life as merely the habitual activities of politically and juridically defined groups (electors, employees, journalists, students, the HIV-positive, the aged, etc.) (2002:17) become apparent. Ways of life need to be conceptualized as "thicker" than this; they have their histories and their modes of governmentality. They do not simply acquiesce to the menace of sovereignty but interpose a solid existence of their own that operates collaterally or against it. Perhaps we can even perceive in them flickering moments of the qualities Agamben attributes to the "form-of-life." Thus, while accepting his arguments that we cannot cast aside sovereignty as the concept of a defunct political theory (as Foucault does) and that we must recognize it – cast in a new light – as integral to the contemporary political landscape, we may also investigate, and indeed in some ways query, the delineation the philosopher proposes for its internal social characteristics.

To demonstrate the importance of this issue, I examine the processes that led to the emergence of a localized form of sovereignty in the Russian city of Ulan-Ude from the 1950s to the 1990s. The character of such local – even mundane – forms cannot be anticipated or understood on the basis of either national assertions of sovereignty or supra-national processes of governmentality – although political processes in Ulan-Ude have certainly partaken of and participated in these broader fields. By describing how issues of sovereignty can occur in ordinary urban life, this chapter shows how

anthropology can fill in and help explain certain lacunae left in the wake of the influential political theories introduced in the previous section. When sovereignty is identified within a particular configuration, then sovereignty itself, which has to consist of practices, may be rethought not simply as a set of political capacities but as a formation in society that engages with ways of life that have temporality and their own characteristic aesthetics.

Sovereignty and Ways of Life: The Mashrut System in the City of Ulan-Ude, Russia

Why should the anthropology of politics be concerned with these issues in Russia now? The upheavals of the post-communist years created conditions for the opening up of a host of previously undreamed-of social spaces in officially unattended locales. Alexei Yurchak (1999:88), following Hakim Bey (1991), conceptualized these as "temporary autonomous zones," unnamed operations that are suspended outside (and yet within) institutional state power. Varying greatly in scale, the great majority of these – communal squats or sites of rave culture in the early 1990s, the barter networks of the mid-1990s, or the financial enclaves of banking culture of the end of the decade – are not "sovereign" in Agamben's sense. But they share certain characteristics with localized sovereign domains. These include non-legality – that is, being unenvisaged and unrecognized by, and hence "invisible" to, state legislation. They also share the quality of being created by "ways of life" that poured in to new interstices within Russian society. Because localized sovereign domains are continuous with these similar zones of autonomy, the former have to be understood as part of wider social transformations in Russia. Thus, while the concept of "bare life" is essential for defining the bottom line of sovereignty, it will not suffice to explain the actual operation of these domains.

The political context

In order to understand the relationship between national and localized forms of sovereignty in Ulan-Ude, it is first necessary to discuss Russian federalism. The Russian Federation was set up as an amalgam of 88 "subject territories" following the break-up of the USSR and the creation of "successor states" in Central Asia and the Baltic republics at the beginning of the 1990s. These were units that had clearly ranked status in the USSR as *oblasts* (provinces), *krais* (territories), and federal cities – all administered on a non-ethnic basis – and autonomous republics comprised of non-Russian nationalities as well as ten ethnic-based "autonomous districts" and one national *okrug* (the Jewish National County).

In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev encouraged regional communist elites to declare sovereignty in the autonomous republics, and his successor Boris Yeltsin went on to instruct the new post-Soviet provincial governments to "take as much sovereignty as they could swallow" (Urban 1997:282–283). As a result, the Russian Federation became a seething cauldron of identity politics and claims for rights and status. Few boundaries were changed, but the centralized hierarchical structure was in

convulsions. Many provinces declared complete sovereignty, including the right to conduct independent foreign relations and withhold taxes from the center. Some promulgated their own constitutions at odds with that of the Federation, while "lower" units sought to jump up the hierarchical ladder by establishing direct relations with Moscow. The presidents of republics and the governors of provinces were now directly elected by the population.

The 1990s saw a flourishing of competitive difference. Inside the provinces, cities with their independent budgets and directly elected mayors challenged the governors of the provinces in which they were situated. Even obscure districts (*raion*) started to brandish the word *suverenitet* (sovereignty). Yet in many regions, elite holders of official posts, the old communist *nomenklatura*, retained control and have been relatively cautious in flying the sovereignty flag. In others, new leaders appeared, bringing in idiosyncratic political and economic regimes, with innovative "ideologies," rituals, and value systems. The great majority of all these provincial regimes were "authoritarian," being founded on presidential as distinct from parliamentary powers, and political parties were weak and shifting everywhere. But the practical effects of these changes were wildly disparate for reasons other than the purely political. The provinces varied vastly in size and resources: some were perpetually and miserably in debt to Moscow, while others contributed substantially to the federal budget. Regional lobbies (such as local industries, quasi-monopolies in electricity, gas, and oil, ethnic and religious interests, and those of criminal networks) articulated particular interests *outside* formal political institutions,

From the moment of his election in 2000, President Putin tried to reestablish central control over these unruly sovereignties. In seven new super-regions, he appointed plenipotentiaries drawn mostly from former KGB or military personnel to promote "vertical authority," and he punished overt independence (especially in Chechnya). It cannot be said that he has definitively succeeded. There have been abrupt shifts in the central political values of Russia, leading it is not clear where. Many provincial governments have supported popular movements for distinct "Russian values," such as collectivism, egalitarianism, strict controls on capitalism, "antiAtlanticism" and "Eurasian" spirituality (Humphrey 2002), that seemed to have been halted in their tracks by Putin's decision to align Russia with the Western powers after the attack on New York's twin towers on September 11, 2001. Yet rightist (quasi-fascist) and leftist (essentially socialist restorationist) movements continue to seethe beneath the surface. Along with all this, a range of discourses has emerged in globalized arenas with diverse international links. Patchily across Russia, we find discourses on ethnic rights, ecological concerns, gender equality, law reform, and civil rights. Religious activism flourishes, often with international connections and funding. This includes mystic, shamanistic, magical, and healing movements, and pagan "revivals" as well as the reconstruction of established religions of Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam.

