Preface

More than sixteen years ago, we wrote *The End of Sovereignty? The Politics of a Shrinking and Fragmenting World*,¹ to which in a sense this is a sequel. With the Cold War still coming to a close, we focused on the extent to which the widely accepted notion of a world of sovereign states was an accurate representation of the world as it was then emerging. Given the origins of the theory of state sovereignty and its role in political discourse, we questioned whether the theory usefully captured the complex economic and political reality of the twentieth century.

By examining a number of key areas of social organisation, we were able to offer a number of answers, some more tentative than others. Our conclusion, generally well received but still controversial at the time, was that state sovereignty was an increasingly misleading perspective for understanding either the world as it was, or as it could or should be. In the face of the already evident and relentless processes of integration and fragmentation, we suggested that while states would continue to retain many administrative and regulatory functions, ‘the theory of sovereignty [would] seem strangely out of place in a world characterised by shifting allegiances, new forms of identity and overlapping tiers of jurisdiction’.² In this gradually unfolding social landscape, the central issue was not so much the shape or size of political entities or even the demarcation of their boundaries, but ‘the very meaning of boundaries, the very nature of the political domain’.³

Much has happened since these words were written. The Cold War ended, but new insecurities emerged. The notion of a ‘globalising’ world became commonplace. So did our depiction of a world that was simultaneously ‘shrinking and fragmenting’. Technological innovation, notably the globalisation of information technology, and more broadly production and consumption, continued at a rapid pace. And the stresses on the natural environment, arising from all this activity, were now pressing further and faster towards a series of critical limits. Though, even then, we could see far enough to characterise this as a transitional period, we were not able to say much about trends in the social and political architecture that was under construction or the dynamic that was driving it.

In the intervening sixteen years, having reflected more sharply and taken into account the insights of others, we have come to see more clearly a number of defining trends. This book is the fruit of that reflection. It
benefits from much recent scholarship, but is equally indebted to many of the classical texts that have so enriched our understanding of the human journey. To make sense of the contemporary period, to grapple with its elusiveness and complexity, we have chosen to place it within the broad sweep of human history and at the same time to consider the concrete and at times quite detailed evidence which alone could establish the content and direction of this unique period of transition. In so doing we have sought to navigate a middle path between the extremes of generalisation and excessive focus on detail – one that combines an expansive conceptual architecture with close examination of current processes, policies and practices. The attempt to synthesise the theoretical and the empirical, the general and the particular, has added many pages to the book we had initially envisaged and several years to its preparation.

Others will no doubt be better placed to judge how well the analysis offered in this book illuminates an area of inquiry noted for its indeterminacy and contentiousness. In this enterprise we have been ably assisted at different times by Michael O’Keefe, George Myconos, Ben Zala, Luca Anceschi, Roger Bodman, Domenica Settle and Craig Bellamy whose efforts were invaluable. A special word of thanks goes to Kristian Camilleri for his painstaking reading of the manuscript and his insightful comments, and to Anna Falk for her skilful rendering of a number of the diagrams. We are also grateful to David Karoly, and Tilman Ruff, for helpful advice, to our publisher, Edward Elgar, for his patience and good humour, and to our colleagues (in the Department of Politics and the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University, Melbourne and the Australian Centre for Science, Innovation and Society at the University of Melbourne) for their support and understanding. We also wish to acknowledge the Australian Research Council ‘Discovery’ Grant, without which this study would not have seen the light of day. Last but not least, we are deeply indebted to our partners, Sue Rowley and Rita Camilleri, without whose intellectual and emotional support, our enthusiasm and capacity to explore the past and imagine the future would have been greatly diminished.

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NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 256.
3. Ibid., p. 250.