Jack Corbett (2023). *Statehood à la carte in the Caribbean and the Pacific: Secession, regionalism and postcolonial politics*. Oxford University Press. hbk. 266pp+biblio+index. ISBN: 978-0-19-286424-6. £83.00p.

It must be obvious that political self-determination is an empty goal or achievement unless it comes with, or leads to, economic development. However, judging by the outcomes of the decolonisation struggles of the latter half of the 20th century, the pursuit of political independence and sovereign statehood has been littered with failed development, indebtedness, corruption, mismanagement, ethnic strife and civil war, coups, military adventures and autocracy. Even for countries that have significant natural resources, their post-colonial situation leaves much to be desired. Many scholars continue to dissect the reasons behind these dashed hopes.

How much worse of a predicament then are the world's smallest countries and territories in? Welcome to a slate of jurisdictions with hardly anything worth selling, stymied by remoteness, insularity, archipelagicity, and diseconomies of scale, plus the looming threats of hurricanes or typhoons, global warming, and sea level rise. The earliest advice suggested avoiding the pitfall of independence to instead *either* seek assimilation and integration with(in) the metropole, as did French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Réunion, and later Mayotte in France; *or* band together with similarly challenged small political units, reaping some virtue from scaling up: think West Indies Federation; US Trust Territory of the Pacific (USTTP); St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla (StK-N-A).

But no – this was not to be. Barring the five French examples cited, dozens of small jurisdictions opted for an extraordinary and bespoke array of binary, 'core-periphery relations'. Attempts at a rational 'scaling up' were resisted and abandoned. Secession in the name of proto-ethnicity has been common. No political unit has been small enough to resist this 'Tuvalu effect': WIF, USTTP and StK-N-A got 'undone'. A flurry of (mostly island or archipelago) statelets emerged on the world stage as independent countries.

Another large number of small territories has instead preferred renegotiating their status with their patron state; the latter cooperating with this initiative but often doing so begrudgingly. From the metropolitan government's perspective, independence would have been a neater and final arrangement. But the small jurisdictions have other things in mind. For instance, the three sovereign states of the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau, which emerged from the USTTP, are 'hybrid' jurisdictions, having effectively 'offshored' their international relations capacity to the US, in exchange for a Compact Agreement. Since Brunei achieved independence in 1984, and in an increasingly uncertain world order, the rush by small units towards sovereign statehood has all but abated. Instead, during this 'infinite pause' (John Connell's apt phrase), we witness a strange 'upside down decolonisation', with the colonial territory refusing to seek or secure sovereignty. Albeit for different reasons, both Aruba and Montserrat rescinded from earlier intents towards full sovereignty.

Jack Corbett's latest solely-authored book grapples confidently with this scenario. The author has, in a few years, revolutionised the study of small states with his powerful analytic focus, supported by an encyclopaedic grasp of the relevant literature. Here, he walks us through so many interesting examples from the universe of small jurisdictions that speak to what he calls, the 'autonomy-viability dilemma'. There is no shortage of examples here: Corbett deftly adopts a comparative interpretative methodology to impose some conceptual order to the otherwise bewildering diversity of cases and narratives. Part I of the book consists of Chapters 2, 3 and 4 which focus on how the leaders of small jurisdictions have

proposed arguments for autonomy based on claims about sovereignty, identity, and territory respectively. Then, in Part II, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 dwell on how these same leaders have proposed arguments about viability based on claims about economic development, capacity, and uniformity.

The enduring sagas and relations of many small jurisdictions with their erstwhile or current colonial patrons is a far cry from the bloodied struggles for decolonisation and independence of many, larger states. Their lived experiences and international relations practices demand a theoretical framework that avoids the tacit assumptions of the classic paradigms of colonialism, including the alleged 'natural' aspiration of all colonies towards independence: something that the UN Committee on Decolonisation refuses to understand. And their economic predicament cannot simply be explained away with nods to vulnerability and impending doom. The residents of these small, often island, jurisdictions have obviously found a way to survive; and – in terms of economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product per capita – generally do so even better than the citizens of many larger countries. Of course, they may not 'make' much: but a specialisation in services – including finance, knowledge, tourism and rentier income – renders competitive advantage.

If we accept that there is no politics but only political economy, then we (and Corbett) must examine more deeply the *economic* consequences of small jurisdictions opting for sovereign statehood or a renegotiated sub-national status. Sub-national island jurisdictions prize access to their metropole: the island diaspora may even be larger than the number of islanders 'stranded' at home; these are linked in a wide nexus of people, money, gifts and cargo. International relations may dwell on privileged access of certain products to certain markets. Indeed, in those few cases where the metropole may *not* wish to let go of its dependency, prized natural resources may be a critical explanatory variable: consider Bougainville (in relation to Papua New Guinea) and New Caledonia (in relation to France). Does Greenland fall into a similar predicament?

This question is worth asking because Corbett stops short of a global analysis, preferring to restrict his canvas to 'core cases' from the Caribbean and Pacific. Perhaps he can turn to the Indian Ocean and the North Atlantic, as the two main regions missing from his analysis, in a future work.

In addition, the book's material in the index is mainly organised by case subject: from Anguilla to Yap. So, if one is interested in looking up, say, 'shipping registry', it does not have its own entry; instead, one will find that term listed under 'Marshall Islands'. Moreover, there is no author index. This arrangement can prove quite frustrating. I would urge that a revised index be considered for an eventual paperback edition of this though-provoking book.

That said, the absence of such practical tools does not detract from the intellectual clarity of the volume. Corbett's book does a fine job in addressing the tortuous issues under study, without the preconceived dogmas of mainstream dependency or decolonisation theory. He also reminds us that rational choice theory has its obvious limits: the extent and powers of political leaders in conjuring and imagining 'nations' – even in the smallest of places – can unleash history and translate into huge political dividends, and risks.

Godfrey Baldacchino
University of Malta
Malta
godfrey.baldacchino@um.edu.mt