The *marshrut* system and political life

The following section does not focus on explicit notions of *suverenitet* propounded by provincial leaders, nor on the ideologies and rituals they have attempted to

establish. For these, see Humphrey 2002. It attempts rather to understand practices of sovereignty at the street level in a Siberian city, Ulan-Ude in eastern Russia. In 2001, when field research was carried out there, the notion of *suverenitet* remained inchoate and largely unspoken. This is an ethnography of the emergence of sovereignty before it could ever have been called that by its subjects.

The closed *marshrut* system organizes public transport in the city of Ulan-Ude. It is a mafia-dominated organization of taxi-drivers operating along set routes – hence the name *marshrut* (route, itinerary). The system has constituted itself as a micro-realm separate from the branches of the state, organizing itself along different principles. When it comes into contact with local state agencies, the system either rebuffs them or forces them to act, at least in part, according to *marshrut* logic.

Around 1991 the state-run bus service collapsed and was replaced by what informants described as a "movement" (*dvizhenie*) – the emergence of all sorts of individuals as providers of *marshrut* taxi transport. People with their own cars or vans joined first, and others borrowed money to buy micro-buses or even old, large, state-owned buses. They formed themselves into groups to take over the old bus routes, but soon realized that new routes would be more profitable. New teams and new itineraries zigzagged across the city, and orbital routes were added until it appeared that every conceivable track had been exploited. This was strictly individual private enterprise – each driver made his or her profit from the value of the fares they took minus the costs of petrol, car maintenance, etc.

Yet drivers cannot act completely independently. From a purely functional point of view collaboration is necessary. The *marshrut* taxi operation is in competition with opportunistic car drivers, cruising around the streets, who will take people anywhere from door to door but demand far higher, unpredictable fares. *Marshrut* drivers struggle to keep fares down by strict calculation of the costs of set routes and the volume of passengers. They must establish routes and inform the citizenry about them, and they must avoid bunching up on any given route so as not to miss valuable passengers. Ulan-Ude is one of those extraordinarily spread-out towns, in which socialist planning sited factories, offices, shops, and dormitory districts far apart from each other. People have to travel long distances, therefore, and taxi routes often span 15, 25, or even 35 kilometers from the city center.

By around 1994, this had developed into what the taxi-drivers themselves call a "system" (*sistema*) that has its own internal "law" and is entirely run by what (for want of a better term) we may call a mafia. Every driver pays a regular toll or tribute (in Russian this is called *dan'*) to these gangsters, initially at the point of a gun. The mafia widely avoids state taxes. The police categorize its members as "organized criminals" and a special directorate has been set up to combat them. A differentiation between "the state" constructed by official law and the actual operations of state institutions will enable us to understand the curiously suspended situation of the *marshrut sistema*. Being run by mafia groups, it is strictly illegal from the point of view of "the state" insofar as that idea is enshrined in federal and republic law. Yet a great deal of what "the system" actually does is not provided for in law and hence is "invisible" to it. Yet the *marshrut* "system" provides the only means whereby the vast majority of the population travel and in this sense is completely integral to the functioning of the city. The *sistema* also collaborates secretly with compliant officials, that is, with elements of "the state" considered as a set of institutions and practices.

This "privatized" *marshrut* system is an extremely efficient economic arrangement. It is regarded by ordinary people as cheaper, faster, more reliable, and in some ways more pleasant to use than the legal *marshrut* services in other Siberian cities that are run by the municipality.

This mafia-run phenomenon has been described in two ways in the literature. One analyzes it in economic or "rational choice" terms (Varese 1994). The other focuses on the political context of the phenomenon, the idea of the weak or disintegrated state and its inability to carry out certain functions that are then taken over by private groups (for example, Volkov 1999). These are top-down studies, in which the notion of politics employed radiates outward from the state, elections, and the overall domination of the means of violence. There have been very few studies of governmentality, a more socially pervasive and contextualized art of politics, which has extended through the late Soviet era into the present (Yurchak 2002). There may be a good reason for this. It is difficult to perceive any consistent or coherent overall governmentality in the myriad of diverse forms of political action now seen in Russia.

A strong impulse toward local autonomy at all levels suggests that issues of sovereignty might be more relevant than governmentality. Although most theories of sovereignty operate at the level of states and nations, aspects of them can be employed profitably in looking at the grass-roots (or more appropriately, the tarmac) operations of politics. Because such theories have left sovereignty as such a "thin" description, anthropology can and should engage with them in order to enrich them. In this respect, *pace* Foucault, there is no contradiction between his idea of governmentality and an anthropology of sovereignty that includes those aspects of governmentality that focus on it as a *way of thinking* about, or imagining, the practice of government as well as the actions people take in relations of domination.

