

DESIGNING FOR  
SOVEREIGNTY

# *Becoming* Sovereign

*by Cyndi Suarez*

- For edge leaders creating viable futures, it is critical to not only understand but also know how to build personal sovereignty.



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ver the last year, NPQ has incubated Edge Leadership—a multi-sector social change R+D platform.

The ideas behind Edge Leadership build on the writings of design theorist Tony Fry.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Design as Politics*, Fry explores the central role of design in helping us move from “the unsustainable state of the world” to a redirection based on asking demanding questions about sovereignty:

What does it take to remake sovereignty by design?

What is there to remake?

How does what is sovereign become sovereign?<sup>2</sup>

Fry describes this work as “designing from the edge”—peering out into an unpromised future.

I build on Fry’s work by explicitly naming this kind of work as *edge leadership*, and identifying five key characteristics:

1. **Personal sovereignty** Edge leadership is acting from a sense of power
2. **Risk** Edge leadership involves risk-taking
3. **Transformation** The core edge leadership practice is transformation—understanding how it happens, in ourselves and others
4. **Connectivity** Edge leaders identify and name connections between things, and build connections with others
5. **Multiplicity** There are many ways to do things at the edge; we don’t have to agree on everything

Here we begin to examine personal sovereignty.



# body

# territory

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

While sovereignty is usually associated with political states—as the ability to protect geographical boundaries—it is originally associated with Christ and the Catholic Church. When the Holy Roman Empire lost its political and economic power and could no longer effectively challenge states, the state became sovereign.<sup>3</sup>

The Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which brought to an end the warring in Europe, is credited with articulating the concept of territorial sovereignty as clear borders that can be defended. It marks the transition from the Middle Ages to “a world of sovereign states.”<sup>4</sup> But its critics argue that it does not provide “a clear statement of the principle of sovereignty”<sup>5</sup>—perhaps due to the reality that borders are sites of contestation, and therefore not only not always clear, but ever-changing.

## THE PERSONAL ASPECTS

We are just now beginning to see the articulation of sovereignty as personal. Sofya K. Nartova-Bochaver, professor at the Higher School of Economics/National Research University in Moscow, is one of the leading researchers of personal sovereignty. At a very high level, she defines personal sovereignty as “a trait that demonstrates the extent to which a person’s empirical Self is respected by his/her social environment.”<sup>6</sup> Or, more simply, “the life space of the personality.”<sup>7</sup>

The concept of sovereignty as border control is carried into the personal. Here, a person is a “physical-territorial-existential integrity,”<sup>8</sup> where she both has a personal sense of the world and projects herself into it. Thus, the boundary is between one’s sense of self and one’s environment.

Nartova-Bochaver explains,

The presence of a private, individual territory is, therefore, a very important component of the normal life activity of a living being in defense of its security.

Real or anticipated change in the boundaries of an individual’s territory acts as a signal for specific behavior: either for the protection of the previous boundaries by means of aggressive-defensive behavior, or for flight to a place of greater security. The boundary between private and foreign territory is a zone of heightened psychological tension.<sup>9</sup>

It makes sense, then, that “the boundaries of a psychological space are defended by both physical and psychological means.”<sup>10</sup> However, sovereignty isn’t just about defending one’s physical and psychological space.

American sociologist Thomas S. Henricks—whose work focuses on social stratification, race, and game theory—sees people as “orderly creatures who wish to ‘know’ the character of situations so that they can move through them in an efficient, confident, and morally justified way.”<sup>11</sup>

The central role of interactions and relationships cannot be overstated.

Henricks writes, “human experience is the awareness that one is involved in ‘relationships’ . . . , and this involvement includes a judgment about one’s ‘standing’ in these relationships. If people use these interactions or relationships to acquire what they do not have, they produce a society in which relationships are in continual tension and subject to change.”<sup>12</sup>

Nartova-Bochaver adds that in times like these of overpopulation and environmental challenges, people are more prone to both have to take others into account and protect their identities.<sup>13</sup>

# things

# *routine habits*

As she delves in, she defines personal sovereignty as:

1. a person's ability to protect his/her psychological space
2. a balance between a person's needs and the needs of other people
3. the condition of personal boundaries
4. a system of explicit and implicit rules regulating relationships between people<sup>14</sup>

This is rigorous balancing work that requires deep awareness and skill. This skill is developed via the responses we have for coping with “everyday deprivations, challenges, and stress.”<sup>15</sup> Over time, these become habits. By the time we have exited adolescence, these habits have become a very important trait.

## **PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY PROFILE**

In addition to defining the personal aspects of sovereignty, Nartova-Bochaver identifies six domains:

1. **Body**
2. **Territory**
3. **Things (belongings)**
4. **Routine habits**
5. **Social contacts**
6. **Tastes and values**<sup>16</sup>

One's preferences along these domains comprise a sovereignty pattern or profile. People with a high degree of personal sovereignty have high self-esteem and self-representation, communicate more effectively with others, and have a general sense of trust in the world. People with low personal sovereignty tend toward avoidance and anxiety in their relationships, depression, and criminal behavior.

High personal sovereignty is critical to well-being and achievement; and low personal sovereignty makes it difficult to overcome life's challenges.

Nartova-Bochaver was prompted to study personal sovereignty after several years working at the consultation center of the Scientific Research Institute for Childhood of the Russian Children's Foundation. There she noticed that children and adolescents who exhibited aggressive behavior, vandalism, and theft often had lives where their need for personal life space had been denied. The more deeply adults denied them this space, the more serious the reaction. These early experiences shape the person and tend to persist.<sup>17</sup>

Nartova-Bochaver and her team constructed the Personal Sovereignty Questionnaire.<sup>18</sup> Most of the items were taken from real psychotherapy client stories of traumatic life events. Each item includes not only a description of an event, but one's feelings as one reflects on it. Thus, the same event may give rise to very different experiences, depending on one's interpretation.

