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To Reclaim or Resist: Can Digital Sovereignty Ever Be Feminist?

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March 18, 2025

by [Plixavra Vogiatzoglou \(et al.\)](#) | 18 Mar 2025



[Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven / AMVK](#); Bloem van Smarten (1990-1991)

On 30 and 31 January 2025, a group of researchers participated in a [workshop](#) examining digital sovereignty through a feminist lens (see below for full list of contributors).^[1] Digital or technological sovereignty is increasingly claimed by various actors, ranging from powerful states or supranational entities like [China and the European Union](#), to global conglomerates like [big tech](#) and standardisation organisations like [ISO](#), to [Indigenous](#) communities or even [individuals](#).^[1] While there is no one definition or common understanding of the concept of sovereignty, it is a term that can be attractive due to its assertiveness of power and governance, for example, over land and people. In that vein, digital sovereignty denotes quests for authority over data, technologies, and infrastructures. Yet, sovereignty's historical origin also reflects the colonialist and imperialist "civilising" project of Europe and the West and thereby implies an inherent inequality of power.^[2] As such, invocations of sovereignty today are highly debated and controversial. The workshop sought to break down the concept of digital sovereignty,

understand what and who it engages, and examine through a feminist perspective how it works, or could work or not. Aiming to dismantle unequal power, feminist ideals invite a critical questioning of the concept of digital sovereignty itself.

This blogpost derives from a collective writing exercise undertaken during the workshop and recounts the discussions we had. It remains fluid in its approach, without upholding a definite stance on digital sovereignty or feminism.^[3] The blogpost first examines understandings of digital sovereignty, then motivates the feminist lens and finally delves into an investigation of what it would mean to reclaim or resist digital sovereignty through feminist visions and practices. The workshop participants and authors of this blogpost are Western Europeans and/or living and working in Western European cities and institutions. Our lenses are, therefore, also informed by our positionalities.

How can we understand (digital) sovereignty?

Conceptually, (digital) sovereignty is linked to ideas of autonomy, (in)dependence, self-determination, and control over (digital) property. It is context-specific and co-constituted *in relation* to others. (Digital) Sovereignty works through hierarchisation and, therefore, invites us to think in terms of subjects and objects to understand this relational nature and its effects. Humans, technologies, nature, and even regulation can be objects or subjects of digital sovereignty, even simultaneously. For instance, tech companies exercise authority by extracting people's data and natural resources, while their users may feel empowered by these companies' novel applications. Similarly, regulation can delimit as well as enable technology development, while the latter can incite regulation but also deregulation. In other words, the power dynamics of this relationship change depending on the perspective in a specific time and space.

Most importantly, sovereignty is claimed *against* others. On the one hand, it is addressed to peers or more powerful parties, requiring their recognition. Without it, claiming sovereignty is merely performative. On the other hand, sovereignty has historically been instrumentalised in concentrating power and pursuing the colonial "civilising" project, imposing "othering" by excluding parts of the world from the ability to claim sovereignty. Sovereignty is, therefore, not to be distributed or shared widely. Furthermore, sovereignty is a state of autonomy and independence that can never be obtained once and for all; it is always in the making and always under threat. Sovereignty thus seems not to exist without an enemy; the claim relies on an "other" who is often presented or perceived as a threat against achieving that state of sovereignty.

In the digital realm, sovereignty continues to be linked to the hegemonic legacy of securitisation and the "civilising mission". Technological development, especially in ICT, has long been motivated and driven by national security and military interests and funds. Today, technological progress seems to replace the language of civilisation to enable new and sustain old differentiations. Therefore, sovereignty claims make prominent references to divisive emerging technologies like artificial intelligence or quantum. At the same time, the securitisation mindset of existing threats for which technology is seen as the solution is maintained in [digital sovereignty discourses](#).

Insofar as sovereignty invokes an idea of autonomy and self-determination, it also brings into tension the liberal ideal of individuality and its relation to the collective. While a strict separation between the individual and the collective (or the human and “non-human”) cannot be made, what autonomy can mean in a context of co-dependency where absolute independence and freedom do not exist is questionable. In that vein, we can further ask how to configure autonomy differently and make sense of collectiveness and relationality without absolute dependence on specific power structures. In other words, how to sustain forms of sociality and autonomy in interdependence? For instance, [Indigenous claims to digital sovereignty](#) negotiate power collectively using this claim as a means, not the goal, towards a better (digital) future that is not extractive but allows the community members to regain some control over their (digital) future. Of course, the sense of community can also be challenging, as digital infrastructures have changed what it means to belong or be local by enabling, for instance, [digital nomads](#). Conversely, states and the EU use the notion of [strategic autonomy](#), which encompasses digital sovereignty and addresses dependencies in areas considered strategic for the security and economy of the EU. Here, too, autonomy is configured in specific ways.