The *marshrut* system provides an example of a new, post-Soviet institution that did not exist before 1991. It therefore serves as a thought experiment about the emergence of "the political" in relation to both sovereignty and governmentality. It helps us to think about how particular ways of life are related to "the political" as an emergent form of relations between people. An obvious question arises, however. The people who created the *marshrut* system were not innocents, as it were, but had previous experiences and ideas, not to speak of concurrent political ties, however weak or fluctuating, as subjects of the state. Nevertheless, we can separate sovereignty from previous modes of existence *conceptually* (if not historically or ethnographically) by adopting Agamben's definition. Yet, because it is these earlier and alternative experiences that provided the resources to open out and fill the domain of the *marshrut* system, it is essential that this chapter should discuss them.

The emergence of "the system"

The information in the following section comes mainly from one middle-aged woman taxi-driver, as well as from conversations with some of her male colleagues, with other inhabitants of Ulan-Ude, and from local newspaper articles.

The woman said that from 1991 to 1994 the new taxi service was both spontaneous and peaceful. Drivers, mostly experienced men, simply got together and followed the old bus routes. But in 1994, when the citizens were forced to face

widespread unemployment and delays in the payment of wages, there was a mad rush to join in. People found every possible way to get money to buy a car, van, or microbus and open up a new route. In Ulan-Ude, unlike certain other cities, this happened so suddenly and on such a scale that the Mayorate (the new town council) was unable to take control and "criminal elements" moved in. They simply claimed a given route as "theirs" and demanded that the drivers on that route pay them to use it. They beat up individuals, threatened others, and set up ambushes in remote areas to attack anyone who resisted. The police were unable to cope. The drivers then got together at a mass meeting and decided that "If the 'roof' [*krysha*] exists, then after all it is better for us to have some kind of 'roof'." "Roof" was a term widely used throughout Russia for protection in general and mafia personnel in particular. Drivers then began to pay up regularly. Meanwhile, the controllers of the different routes quarreled, especially when the mafia groups themselves invented new routes to mop up the best passengers. Drivers and mobsters together set up fights all over the city. Finally, in 1995, there was a massive "settling of accounts" (*razborka*) between the various *struktura*s at a central patch of bare ground called the Komsomol Peninsula. Several people were killed. These were, significantly, interstitial people who tried to get round the opposed blocks, to blur the boundaries of "those ranks of inter-connected criminals." After this the "roofs" agreed on how to divide all the routes among themselves and (in the words of our woman taxi-driver) "Everything died down."

Meanwhile, our informant said, she and some other women drivers felt unsafe. "In the case of our route," she said, "we invited five to six young men to join us as co-drivers, aged about 32–35, all very good boys, with drivers' documents, they all graduated from the Technological Institute, they had education, some had been in the KGB." One of them was chosen by our roof to be our brigadier, to register the members of the team and collect and pay up the money. "On all these routes," she continued,

> "there was very strong discipline. I was amazed. No sooner had we opened our new route under the Wrestler [*Bortsy*] roof than every week there was a meeting [*sobranie*]. The agenda and the time were announced beforehand, and then the roof arrived, two or three people in their own cars, and they had a sorting out [*razborka*] to discipline the drivers. It was almost like a Party meeting in the old days, but with even stricter, stronger discipline. Everyone connected with any of the routes owned by a given roof comes to these meetings, perhaps 40 or 50 people. You can't put your feet up or smoke, and you have to pay attention. If you don't come to one meeting you get a first warning [*preduprezhdenie*], if you don't come twice you get a second warning, if you don't come three times you are sacked from the route. 'Infringers' are punished."

At this point, our interviewer asked, "Who are these 'infringers'?" The reply was, "People who get drunk, who don't have the right documents and licenses, whose cars are not kept in order." And the driver added that "illegals" (*levyye*) are not allowed in. "You know how a white rook is thrown out of the nest, an alien bird? It's the same here, an alien [*chuzhoi*] cannot appear on our route." "And how do they get rid of him?" "Simple. They beat him up and put sand in his tank, he wouldn't venture on our route again." In fact, the occupation of *marshrut* taxi-driving is now (2001)

saturated. This means that someone joining a route has to pay a huge sum of 10,000 rubles to the brigadier, who pays it to the roof, which then gives permission to start work, but only if some other driver can be dismissed.

The woman driver described how she suddenly came to realize what she was involved in. "My husband Bair," she said,

> "One day he got so angry when the guy came round from the roof to collect the money. Bair spoke out, 'What's this? You are still young, you do nothing, and we work from day to night, we don't owe you any money!' A real row. Two days later, two threatening figures from the roof came round to our apartment and told Bair he was excluded from the route. Then we realized! Driving was our livelihood. We had to get back a route, but to do that we'd have to reestablish the roof and pay them a massive fee. God, it was difficult. We faced ruin and we had to rent out our car for a time to make the money... So today in Ulan-Ude the *marshrut* system is completely regularized. Maybe one roof or another will weaken and another will come in, but it will be according to the same scheme. You have to deal with the roof, and whoever among them wins, the drivers have to pay."

