

Harry Hobbs and George Williams (2022). *Micronations and the search for sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. x+256pp. Online. ISBN: 978-1-0091-5013-2.

What makes a state, a state? This definitional question has generated a lot of debate among the *SST* community. By and large, we have tended to endorse subjective understandings and follow maxims like ‘we know a small state when we see one’, while at the same time employing practical cut-offs for the purpose of comparison (e.g. 1 million population). Such cut-offs have enabled researchers to distinguish between their cases and the work of scholars on ‘large’ states and territories. *Micronations and the search for sovereignty* forces us to look the other way: is there something smaller than a small state? And by smaller I do not mean microstates, a term often employed to differentiate countries with populations under 100,000, or even their semi-autonomous jurisdictions (e.g. Tobago, Barbuda, or Nevis in the Caribbean). Micronations, Hobbs and Williams claim, are ‘a non-state entity that adopts the trappings of a state, perhaps as a parody of a state or perhaps in defiance of it’ (p. 80). Or more evocatively, micronations are “imaginary states ruled by eccentric men in faux royal garb with a bevy of pretend military medals on their chest” (p. 72).

Chapter One fully embraces the eccentric men – yes, so far, micronations are all led by men – with pompous titles and military garb theme. It comprises three vignettes: (1) Roy Bates, whose Principality of Sealand claims territorial jurisdiction over a decommissioned artificial naval installation located off the coast of Essex in the River Thames estuary; (2) Prince Leonard Casley of the Principality of Hutt River, a 75 km² wheat farm in Western Australia that declared war against the Commonwealth of Australia in 1977; and (3) Lord Dumpling II (also known as Dean Kamen, the inventor of the Segway) of the Kingdom of North Dumpling, a small island one mile off the coast of Connecticut, USA, who secured a non-aggression pact from his friend, former US President George H.W. Bush, even though the United States does not officially recognise the Kingdom. There are many more, wonderfully colourful vignettes in *Micronations and the search for sovereignty*. They include: the Republic of Minerva, the nation of Abalonia, the Principality of New Utopia, and the Principality of Marlborough. Readers can consult the 15-page Appendix for a full list. This book is undoubtedly the definitive text on these cases, containing unmatched empirical breadth, a serious attempt to differentiate types of micronations, and a full chapter (Three) on their leaders’ motivations. But, aside from adding welcome fun and colour to the solemn study of statehood, what else is there to learn from these cases that might help answer the ‘what makes a state, a state’ question?

The other four chapters take us closer to an answer. Chapter Two is concerned with the definition of statehood under international law. The authors, both lawyers, find considerable ambiguity. Declarative theories posit criteria – e.g. the Montevideo Convention – but, as *SST* readers know, there is great diversity in the size of states, and there are a number of entities who are recognised as having some sovereignty despite not meeting all of the criteria, too. Constitutive theories rest on recognition and thus have the potential to exacerbate conflict and rationalise colonialism. Normative arguments aside, Chapter Two identifies an empirical spectrum, with large and powerful states that clearly meet any criteria on one end, and “semi-legitimate places” (p. 73) whose leaders claim sovereignty over a territory (even if it is not accepted by others) and entities like the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, which are recognised as sovereign but have no territory, on the other. The author’s main takeaway from this survey of the diversity of state forms is that micronations are a different category altogether: they are not states because they have no credible legal basis and typically remain under the legal authority of another state (although secessionist movements are often defined in similar terms by the unitary state they wish to break away from).

A key puzzle is why micronationalists, including those with avowed libertarian philosophies, cloak their movements in the garb of legalese in the first place. Chapter Four argues that such claims, whether spurious or downright absurd, are the only means by which these movements can gain legitimacy. Their search for legitimacy involves considerable mimicry, from the aforementioned titles and medals to letterheads, stamps, coins, passports and diplomatic representations. The point is that micronations somewhat unexpectedly tend to act through the law rather than directly contradict it, a pattern of behaviour that somewhat ironically further differentiates them from the largest and most powerful states who have much more scope to pick and choose when they act lawfully.

So far, so interesting. But it still does not answer the ‘what makes a state, a state’ question. Chapter Five comes closest. It interrogates how ‘real’ states respond “from forcible and violent suppression, to ignoring their declarations of independence and performative assertions of sovereignty, to playing along with their bizarre or eccentric claims” (p. 199). The point is that, while micronations are mostly harmless oddities whose actions only impact on their few subjects, they can cause bigger problems for ‘real’ states, either because they catalyse conflict between them or because they enable illicit activities, ranging from conventional crime to tax evasion. Indeed, many of the (already small) jurisdictions studied by *SST* readers would have been approached – and will most likely continue to be tempted – by wealthy persons or business consortia offering considerable sums of money to establish micronations in their territory in order to facilitate their engagement in these types of activities. In such cases, the resources of micronations can dwarf those small states whose sovereignty is internationally recognised.

The central theme of failure is probably the key reason why the book struggles mightily to move from a fascinating description of these cases and the differences between them to broader lessons. As Chapter Six summarises, unlike more conventional secessionist movements mentioned in Chapter Two, micronations never become states, nor do the authors expect they will in the future. Their use of sovereign symbols and legalese, and their ability to provoke a reaction from ‘real’ states, provides empirical support for claims that statehood is a subjective category, even if the authors shy away from embracing this as a normative position.

In doing so, *Micronations and the search for sovereignty* is another important contribution to the growing body of literature on the diversity of sovereign forms and the multiplicity of pathways to and types of statehood. But it also demonstrates the limits of simply acknowledging and documenting diversity. The post-WWII principle of self-determination can be interpreted as affording sovereignty to any who seek it; but, in reality, only a fraction of those who claim it are recognised. These cases are the extreme and thus their main function for scholars, aside from introducing a welcome light-heartedness, is that they force “renewed consideration [of] why some political communities are accepted as states, and others are not” (p. 218). *Micronations and the search for sovereignty* ultimately opts for an in-depth description of these cases rather than using the empirical material to theorise an answer to the ‘what makes a state, a state’ question, even if the inherent subjectivity of statehood appears to be implied throughout.

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