

Fry, G. (2019). *Framing the islands: Power and diplomatic agency in Pacific regionalism*. Canberra, Australia: ANU Press. xvii+399pp. ISBN (print): 978-1-7604-6314-4. AUS\$55.00.

Greg Fry has dedicated a career at both the Australian National University and at the University of the South Pacific to studying Pacific regionalism and so there is nobody better qualified to write a book on the topic. *Framing the islands: Power and diplomatic agency in Pacific regionalism* is a wide ranging but empirically rich study of the ways that different sets of actors, from colonial era officials and independence leaders to civil society organisations and present-day politicians, have thought about the region and sought to institutionalise their vision of it. The main question that drives the book is: where does power lie? The answer is: in the contingent interactions between global trends, larger regional states, and island leaders. The latter have primarily viewed regionalism as a ‘society of states’ through which to pursue political agendas, including on environmental issues and decolonisation, and pool specific functional capacities (e.g. higher education or shipping). In contrast, larger states have favored security and economic liberalisation. The contest between these framings can explain varying outcomes over the last century.

The book contains 14 chapters. The empirical core is structured chronologically. It charts the way framings of regional projects have changed over the last century. Early framings were dominated by colonial officials, planters and merchants. Their preferred institutional mechanism for promoting regionalism was the South Pacific Commission (SPC) with its technical rather than political focus. Decolonisation was the backdrop against which independence leaders sought to challenge this model. Their activism led to the creation of the South Pacific Forum in 1971. Later decades saw a greater diversity of actors and interests due to the emergence of a regional civil society, especially around nuclear and gender issues. More recently the region has served as a key means of achieving coordinated action on climate change. Fry continues the themes he first developed with Sandra Tarte on the ‘New Pacific Diplomacy’ here. The phrase captures the desire of island leaders to project a Pacific voice in global governance.

Key disputes include membership of regional institutions and the role of non-sovereign territories and larger states such as Australia, New Zealand and the US in regional projects. The latter have continued to see regionalism primarily as a technical mechanism, similar to the old SPC, for ensuring stability and overcoming issues of diseconomies of scale. Examples of this framing over recent decades include the RAMSI intervention in Solomon Islands, the 2005 Pacific Plan, and the PACER Plus negotiations around trade liberalisation. Other key points of contention include the influence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, nuclearisation, Fiji and the role of its military in domestic affairs over several decades, and more recently the increased presence of China. For the most part, Fry sees island leaders and larger states as being on opposite sides of these debates. This account has strengths but it is less clear how this juxtaposition would explain more recent events, such as the 2021 decision by Micronesian countries to withdraw from the Forum.

For *SST* readers, *Framing the islands* should be read alongside works such as Tony Payne’s 2008 political history of CARICOM and Patsy Lewis’ 2002 study of regional integration in the Eastern Caribbean. Indeed, Payne’s influence on this text is warmly acknowledged and evident throughout. The advantage of reading them together is that each highlights the common paradox

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of regionalism to small island communities: integration should assist them to overcome inherent challenges associated with diseconomies of scale; but, for the most part, these projects tend to buttress the nation state as the primary unit of politics rather than supersede it. Comparison also hints at variation between these regional initiatives: this approach helps to answer why the history, political economy and geography of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States in particular has facilitated a level of integration that broader Caribbean and Pacific regional institutions have thus far struggled to generate. Oceania is vast; and colonial legacies, modern economies and political systems vary considerably. There is some common ground, especially on environmental issues; but there are many more areas of divergence and disagreement. Each makes framing regional projects difficult.

My main critical comment on *Framing the islands* is that Chapter Two claims to offer a theoretical framework but instead reads as a list approaches that shed light on some aspects of the story. Having been introduced, these approaches then effectively disappear from the rest of the text. The book would have been better served if it had either tried to evaluate them, provided its own framework and then structured the empirical story to substantiate it, or more consciously embraced its roots in area studies. The former course might have made more of the idea that Islanders see the region as a ‘society of states’. The latter route in particular would have more clearly showcased the book’s core contribution: providing a history of the way people have thought about the collective governance of an area variously called the South Seas, the South Pacific, the Pacific Islands, Oceania and most recently the Blue Pacific. In the end we are left with something in-between: an attempt to show where power lies and how agency is exercised by Islanders in particular, without a clear theoretical basis from which to understand what either of those two concepts mean.

A theory chapter that is somewhat disconnected from the main text is by no means a fatal flaw. Rather, it felt like a distraction from what is otherwise a compelling narrative expertly told. As a history of the beliefs that generations of actors have held about Pacific regionalism, the book succeeds remarkably well. It is a must read for anybody thinking about or working in the Pacific and will deservedly be recognized as the foundational text on this topic for decades to come.

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