Further inquiries revealed the strength of "the system," its capacity to incorporate branches of public bodies and defy those that attempted to reform it. Suddenly, a new route appeared, No. 55. Normally the drivers would have been attacked, but everyone said not to touch this one, even though it crossed many other routes. It was rumored that this was Aidaev's route – Aidaev being the mayor of Ulan-Ude. Then, amid much hedging, because Aidaev is still the mayor and an extremely powerful figure, our informant revealed her suspicion that the drivers of No. 55 are secretly paying a roof called the Dvortsovskaya Struktura (the Palace Structure, probably referring to the Palace of Sport) and that this roof then pays directly to Aidaev personally.

Next to appear on the scene was the *mayorate* as an institution, this being the public body headed by the mayor but distinct from him as a private person. The *mayorate* set up routes 90, 91, and 97, and in the words of our driver tried to "subordinate" (*podchinit'*) its teams, by forcing them to rent cars at high rates from the town council and also to pay them a large percentage of the fares through a metering system. Aidaev, in his capacity as mayor and attempting to follow the example of the city of Irkutsk, decided to try to extend this differently organized municipal operation over the whole city. He gave an order (*prikaz*) to this effect. In revolt, the private drivers supported by the "roofs" then joined together under a former Soviet trade-union official, each route elected its own representative to the new union, and all went to court to contest the order. Quite probably through illegal pressure, but ostensibly because the drivers had licenses and some of them could be shown to have paid certain nominal taxes, the *mayorate* lost the case and everything went back to the mafia-run system as it was before.

The public powers having been defeated, the 6th Directorate for the Fight Against Organized Crime, a section of the police under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), decided to join "the system." They carefully studied the strengths and weaknesses of the various roofs to see where they could make an alternative offer of "protection" to the drivers. "In general," our taxi-driver said,

"the MVD has complete information about who is in each roof and who controls whom. Everyone knows about everything. In fact, the MVD 6th Directorate already had its own route, Number 130. We all know that that is theirs and that no one should touch it. How do we know? Because in 1997 when there was a period of disorder and drivers were getting beaten up and robbed, we asked for help from the 6th, the 5th,and the 10th Police Directorates, and only the 6th gave any active help, and then only to drivers on route 130! Of course, if you ask those drivers concretely, 'Who is your roof?' they deny the whole thing and say they don't know."

The implication of what our informant said is that the police are trying to take over other routes as well, but she was adamant that neither the police, nor the town council, nor the mayor, would change "the system." "That cannot happen in Ulan-Ude," she said, "because they are all privatized drivers [*oni vse* individually]. The state is not strong enough to unite them, nor can it afford to supply them all with petrol, spare parts, oil, technical checks, and all the rest of it – colossal money – for them to go onto the wage system."

So, in this micro-world it is the roofs that are in control. Having more or less agreed on a division of the spoils, they unite to rebuff outside interference through their new union. They suck money up through the brigadiers and pay it into their *obshchak* (common pot or treasury). For return favors, they pass some on to the mayor personally, as we have seen, and no doubt also to some other official figures. Yet such links are secret and have to be disguised, as is the participation of the police. This secrecy acts as a screen that separates the domain of the *marshrut* operation from the public activities of the state. In effect, secrecy constitutes a boundary between sovereignties. In this curious situation, the taxi service is *simultaneously* open and part of the daily life of every citizen and at the same time illicit, with its governing bodies hidden. The drivers, with the exception of the brigadiers, do not know the roofs personally, do not know their real names, and do not socialize with them. "We just *see* these people, we have no idea what they do," as our driver put it. "In the first days it was very unpleasant," she continued. "Perhaps it was the Soviet mentality, but to sit in those meetings and listen to that roof laying down the law, well, I know we sat and clenched our teeth. It was somehow insulting when young boys ordered you around and could spit on you." The interviewer then commented that she herself as a passenger hated it when "you are sitting in the taxi and in come two boys, completely young and green, just 18 or 19, and roughly give orders to the driver, and you see him handing over money." The driver thought for a bit and then said, "In the old Communist days, we had someone to complain to. I could go to the *partorg* or the *mestkom* [low-level Party officials]. Nowadays I have no one to go to. These are new times. Anyway, a criminal now is not the same as he was in the past, with blood-stained fingers opened wide. Now the criminals are very proper and even nice people [*vpolne prilichnyye dazhe simpatichnyye lyudy*]."

Another driver commented that since the various mafia "structures" that dominate in Ulan-Ude are all groups of athletes, you have to understand their situation. "They were given advanced special training in the Soviet system, they are incredibly fit and strong and energetic, way beyond ordinary people. Remember, they were trained to beat the world at the Olympics! Now there are no jobs for them. What else are they to do?" In such statements, the roofs appear almost in heroic guise. They consist in fact

of groups who call themselves the Wrestlers, the Boxers, the Karate group, and so on, and these are the images they project even if most of the members these days are not athletes at all. Note, because it will be relevant later, that the Wrestlers (*Bortsy*) run the *marshrut* system and are currently the dominant group in Ulan-Ude.

