Chapter Four

Arche-Trace (II)/Dominium: Divisible Sovereignty and the VOC as Corporate Sovereign

I Divisible Sovereignty, Heterogeneity, and Deconstruction

The paradoxical intrastitial position of the Dutch Republic as lawful rebel against the Iberian world-empire on the one hand and as legitimate hegemon on the other highlights the discursive correlation between a war of national liberation and Dutch leadership within the Modern World-System. The Grotian Text had to perform the somewhat thankless task of providing an internally coherent rhetorical stratagem that would symbolically validate latently contradictory agendas: the creation of an inter-state system of formally equally States within the core zone, and the legitimation of the exploitative domination of the Periphery by these same States.

A signature characteristic of De Indis is the recurrent juxtaposition of contending forms of sovereignty: the binary opposition between monistic and ‘divisible’ sovereignty forms a cardinal antinomy of both De Indis in particular and of the Grotian corpus as a whole. What is at stake here, in addition to the binary structure of the Grotian Text(s) itself, is the wider issue of the textualized relationship between Europe/Self and Asia/Other. The binary opposition between the competing forms of sovereignty underscore the relative absence of differance between European and non-European societies, subsequent divisions themselves being the product of the successful implementation of the Modern World-System. In this way, De Indis reminds us of the ‘structuralizing’ role played by European colonialist hegemony. For Keene

It has always been hard for orthodox [International Relations] theorists to appreciate the international dimensions of relationships in the extra-European world, largely because they make the misguided assumption that their unitary conception of sovereignty has always defined the discipline of international politics and international law. They argue that international relations are relations between mutually independent states, because that is the only conception they possess as a way of thinking about the modern world; they lack the more flexible vocabulary of Grotius, and are thus at a loss to know how to describe, say, relations between the British paramount power and the ‘semi-sovereign’ Native States of India. What they typically do, then, is simply ignore this way of organizing international relations, perhaps giving it a breezy acknowledgement
but hastily moving on to the familiar business of international politics in the European states-system. The inadequacy of their conceptual apparatus and the narrowness of their historical vision are faults of the orthodox [i.e. 'British School'] theory that continually reinforce each other.¹

As Keene rightly points out, much of this ‘statist myopia’ of both International Law and International Relations is the end product of a superficial, if not actually naïve, understanding of the complex cross-currents of early modern History, which leads directly, in turn, to a facile belief in an essentialising statist ‘Presence’.² Essentialism and its juro-political correlative, the indivisibility of sovereignty, are central to the space of *differance* within which *De Indis* operates. This is clear from even the most cursory reading of Grotius’ near-contemporary Jean Bodin (1529/30–1596), the progenitor of Absolutist political theory.³ The entirety of Bodin’s later thought is that the essentialist indivisibility of sovereignty guarantees the logical necessity of a strictly hierarchical polity.⁴ The key element of Bodin’s discursive stratagem is the fusion of Civic Humanist scholarship with a thoroughgoing Aristotelian essentialism; ‘But it is clear that to have true definitions and resolution in any subject matter, one must not fix on accidents, which are innumerable, but on essential differences of form. Otherwise, one could fall

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¹ Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95.
² See above, Chapter One.

> Since [Jean] Bodin, indivisibility has been integral to the concept of sovereignty itself. In international political theory, this means that whenever sovereignty is used in a theoretical context to confer unity upon the state as an acting subject, all that it conveys is that this entity is an individual by virtue of its indivisibility, which is tautological indeed. What follows from this search for the locus of sovereignty in international political theory, however necessary to its empirical testability, is thus nothing more than a logical sideshow; the essential step towards unity is already taken whenever sovereignty figures in the definition of political order. Whether thought to be upheld by an individual or a collective, or embodied in the state as a whole, sovereignty entails self-presence and self-sufficiency; that which is sovereign is immediately given to itself, conscious of itself, and thus acting for itself. That is, as it figures in international political theory, sovereignty is not an attribute of something whose existence is prior to or independent of sovereignty; rather, it is the concept of sovereignty itself which supplies this indivisibility and unity.