

Simpson, A. W. (2021). *A theory of dysfunctionality: The European microstates as dysfunctional states in the international system*. xvi+262pp. Hbk. Wilmington DE: Vernon Press. ISBN: 978-1-6488-9016-1. €52.

If one subscribes to the neo-realist perspective in international relations, then a state's capacity to 'act like one' is a critical and necessary feature of a functioning state. Granted. However, what exactly then are the essential characteristics of a state? Such that, if a state is unable to exercise or guarantee, from its own resources, one or more of these characteristics, it can then, according to this book, be called dysfunctional – with an 'i' and not 'y', so the term simply means 'lacking' without also implying a demeaning or pejorative judgement.

According to Simpson, one problem of microstates – sovereign states with populations of less than one million - is that "they are unable to fully perform or carry out [six specific functions] *without recourse to others* in the international system" (p. 87, emphasis in original). These functions are: military/defence; membership of the international system; economics; internal order; infrastructure-communications and nation-sustaining (p. 3). Simpson's key hypothesis is that microstates, by definition, do not fully perform one or more of these functions. Implicit to this hypothesis is that states, by virtue of their sovereignty and the neo-realist principle of self-help, should provide these functions from internal and domestic resources. Not doing so renders them 'anomalous'.

When a hypothesis is laid out so rationally, expect eyebrows to be raised and issues to be flagged. Indeed, one would perhaps like to know which states actually perform all these six functions. Tuvalu may be the world's smallest island state by population; but its 'internal order' function is more robust than that of many, fairly large states. One can go on. Simpson is brave to make such assertions because he is exposing himself to some serious criticism. And perhaps that is the whole point behind this neat little book.

The book, and the theory that bears its name, is the author's research output while a student at the UK universities of Hull and Aberdeen. It delivers a comprehensive and up-to-date review of the small state literature; proceeds to explain 'the theory of dysfunctionality' as well as that of 'sovereignty' in Chapters 2, 3 and 4; and then reviews the characteristics of nine European microstates: Andorra, Cyprus, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, San Marino and Vatican City. Chapters 5 and 6 are case studies of the Principality of Liechtenstein and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Chapter 7 concludes the study.

Given this context, we should not be surprised that the epistemic framework of the work is driven by notions of state behaviour that are inspired by the practices of fairly large (now post-colonial) states, like the UK. To provide an example of this, take the notions of military/defence: the expectation is that a state, for it to be sovereign, is to have the necessary human and technological assets to defend itself, presumably from external invasion. Otherwise, it is "dysfunctional", and would have outsourced or subcontracted this function, deemed essential, to some other power. For example, says Simpson, "the US is responsible for the defence of Iceland". And yet: is this really so? I write as the citizen of a small state with neutrality and non-alignment enshrined in its constitution and whose armed forces – yes, Malta has them – are essentially a search and rescue outfit, now mainly engaged in dealing with undocumented migrants crossing the Mediterranean sea in rickety boats. The thing is: I take objection to having Malta, my country, called 'dysfunctional' just because its state does not conform to the characteristics of much larger jurisdictions; including Simpson's own country. Malta does not contract out its defence:

it presumes a peaceful Mediterranean region, where the potential for armed conflict is not met by a build-up of military capability but by negotiation and arbitration. Moreover, the author should look more deeply at the compelling reasons why, for example, San Marino and Liechtenstein have survived over many centuries: they provide vital ‘offshore’ services to the citizens or governments of larger neighbouring states.

Indeed, I would argue that small states, and their behaviour, constitute the *norm* in the current international system. The mean size of a state today, by population, is just over 5 million. It is only around a dozen large states that project significant military power in the world today that are ‘anomalous’; they may need their armed forces even to assure domestic stability and non-regime change within their own large country, often comprising multiple ethnic minorities or national groups. These are also often the same countries that can depend on the domestic provision of such essential goods as “fuel, food, water” (p. 201). Are these states expecting other, smaller countries to behave in the same way? But: why should they? When states stop imports, they encourage non-competitive local substitutes, while dampening international trade. If they were to disarm, might the threat of war and invasion subside and de-escalate? If Simpson holds the self-sufficient state as his gold standard, then does he envisage Cuba under embargo as his model? It seems to me that the truly self-sufficient state, if it were to exist, is the anomaly.

Additionally, Simpson boldly suggests that his suite of 41 disfunctional small states lies some way along a continuum between functional and non-functional states (p. 4). Once again, I find myself unable to stomach such a wild claim, and its implications. If the claim holds, then the world’s ‘failed states’ should largely consist of microstates. Yet, this is not so: we may disagree that Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan and Venezuela are all failed states; but we should agree that none of these is a microstate. Perhaps the only very small ‘failed’ state, that also involved an external intervention in recent history, was the Solomon Islands. The evidence is clear: smaller states are *more* likely to be stable democracies than larger states.

Finally, Simpson refers multiple times to the question of “the proliferation of microstates” (p. 202) on the world stage, also as partly a justification for why the world today should be interested in the smallest of states – and, therefore, also in his book. There are, indeed, dozens of subnational jurisdictions with the potential to request and secure statehood; while other national groups may yet clamour for independence. It seems to me that one of the main reasons why most of these entities do not press for statehood is precisely because many services that they would otherwise have to pay for and equip themselves are currently being handled by other governments and from other sources of tax revenue. There is therefore nothing really “anomalous” about the practice described as dysfunctionality: a type of piggy-backing on someone else’s largesse. The provision is not one-sided but also functional to the patron state, since the exercise of such patronage bestows national pride and allows an expansion and projection of state power.

By now, it is amply clear that this is a polemical text: rich in data – the appendices and list of references are notably thorough – and redolent with controversy. It merits being debated by those reviewing principles of statehood in international relations and political science.

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