THE "SYSTEM" AND THEORIES OF SOVEREIGNTY

How can we analyze this phenomenon? First, it has to be seen as a process, rather than as a timeless structure, a process whereby what the driver called "the system" came into being, evolved (as it were), and probably will mold itself into yet other shapes in the future. Second, this micro-world involves a kind of sovereignty. At the extreme, people were killed in order to set its boundaries. Further, "the system" was able to rebuff the control of the legal state (in the form of municipalization) and, within the practicing state, it could transform both the mayor's and the Police Department's interventions into minor examples of its own methods. Finally, "the system" – while being itself an exception – could decide on what (or whom) it could exclude, an ability that is inseparable from creating and guaranteeing the situation that its internal law requires for its own validity. As Agamben paraphrases Carl Schmitt (1998:16):

> The exception appears in its absolute form when it is a question of creating a situation in which juridical rules can be valid. Every general rule demands a regular, everyday frame of life to which it can be factually applied and which is submitted to its regulations. The rule requires a homogeneous medium. This regularity is not some external matter, but belongs rather to the rule's immanent validity. There is no rule that is applicable to chaos. Order must be established for juridical order to make sense. A regular situation must be created, and sovereign is he who definitely decides if the situation is actually effective.

It was exactly such an "everyday frame of life" that the Bortsy created when they took control of the *marshrut* system. They established team memberships, firmly cut off "illegals" (illegal from their point of view, but no more illegal than they themselves from the point of view of the legal state), and set up the regular disciplinary meetings. In such a "homogeneous medium" their own law could have validity, that is, the tariffs charged, the apparatus of warnings for non-attendance at meetings, the idea of "infringements," and the punishments for them.

Agamben, as we have seen, reworks Schmitt's ideas on sovereignty and law in order to examine their relation to "nonpolitical" everyday life. He insists that the problem of sovereignty is not to be reduced to who within the political order is invested with certain powers, but refers to the "threshold of the political order itself" (1998:11–12). In this light, Agamben's notion that the ban is the originary political act is significant. "The ban" refers here both to exclusion and to the command of the sovereign. The topography of legality defines itself in relation to what is external to it. Yet, as Agamben argues, the person who is banned, like Bair the driver, "is not in fact simply set outside the law, but rather abandoned by it. That is, he is exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, inside and outside, become indistinguishable" (1998:28). In the case of Bair, a decision was taken to write him

off, as it were, and yet he was still present as a driver in the city. And he never mentally left the system. As soon as he was excluded, he and his wife could only think about how to get back in again.

Agamben does not draw out the full implications of this idea, including its psychological implications, because his point of originating action is always (only) the sovereign. He writes, "Contrary to the modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens' rights, free will and social contracts, from the point of view of sovereignty only bare life is authentically political. This is why in Hobbes the foundation of sovereign power is to be sought not in the subjects' free renunciation of their natural rights but in the sovereign's presentation of his natural right to do anything to anyone, which now appears in the right to punish" (1998:106). We may accept Agamben's definition of the basis of sovereignty in the "right" to kill, but a definition only goes so far toward understanding a phenomenon that is, in fact, a complexity of interrelations. Prioritizing the "intrinsic right" of the sovereign in this way underestimates the richness and weight of the "ways of life" of the people, which Agamben sees only in terms of bare life, its vulnerability to violence, its liability to be snuffed out in killings or incarcerated in camps.

The payment of tribute by the drivers, for example, is not just a matter of fear. It is conditioned by the struggle to live which Russians call *vyzhit'* (to survive, to hold out). People in Ulan-Ude have to make payments wherever there is scarcity. They have *to buy*, in effect, jobs, have to pay for promotions, to get their children into college, to acquire a trading license, and so on. These payments are not simply economic in character. They are thought within convoluted ethical considerations and ruminations about what one might expect from other people of various kinds. In the case of payments to racketeers, these musings do not exclude even empathy for the men of violence. Thus our woman driver said of one member of her roof, "I was on his side, because, really, he's just a little boy, just 12 or something, not even shaving, and he opens the door and asks you for money." And about the men of her own brigade, who at one point had gone out to block a competing route and beat up its drivers, she said, "Well, our lads, it's their age, 32–35, the very age for fighting." For payments to state officials, she had the following comment to make. "It's not like the roof there. Those are state structures after all. The person who sits there in a state post, he *has a right* to receive money, valuable gifts or services. Because, you know, a state seat is an 'income-giving place' [*doxodnoe mesto*]." In this light, the tribute given to the roof can be seen as part of a wider imaginary of political-economic acts. A person does not pay up as a negotiated strategy, nor out of sheer fright, but as someone who *has adopted a way of life* and submits to the way its necessities are conceived. Giving tribute is a crucial element in governmentality, in what we may call the "technologies of sovereignty," and, at the same time, it cannot be separated from the wider symbolic imaginary of "survival" in urban life.

Thus, as anthropologists, we have to see such objects as "natural rights" in terms of the ideas in which they are held. The people who sign up as drivers, whose bare life, in Agamben's terms, is thereby included in the micro-polity of the Bortsy, are not to be seen as mere eaters and sleepers and family reproducers in the Aristotelian mode. They are not devoid of experience in political life. What would be the ideas whereby Russian and Buryat drivers would subordinate themselves and "leave" to the Bortsy the exercise of their power? And would these notions not in some degree impinge on

the actual forms taken by the practice of sovereign power? Indeed, might not other ideas, springing in some sense from the wide totality of everyday life and global imagining, spill over and infuse into the political, so that we could not truly understand the political life without taking account of them?

