

Ulf Hannerz & Andre Gingrich (Eds.) (2017). *Small countries: Structures and sensibilities*. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. 346pp, hbk, ISBN: 978-0-2959-8524-4. €65.00.

Even after the ‘constructivist turn’ in international relations, the spectre of explaining all questions of smallness in terms of material capabilities and interstate power differentials still haunts the subfield of small state studies to some extent, despite widespread acknowledgement that such explanations are ultimately unsatisfactory. This is because they tend to deprive small states of agency; which the empirical record suggests to be an invalid assumption. As anthropologists, the contributors to *Small countries: Structures and sensibilities* are not hampered by the intellectual legacy of pre-constructivist IR and instead ask themselves questions that are typical for their field: under which conditions do people perceive their country as ‘small’? In what ways do people attach meaning to living in a small country? How do they cope? What are the consequences of smallness in everyday lives? If they are serious about acknowledging and analysing small state agency, small states scholars would do well to grapple with these questions, too; and *Small countries* provides a good starting point.

The volume opens with an extensive introduction by the editors. Hannerz and Gingrich do a commendable job making sense of the rather disparate findings of the contributing authors; not by trying to force them all into a tight theoretical framework that could never do justice to the wide bouquet of complexities and context-dependent implications of smallness unearthed in this volume; but by pondering plausible avenues of systematisation, without making a firm commitment to any. It may be that the international (structural) constellation matters: smallness may be lived differently, depending on whether there is only one large significant Other to the small Self, whether there are several, or whether there are not really any at all. The Wittgensteinian notion of ‘family resemblances’ (no two members of the family are exactly alike, but family members do resemble others in certain traits; and this overlapping web of resemblances delineates the family) might be helpful in making sense of the meaning of smallness; or perhaps the focus should be on the paradoxes of small-scale societies (more coherent and flexible on the one hand, more prone to nepotism and groupthink on the other) – or on the spatial implications of being a very remote island or a small population on a vast stretch of land, versus the cramped, bustling city-state whose borders are always nearby. Finally, history may play a role: what happens when your country was once much bigger than it is now? The advantage of this approach is that it encourages readers to make up their own mind about what is relevant, in their view, making it a versatile building block for further research.

As helpful and thoughtful as the introduction is, the true strength of the volume lies in its sixteen individual chapters, loosely grouped into five parts to provide some coherence. The vast majority of the chapters (covering some twenty small states, from the ‘usual suspects’ like the Scandinavian countries, to less well-trodden paths like Belize or Sierra Leone) are well-written, easy and even fun to read – and all of them draw on excellent, in-depth knowledge and field experience. The black box of small-state societies gets convincingly unpacked, giving way to a rich analysis that does not shy away from portraying dissent, contestation, and collective embarrassments within these societies. To cite but some examples: Cris Shore’s contribution on New Zealand highlights the contradictory juxtapositions of imagining the country as small in some ways but large in others (p. 51), and the way New Zealanders deal with the frictions inevitably resulting from such juxtapositions from time to time, including when attempts at nation branding (“New Zealand: 100% Pure!”) go awry due to food safety scandals. Regina Bendix examines two ostensibly very similar countries in a similar

environment, were it not for one conspicuous difference: Switzerland has always been and felt small, whereas Austria “grew to imperial dimensions that mentally reverberate in its shrunken terrain” (p. 175). What results from this is an active, can-do sense of self in the former, and a passive, occasionally lamenting voice that looks at the latter through a filter of “formerly known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire” (p. 176). Likewise, João de Pina-Cabral and Aleksandar Bošković discuss the implications of shrinking in the cases of Portugal and Serbia, respectively. The perception of Portugal’s smallness remains of an expansive nature, focusing on elements such as Lusophony and past naval glory, to some extent transcending the traditional categories of ‘nation’ and ‘state’; while Serbians, struggling with their country’s recent shrunken condition, still imagine Serbia to be larger than Greece, despite being smaller in area, population size, and size of the economy (p. 199). The chapter by Gingrich, Al-Dubai and Kamal unveils how the topic of smallness is addressed in Palestine and Yemen through jokes and witty riddles, often of a self-deprecating nature, as a device to cope with a sense of embarrassment over the two countries’ smallness.

All these chapters use ethnographic and other qualitative methodologies (typical of anthropological scholarship), with an emphasis on imaginaries, narratives, alterity, and similar discursive practices. Consequently, the volume makes for a marvellous, multifaceted peek into the full richness of the issue; but it does so at the expense of generalisability. That means that scholars looking for definitive and universally true answers about the everyday impact of smallness across the world, or even merely within the countries explored, will likely be disappointed by *Small countries*. However, those starting from the viewpoint that the meaning and consequences of smallness are highly idiosyncratic, complex, and dependent on context – and therefore not reducible to a parsimonious theoretical framework – will find a treasure trove of excellent and well-researched chapters painting an intricate picture of the structures and sensibilities within small-state societies, accompanied by an extensive and highly plausible introduction to tie it all together.

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