

Fred Constant (2024). *Overseas territories in world affairs: Linking up subnational, national and international politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. Hbk. 177pp+ bibliography+ index. ISBN: 978-3-031-64232-6. €39.99 (e-book version available at €12.99)

I have a lot of sympathy for Dr Fred Constant; in a way – and I hope he does not mind me saying so – he could be my French double. He is five weeks younger than me. He is a career academic and political scientist who also served for a while in the diplomatic corps of his country. He is adamant on bridging the (still troubling) linguistic divide between French and English language scholarship, particularly on small states and territories. And he adopts a global, rather than a narrowly regional or national, focus.

True to form, his 2024 book is a translation of an earlier, French language monograph on the contribution of subnational, mainly small, island jurisdictions to the understanding of contemporary politics and international relations. Now, this may sound like an oxymoron: how much could small, sometimes *very* small, non-sovereign island units impact on world affairs? The answer is: a lot, actually: a growing paradiplomatic clout places them amid regional tensions and great power competition, where they must permanently stave off being used as stooges and fronts for other powers, be these metropolitan patron states or ‘the new kid on the block’ (read: China). The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea has gifted them with immense tracts of ocean and their marine and submarine resources, but they may lack the internal capacity to manage these. Their unique evolutionary paths mean that they can offer spellbinding ecological beauty and natural diversity – the basis of a burgeoning tourism industry – which is concurrently fragile and vulnerable to environmental threats and human-exacerbated invasions, despoliations and extinctions. Their far-flung locations assume the symbolic status of projecting state power – coveted as forward bastions of military might – as well as safe, detached, ‘out of sight’ fragments where certain experiments can unfold, including the testing of nuclear weapons.

Thus, Constant presents us with this fantastic *tour de force* of the world’s subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) – a term he adopts from my own work – sharing with us some of their stories which, by definition, involve relations with their patron/metropolitan state. In SNIJs, ‘what goes on’ invariably blends local and global; the domestic and the international. Typically, the smaller the island, the greater the significance of what, elsewhere, would have been dismissed as externalities. The sheer number of these SNIJs – adding up to over a hundred, if one also counts the island constituents of the world’s federated states – means that there are many voices out there, flexing their presence and impacting upon the international system...albeit sometimes getting a rap on the hand for doing so in ways that irk their patron. Constant chooses to zoom in on 30 of these island and archipelagic units, ranging from Hong Kong (resident population: around 8 million) to Niue (around 1,700).

After a solid conceptual introduction, the book is organised into four neat sections, with three chapters in each. Part I (Chapters 2-4) deals with the ‘invention’ of the overseas territories. Some of these island societies were not just discovered by Europeans, but established by them; while others were brutally conquered. Part II (Chapters 5-7) deals with geopolitical virtues in a globalised world, including geo-economic resources. Part III (Chapters 8-10) covers the local checks on geo-political assignments, where citizen activism is highlighted. Part IV (Chapters 11-13) deals with the SNIJs’ ambivalent status on the political stage, practising paradiplomacy, and toying with affiliation and degrees of self-determination. Each contribution is a stand-alone chapter, with its own abstract (but without its own set of references).

Constant’s epilogue offers his readers a short, final reflection, wherein three recent (2023-2024) events make a cameo: political turmoil in Kanaky/New Caledonia; a historic speech by (now, the former) Greenlandic Prime Minister; and more public protests in Mayotte, the latest French

territory to be fully departmentalised. Other than its obvious intention, I welcome this ‘update’ for two main reasons: first, it alerts us to the *dynamic* nature of mainland-island relations. Indeed, the situation in Greenland has become so much more dynamic since 2024! The project for more (or better) autonomy continues, and not just for as long as the SNIJ remains a non-independent, non-sovereign state: recent agreements between Australia and both Tuvalu and Nauru have shown that sovereignty can be deployed and ‘surpassed’ – to use David Rezvani’s term – to seek shelter with larger states. Second, it foregrounds how fractures in the ‘social contract’ between the SNIJ and the metropole can boil over and, sadly, descend into violence. Most seriously of all are ‘settler societies’, where still-identifiable ‘natives’ and Indigenous communities risk being overrun by ‘settlers’ and, thus, becoming disenfranchised in their own (is)land. Kanaky/ New Caledonia is the most critical current example of this.

My main gripe with this great little monograph is that its conclusion is simply too short and succinct. Constant could have said so much more, especially about where all this dynamism is going. SNIJs are here to stay. Indeed, they, and not classic sovereign states, seem to be the ‘jurisdictions of choice’ in (and of) the 21st century. Their paradiplomatic efforts can only increase, widen, and deepen. With what results? And how do different metropolitan powers respond? Is it plausible to expect states like Denmark, which are themselves small, to ‘fully collaborate’ on a path that *may* lead to full sovereignty – or perhaps associated statehood – for their SNIJ affiliates (Greenland and Faroes)? And how would the world’s two imperial powers – France and the United States – deal with and respond to such developments?

Additionally, there is just one (quite badly reproduced) map in the book, with quite illegible text; and no tables and figures at all. This emphasis on ‘just text’ dampens the pedagogical impact and user-friendly appeal of the book.

That said: Constant is a seasoned academic and an accomplished diplomat. He does not mince his words, however. He intuitively understands how metropolitan initiatives, even if well-meaning, can exasperate and disappoint SNIJ citizens. These are generally in favour of secure and steady steps towards (more) self-determination; but such initiatives need to be done *with* and *by* them, not *for* them. SNIJ citizens can grow increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of change and the failure to address the ‘development gap’: and so, for many of their youth, the future still lies elsewhere. Such an exodus, with its underlying psychology, can introduce a vicious cultural spiral of hopelessness and despair.

I keenly recommend *Overseas territories in world affairs* to scholars and students of international relations, political geography and small states studies for its timely and critical insights on the paradiplomatic activities of subnational island jurisdictions.

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