PRECURSORS IN THE IMAGINING OF A WAY OF LIFE

These questions are explored by making a brief excursion into a significant precursory context of the *marshrut* system, considered as a sphere of politics. I refer here only in passing to the official Soviet institutions, because they are well known to readers in their broad outlines. What I draw attention to is another rebellious foundational experience that would be part of the "political" life (in a non-official sense) of any contemporary inhabitant of Ulan-Ude. This draws upon the idea, explored by Nugent (2001), that local people's relation to the state and politics in general is imagined in frameworks that have spatial and temporal dimensions. In Ulan-Ude, the former Soviet imaginary of the all-USSR and future-oriented spatio-temporal frame has fractured into a literally provincial and somehow self-oriented outlook. This is fully understandable only in relation to its precursory perspectives, because those are what people today refer to when explaining their new attitudes.

The history that illustrates this point is that of youth-gang conflict on the streets of Ulan-Ude. This is something – a combination of practices and imagination – that almost everyone, women as well as men, must have participated in, if at times only peripherally, since between the late 1950s and the late 1980s the city became saturated with gangs. At first the conflict was between predominantly Russian urban working-class kids and immigrant Buryat youths from the surrounding countryside. The Buryats, the indigenous people of this region of Siberia, seen by the Russians as country hicks, called themselves by defiantly oriental names, such as Chiang-Kai-She, referring to the 1940s anti-communist Chinese leader, or Hung-hu-dze, the local pronunciation of the Chinese term for "Red Beards," bandits (possibly originally Russian) who infested the Russo-Chinese borderlands in the early twentieth century. Street battles were part of the urban scene during the late 1950s, but sometime in the early 1960s a mass battle took place on the bridge that linked the center of town with a district across the River Ude occupied mostly by Buryats. The police intervened and "imposed order," as it were, only for the Chiang-Kai-Shisty to use this as a shelter to strengthen their grip over the entire riverine area. Through the 1960s and 1970s they subdivided into several, often warring, gangs and established outposts in nearby villages. The central city groups did likewise. In this shifting scene, at any one moment the entire city was divided up into delimited gang territories, down to each apartment block. If members from an enemy gang strayed onto alien territory, they would be beaten up. The incident would then count as a provocation for a more general battle.

Each gang had its own name, war cry, distinctive dress-code and hairstyle. Some even had hymns or anthems. The images gloried in heterodoxy. Some gang territories were named after American states such as Louisiana or Nebraska, or after Chinese cities, such as Shanghai. Gang names included "the Anarchists," "the Bourbons," "the Colonialists," "the City Wreckers," and, in the case of a women's gang, "the

Sultanki" ("the Sultanas"). Defying the derogatory stereotype of Buryats as backward nomads, certain gangs chose names like "the Huns" or "the Barguty." Cocking a snook at sexual stereotypes, one central city gang called itself "the Babochki" ("the Butterflies," a reference to their territory around the Opera and Ballet Theater, associated with homosexuals). Gang leadership was shifting, but chiefs called "Boss" or "Papa" were supposed to demonstrate strength and fairness. They often acquired additional authority through having served a prison term (Mitupov 2002). The leadership, which dominated over a three-tiered hierarchy according to age (within the range of about 16 to 25), collected a nominal sum from all gang members. This was supposed to provide support to the families of those who were arrested. To refuse to fight was to incur ignominy or bullying, yet for decades these payments were strictly voluntary.

This whole situation of gang warfare, according to those who remember it, was driven by a desire for sheer domination – glorious victory over the enemy and intimidation of the weak or undecided. In its perpetual violence, its collectivism, lack of structure, the absence of anything definite to fight over, or any ideological reason for conflict, this looks like an example of what Norbert Elias (1978) modeled as the "primal contest," or Carl Schmitt (1996) as the "pure politics" of the friend/enemy. Yet, although the gang world had its own kind of order, it was firmly encased within another order, that of the Soviet state.

It is very significant that the gangs withered with *perestroika* (Gorbachev's campaign to restructure the socialist system) in the late 1980s and morphed into something very different during the 1990s. After the end of communism the "romantic period" of the gangs was over, as one Buryat observer put it (Badmaev 2002:99). Ulan-Ude's gangs created an archetypal "temporary autonomous zone" of the kind mentioned earlier – the flow of life into unrecognized spaces within and between rigid structures. They are evidence that the Soviet state did not have a complete monopoly over violence (*pace* Volkov 1999), but nevertheless the gangs cannot be described as sovereign. The legally defined state and the state in practice were very much closer to one another in Soviet times than they are today. Soviet overarching dominance, if not monopoly, created the situation in which the stakes of gangland violence were – and could be – nothing but glory.

If this state of perpetual conflict was the precursor of the *marshrut* system, the transformation of the gangs after 1991 shows something of the social landscape in which the system now exists. The trade and entrepreneurship allowed in the late 1980s brought real economic gains to be fought over. The gangs ceased to be purely territorial and began to establish bases in schools, colleges, and workplaces. The collection of money dues then became obligatory. Primary-school gang members sometimes stole from their parents in order to accede to the demands of extortionists.

As police supra-domination of the street withered, this newly economically rapacious system flourished. It still exists and is countered by well-organized vigilante groups (one such, called Black Rider, is a militant Buryat movement trained by ex-army officers). The criminal subculture, with its jargon, ways of behavior, and styles and rules of interrelationships, spread into society through these same networks (Badmaev 2002). Remembering that between 1960 and 1990 around 73 million people in Russia served terms in prisons or labor camps (Mitupov 2002) and that Ulan-Ude was located in a region known for such institutions, it is not surprising that

the influence of the "zone" (slang for the Gulag) has a strong social foundation. The tribute flowing into the common treasuries (*obshchak*) along a well-established hierarchical chain became by the mid-1990s the internally "legal" (*zakonnyi*) economic basis for the criminal racket. The image of "the enemy" is no longer another street gang but the so-called *barygi*, traders and kiosk-owners who are also trying to wrest a living from the street. It is their territory that the racket is trying to "occupy." And who dominates this racket in the city of Ulan-Ude but our friends the Bortsy (Wrestlers).