From the large hegemon to the once-powerful-now-fearful supranational to the local or bottom-up, there are different spatial, material and temporal scales with which digital sovereignty can be understood. Perhaps, then, the power of digital sovereignty lies in its ability to produce effects regardless of a commonly understood meaning and to bring into confrontation the concrete, such as data or infrastructure, and the abstract, such as ideals or values. For instance, in the EU’s claim for digital sovereignty, there is tension between the digital material infrastructure of Europe and more abstract ideas of what it means to be European. This tension is instrumentalised to project an inescapable scenario where we cannot have alternative infrastructures to the ones presented in [the digital sovereignty ambition](#). As one of the participants/authors emphatically articulated, digital sovereignty seems to do everything, but it reconfigures what everything is. Ultimately, the work that digital sovereignty does relies on its appeal to the fantasy and the imaginary; in its vagueness and grandeur, it can be both a strength and a danger, and what is won and lost will depend on the perspective.

Why a feminist perspective?

A feminist lens helps in accounting for more fluidity and resisting fixed, stable dichotomies often used in digital sovereignty discourses. It allows for an open conversation, contemplating various perspectives and bringing to the forefront those rendered less visible or marginalised. At its core, it seeks to dismantle structures of oppression, privilege, and power. In that vein, we sought to identify questions of power that should be foregrounded by feminist thinking and consider if and how the power dynamics at play could be transformed through a feminist perspective.

A crucial area of investigation involves rendering more transparent what makes digital sovereignty claims possible in the production process. How is money flowing, what are the material conditions, what is the labour, the land, the resources upon which their

functioning depends, and who bears agency in producing digital sovereignty for themselves or, most commonly, others? From Musk and Zuckerberg to tech and [crypto](#) bros, vast streams of money are accumulated and directed by masculinist patriarchal figures towards specific technological products and practices. Meanwhile, tech designed by and for communities – such as [Nubo](#), a Belgian cloud service provider^[4] – is often overshadowed. Within tech spaces, a successful sales pitch is commonly one promoting [a solution to an imaginary or created problem](#) and decided without input from or attention to those communities on which it will be imposed or relies to be successful. For example, [Burrington explains](#) how there is an internet cable running from California to Japan and Hawaii, but the towns near it do not have proper access to the internet. Such lack of care for those most immediately affected by it renders it a non-affective infrastructure.

While EU digital policies present themselves as the human-centred and green alternative, questions can also be raised with regard to the [EU's ambition to be a global value exporter](#) in the digital domain and beyond, reflecting European expansionism and colonial histories. The values in question and who benefits from these policies are often left undefined. In focusing on the ever-lasting pursuit of digital sovereignty, the restructuring of finances and shifting modes of production and power often happen out of sight, reinforcing the already dominant digital players that focus on maximising compute and profit rather than accounting for the societal and environmental impacts.

Our discussion ultimately boiled down to the “dilemma” (that is certainly multi-faceted rather than a question of this or that): in light of sovereignty’s continuous reconceptualisation yet seeming inescapability from its imperial origins and power hierarchies that go against what feminism (as we understand it) represents, can we reverse, reclaim, resist or reject it?

To reclaim or resist digital sovereignty

Can we imagine a feminist digital sovereignty? In terms of ideology, we wonder whether, and if so, how, to break free and reconcile with sovereignty’s historic associations with extraction, differentiation, exclusion and domination. Its protectionist and hegemonic legacy is largely part of its appeal as a concept. Where does it stand without it? In this regard, we must also manoeuvre the unintended [ideological](#) and/or [discursive](#) proximity of anarchist/anti-globalists/feminist proposals to the neo-patriotic/tech-libertarian projects that are on the rise.

Perhaps it’s about an explicit commitment to boundaries in a porous and non-extractive way, highlighting the abovementioned production process. Certain claims of digital sovereignty over others might resonate more, especially where the claimants have been historically repressed and oppressed, such as Indigenous communities. Yet, it is not up to us to assess those claims. Instead, turning inwards, we question the benefits gained from our sovereign past and how those affect any new claim to (digital) sovereignty. Our tendency is towards notions of caring and thinking of what and who has been objectified. Whereas even so-considered progressive reactions to digital harms have been

advocating for inclusion and representation of marginalised communities (e.g. to debias AI systems), reclaiming digital sovereignty might be about [not participating in it whatsoever](#). It might be about cutting the act of asking for recognition from the hegemon.