The questionnaire has six subscales representing the aforementioned domains. Examples of items are:

1. I often felt offended when adults punished me with slapping and cuffing (Body).
2. I always had a place (table, chest, box), where I could hide my favorite things (Territory).
3. It annoyed me when my mother shook my things out of the pockets before laundering (Things/Belongings).
4. I often became sad when I didn't finish my play because I was called by my parents (Routine habits).
5. My parents accepted that they didn't know all of my friends (Social contacts).
6. I usually succeeded in having a children's celebration as I liked (Tastes and values).<sup>19</sup>



## HIGH PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY IS CRITICAL TO WELL-BEING AND ACHIEVEMENT; AND LOW PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO OVERCOME LIFE'S CHALLENGES.

# social

She explains,

The more provocative the situations experienced by a person who cannot cope with this challenge (and which arouse his/her negative feelings), the less the person's sovereignty level. *Thus, both the absence of such situations in the life experience, and personal resistance against them, ensure psychological sovereignty.*<sup>20</sup> (Italics mine.)

In the use of the questionnaire with adolescents and youth from Armenia, China, and Russia, the most significant results were found in the interactions between the factors they looked at: culture, age, and gender. Generally, the lowest scores were found among female respondents, and the highest among males.

Nartova-Bochaver set out looking for differences in levels of personal sovereignty between cultures, and instead found that the main differences were *within* the cultures among the various status groups.

She attributes this "impressive result" of sovereignty being generally high across cultures to "the evolutionary and adaptive function of the sovereignty trait in everyday lives," and concludes that "all cultures need and support its development."<sup>21</sup>

However, one wonders what would happen if one included race as a factor. In fact, it's surprising that a study of personal sovereignty would not include it, as race is a central organizing factor of human value, both within and across societies.

### THE CENTRAL ROLE OF RACE

The current Black Lives Matter movement, which started in the United States and has spread around the world, speaks to the urgency of looking at race. And though it started out specifically addressing the challenges Black people have defending their bodies, it quickly expanded to cover the other five domains.

Political scientist Mae Coates King sums up the centrality of race as an organizing force in the United States when she writes, "A basic and distinctive feature of the American political system became evident, namely, the primacy of the role of race in the acquisition and loss of power and status."<sup>22</sup>

Henricks sees one's status in society as critical to one's experience, and identifies four possible positionalities:

- Privilege—the possession of special rights
- Subordination—to be the object of obligations
- Marginality—separation from others
- Engagement—being fully engaged in reciprocal interactions with others<sup>23</sup>

The ideal positionality is engagement.

Low status, or to be the object of low opinions, manifests in the body as negative affects. Teresa Brennan, a former professor of mine at The New School for Social Research, pioneered affect theory. In *The Transmission of Affect*, she writes,

Pheromones act as direction-givers which, as molecules, traverse the physical space between one subject and another, and factor in or determine the direction taken by the subject who inhales or absorbs them.<sup>24</sup>

Brennan's brilliance is in infusing this observation from the field of neuroendocrinology with the role of power in relationships and how those are further shaped in stratified societies.

To be dominant in an interaction is to be able to off-load one's anxiety; and to be subordinate is to be compelled to upload the anxiety of others.

THRIVING DEPENDS NOT ONLY ON THE ABILITY TO PROTECT ONE'S BOUNDARIES  
BUT ALSO ON MAKING TRANSPARENT AND CROSSING THEM.

## *contacts*

Further, Brennan finds that negative affects accumulate, so that people who experience constant subordination have a harder time resisting them. This aligns with Nartova-Bochaver's observation that the more challenges a person faces with which she cannot cope, the less sovereignty she experiences.

Brennan writes, "the predominance of the affects means it is harder to struggle against them, and when the predominance is complete, one no longer knows that there is anything to struggle against."<sup>25</sup>

Like Nartova-Bochaver, Brennan focuses on gender. However, given the central role of race as a stratifying force in societies, we can see how important it is to examine it as a key site for understanding personal sovereignty.

### **BUILDING PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY**

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Nartova-Bochaver writes,

The boundaries of a person's space dictate his attitude to his social micro-and macroenvironment—to his family and friends, to his social and ethnic group, and to humanity. Whether he perceives the social environment as "his own" or as "foreign" determines the possibilities for the manifestation of constructive, life-creating tendencies that will make social boundaries transparent for him and take him across them.<sup>26</sup>

Here, she introduces the idea that thriving depends not only on the ability to protect one's boundaries but also on making transparent and crossing them. How does one do that? Nartova-Bochaver's sovereignty profile and Fry's demanding questions are a great start.

■ **These are the kinds of inquiries Edge Leadership is set up to explore. Stay tuned as we dig deeper into personal sovereignty and begin exploring the other four key edge characteristics. Go to Edge Leadership @ [edgeleadership.org](http://edgeleadership.org) to join the conversation.**

## *tastes & values*

## NOTES

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**CYNDI SUAREZ** is the *Nonprofit Quarterly's* president and editor in chief. She is the author of *The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics* (New Society Publishers, 2018), in which she outlines a new theory and practice of power. Suarez has worked as a strategy and innovation consultant with a focus on networks and platforms for social movements. Her studies were in feminist theory and organizational development for social change.

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