This brief chronology indicates how different kinds of domination succeeded one another. The more spontaneous and rebellious form of the early street-gang had its conditions of existence guaranteed by the Soviet state. It could take the "romantic" form of pure conflict (pure "politics") because "the economy" was provided for – everyone was simultaneously either in education or at work. It was imagined in global terms because the USSR itself was imagined that way. By the late 1990s, however, the region of Buryatia had become one of the poorest in Russia, and 40 percent of its adolescents were neither working nor in education (Badmaev 2002, quoting *Trud* 1997, March 6). The almost theatricalized performance of anarchic autonomy melted away and was replaced by a struggle for economic survival.

Gangs, no longer quasi-universal but specialized in racketeering, became serious elements in the political economy of the city. Their fighting quality (*boevitost'*) no longer springs from the strength and aggression of young people who happen to live in given territorial districts but rather is constituted by *the ability to rule* of professional thugs who provide "protection" from above. These professionals, instead of avoiding state agencies as the gangs do, connect with them in various discrete ways. Yet, as suggested earlier, the secrecy of these links constitutes an invisible boundary for the emergence of domains in which prototypes of sovereignty may be recognized. The aesthetics of these rulers has shifted: the toponymy of ironic autonomy has been replaced by names intended to evoke respect.

This is the contemporary context for the *marshrut* system, which now can be seen as a quasi-sovereign protection racket with its own dynamic – even perhaps a relatively benign one – in a differentiated landscape of networks. True, it takes dues by threats of violence, but at least it does not rob children and it does allow taxi-drivers a decent living. The Bortsy have become a sprawling and variegated conglomeration. One driver respondent said, "The Bortsy are not just wrestlers, of course. They link up bank structures, commercial structures. Bortsy is just their general name. Lots of different people are joined up there, those who are very occupied with violence and those who have real money, real power [*vlast'*]. It's a very complex structure."

The implication of this is that the Bortsy exercise their rule in different ways in their various spheres of operation, a point supported by Varese's (2002) study, *The Russian Mafia*, which makes it clear that a highly variegated repertoire of tactics is present. What we see here are different forms of governmentality present in various sites of operation and engaging with different concrete ways of life. Yet, however politely the threats are couched, anthropologists should not lose sight of the fact that these operations are ultimately about sovereignty when the fundamental, realistic threat is that of an ignominious death. Informants among the taxi-drivers spoke of an uncle murdered in his apartment, a young man found with his throat slit in a stairwell, a debtor discovered burnt to death so that his remains would not be

identifiable. This is "the life that may be killed but not sacrificed" of which Agamben writes (1998:107). Yet our analysis cannot be restricted to this horror since a sphere of threats precedes it that exists in the world of the living. Here there must be different manners if, as I have argued, sovereignty is always qualified by ways of life.

We therefore need to take account of the values and symbolism that give legitimacy to the Bortsy. A Buryat writer suggests that the dominance of the Wrestlers is quite understandable, since wrestling and archery are the national sports of the Buryats (Badmaev 2002). This is inadequate, because the Bortsy are mostly not Buryats but Russians, and in any case the sportsmen–mafia association occurs all over Russia. More pertinent is the previous cult of sport in the Soviet Union and its link to images of world glory through the medium of the physically honed, powerful male body and the idea of the loyal team. Certainly such images are exploited in the governmentality surrounding the Bortsy. Their dominance is expressed in the image of the heroic Spartachi ("Spartan warriors," a term commonly applied to all sports-based mafia-type groups) in the supposition they foster that they are secretly training hard, and would prevail in any physical encounter. Their symbolic face is at once a heroic exemplar and an utterly practical threat. Yet, the mobsters' practice of using aliases, *noms de guerre*, code-names, and nicknames (Varese 2002) distances the face from the person behind it. In this context we should remember the taxi-driver's sympathy, even admiration, for the actual members of the roof she encountered ("the 12-year-old who was not even shaving," the "young men of perfect age for fighting"). Such views are carried forward, I suggest, from half-remembered youthful participation in the adventures of the Soviet-era gangs. The mobsters themselves adopt a similar self-identification technique (naming by iconic image) to that of the youth gangs. This points to the complex psychological relationships that exist when people are aware of changing temporalities, masks, and more vulnerable faces. We see a multiple relation between the familiar Soviet images of prowess and fame (now lost for ever), the hard surface the Bortsy project (but cannot always sustain), the struggle of everyone to wrench economic gain from the streets, and the ordinary people's understanding of the pathos of these contradictions.

This leads to a final observation in my attempt to understand the *marshrut* system. I have argued that there is sovereignty here, but that idea as expounded by Schmitt and Agamben fails to take account of what the ordinary participants bring to the relation. Their everyday life "throws in" its own exigencies and excitements. These burst beyond the confines of the notion of sovereignty and qualify it by responding to a different logic. True, the taxi-driver explained how every member of her team is now "disciplined," which might be understood simply as subjection to sovereign power. But in fact, this is a self-discipline, which does not lie only in menace or in submissiveness, but has other origins too. She explained, "You know how it used to be, you went to work in a factory, every day at the same time, you waited for the whistle, you got up at seven. That was very hard psychologically. Now the *marshrut* drivers get up even earlier at five, but they don't have that feeling of heaviness because they know they could go at 12 o'clock. But I go out before six because I know that I'll get money right from six o'clock." Certainly the rulers tap the economic impulse ("I'll get money"). But that impulse also interjects its own rationale, which cannot be summed up by the notion of pure subjection.