But what could resisting digital sovereignty mean, and even more so, what autonomy do we really have to resist? The degree of autonomy also depends on one's vulnerability and being locked in specific digital (infra)structures. All too often, we are incapable of doing basic things in the digital world without the tools imposed on us. We are part of the system and often lack the individual skillset to navigate or resist it. This further raises the question of complicity and who and what we think and work *with*. There is also a cost in trying to regain power in the current system of production and government where increasingly fewer processes can go on without computation. Can we even talk about digital sovereignty then? If we need to stretch digital sovereignty as much as to address these challenges, are we stretching it too much, and are other notions doing this work already?

Feminist visions and practices

Letting go of unresolved conceptualisation efforts, our discussions turned to community and the search for methods of design and coding to implement feminist visions in infrastructures. Reckoning with our dependencies on technology, we can ask what brought us to a situation where tools become the solutions to problems they helped create. What are the knowledge and skills lost and replaced by technology? Can we bring such methods back, and if so, in what form? For instance, [knitting was a women's way of resistance](#), now an art largely replaced by machines. Can we highlight and prioritise local, marginalised, erased forms of knowledge over the digital? How can we develop new narratives, imagine different futures, and resist the amplification of technological solutions, even those for the so-called "good", such as [digitally twinning environments to preserve them all while neglecting digitisation's power-hunger](#) and local know-how?

Designing and coding from a feminist intersectional perspective entails the exploration of the interconnections between the different struggles entangled with or affected by the digital. It may include collective action, civil disobedience, infrastructural resistance by interrupting technological developments, use of the collective dynamic through storytelling, or use of common spaces to learn, inform, come together. Financial and technological power must also be channelled into collectives that tend to be minorities and under-represented in the dominant tech spaces. To that end, attracting funding schemes and expanding them to reach out to those communities could enable the development of strategies of resistance from within the system.

Another relevant framework could be abolitionism, which also looks to dismantle and rebuild, to think about undoing existing structures and work through new institutions and modes of organising and getting together.^[5] On a larger scale, it means trying to develop alternative practices of dependency and experimenting with new ways of caring and strength. Vulnerability and dependency presuppose risk, and risk is captured. Vulnerability is about mutual aid, not defence; it is about bringing pleasure and care and

building affective (infra)structures and, in that way, strength. Finally, inspiration can also be drawn from Berlant's nonsovereign relationality,^[6] which invites us to accept our lack of autonomy and sovereignty and embrace the tensions, frictions and disturbances that unavoidably occur when relating to others. Flipping digital sovereignty to nonsovereignty could then offer new perspectives into being in sociality and interdependence more consciously.

Conclusion

We joyfully entertained the idea of a Feminist Digital Dominance Manifesto to cut through the ambiguity of the many possible tricky meanings of (feminist) digital sovereignty. After all, sovereignty is just another old French/English term not translated intactly in all languages. For example, digital sovereignty in Greek is translated as digital dominance (ψηφιακή κυριαρχία). We also fluctuated, laughed, asked more questions than we answered and hope to have scratched the surface of an equally radical proposition: starting with the basics. And so, this is an invitation to ask questions of interdependence that ask us to further question the institutions themselves and the institutional structures that lock us in and create the problems for which specific technologies are then presented as the solution. By asking how we got here, we can then think about how to contribute to, demand, or create (infra)structures that are supporting and caring, that create strengthening dependencies, that consider the self in the collective, that start at the bottom, the local, the communal, and/or call out those that don't.

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^[1] Plixavra Vogiatzoglou organised the workshop, structured and guided the discussions, and edited the raw text, which resulted from a collective writing exercise, into this blog post. All authors participated equally in the discussions and shaping of the original text.

[1] Stephane Couture and Sophie Toupin (2019) 'What Does the Notion of "Sovereignty" Mean When Referring to the Digital?' *New Media & Society* 21:10, 2305–22.

[2] Antony Anghie (2005) *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*, Cambridge University Press.

[3] We do reject feminist narratives that prioritise privileged social groups or identities to the detriment and exclusion of others, especially those who have been historically disadvantaged and/or marginalised.

[4] One of the authors is an administrator and part of the Nubo team.

[5] I.a., Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, Verso Books; Ruha Benjamin (2019) *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Polity.

[6] Lauren Berlant (2022) *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Duke University Press.

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