Let me explain by describing some nuances of the drivers' practices. They have instituted a rigidly upheld order according to which they must set out from the beginning of the route and follow one another in sequence. To start in the middle or overtake another driver is regarded, except when it happens by accident, with harsh disapproval, as this is seen as collecting other drivers' rightful fares. The drivers observe strict mutual surveillance in this matter and beat up drivers who "infringe." We should beware of assuming an overwhelming oppressiveness in this situation because people bring to it an awareness of experiences of even more grim Soviet contexts. The women taxi-driver said:

> "What's good about these days is that a person for the first time can ... well, I'm speaking about myself, I always worked in the state structure, I received wages regularly. But they could insult you and what could you do? But the entrepreneurial movement gives me a kind of freedom. I have a car of my own, I can just sit in it and go to work, I earn money for myself, and it seems to me this is a very pleasant feeling, despite the roof, in spite of all the difficulties."

In other words, we cannot understand the life of taxi-drivers unless we see that it does not stand on its own – they are contrasting it with the perspective of an earlier time.

Furthermore, however authority-ridden the *marshrut* system, its actuality can be infused with *joie de vivre*. "Let's say," the woman continued, "we decide to start the route at 7 o'clock. And sometimes it happens that several cars go to the starting point together. And there's such a race for who'll get there first, because the others will have to wait their turn. We have such a great time racing there wildly through the streets. And everyone knows it's no big deal, because shortly after seven there are lots of people going to work and we'll all be making big money." She went on,

> "On almost all routes, people work there a long time and are friends. In our route, for example, we had an opening party [*otkrytie*] when we started, and then we always celebrate our anniversary [*godovshchina*], and we have set up a common fund [*kassa*] for people's birthdays and to help people. If I need an urgent repair and I have no money I can park at the last stop and one of the other drivers will always help me. People borrow money from one another freely in our team, because the guarantee is always your car, or the fact that you have a place on the route. This pleases me, these human interrelations."

Two points can be made about this statement. First, it is impossible not to see here certain long-standing habits of sociality being carried forward into the new micro-world. Opening parties, anniversaries, common funds, etc. were all features of the old Soviet *kollectiv*. To these are added the invigorating bolsters of the newly imagined world of entrepreneurship and "capitalism" in which the Bortsy are participants: valuable private property (the car), entitlement to earn (one's place on the route), and the sense of freedom. Second, more tentatively perhaps, one can see a certain "economy" of vitality here. Negative quashing of life ("the ban," the beatings and threats) may be the ultimate guarantee of sovereignty, but are they not countered in the sphere of daily life by this *joie de vivre*?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has suggested that analysis of sovereignty need not be opposed to studies of governmentality, and that both concepts are essential in explaining how the political life emerges and may be constituted. In particular, localized "everyday" spheres of politics, because they are constituted by particular ways of life, offer the most vivid opportunities to question aspects of theories on sovereignty. The *marshrut* operation is a micro-polity that operates on its own terms and maintains its own "law." Because its initial operations created an unforeseen and uncharted space, it was for a period "invisible" to the black letter of the law, which has never quite caught up with it. It is still not absolutely clear, for example, whether tribute paid to the roofs is illegal or not. Meanwhile, as regards the practical agencies of "the state on the street," the *marshrut* operation has either kept them at bay or forced them to participate in the racket system.

I have argued that this is a system of micro-sovereignty. Yet "pure sovereignty" is qualified by the necessity of manifesting itself in life. The Ulan-Ude ethnography shows that micro-sovereignty has its own distinctive ways of instantiating symbolizing authority, which imposes a specific kind of relationality with its subjects. At the same time, in any historical situation those subject to sovereignty will have prior experiences and alternative lives people construct for themselves – previous "states of imagination" in Nugent's (2001) terms. Both the street gangs and the Soviet labor *kollektiv* are such prior worlds. In the case of the street gangs, the sense of belonging, of having enemies, of fiercely observed territoriality, and paying tribute to leaders, as well as a kind of rebellious independence, all pervade the actual practice of the taxi system. It is, perhaps, no accident that the neighboring city of Irkutsk, which never had such pervasive street gangs, also does not have an independent mafia-run transport system.

Yet we are dealing here with a new era. The images that enhance the authority of the roof are not just after-images of Soviet athletes. They also embody the figure of the ruthless capitalist, with all that that implies for people who have been taught from childhood about such people but never experienced them. The subjects in this arena of sovereignty bring to it new, yet historically specific, political ideas – such as that they constitute "a movement," that they are all "privatized," and that a certain freedom is possible within an oppressive system. Agamben may be right in general terms that across the world we are coming to see the increased presence of paralegal measures beyond the state that embrace "biopolitics" and create enclaves alien to democracy (see also Žižek 2002). But it would be a mistake to think that new sovereignties emerging within and beyond nation-states are all alike, simply because they do indeed have the characteristics of sovereignty. Sovereignties are saturated with "ways of life."

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