

– Feature Review –

HARRY HOBBS & GEORGE WILLIAMS’ *MICRONATIONS AND THE SEARCH FOR SOVEREIGNTY* (2021)

[Received March 7th 2022; accepted March 11th 2022 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.159]

Vicente Bicudo de Castro

Deakin University <v.bicudodecastro@deakin.edu.au>

The study of micronationality has gained momentum in the last decade thanks to the efforts of journals such as *Shima*. Despite the increasing number of articles regarding micronations being published, there is a dearth of books regarding this topic. Therefore, Hobbs & Williams’ *Micronations and the Search for Sovereignty* (2021) should be welcomed as a building block for research into micronations as it provides an in-depth examination of this phenomenon. The authors draw on their expertise in international law to offer a definition of what a micronation is and discuss how micronations differ from entities such as microstates, entities with limited or no recognition, and internationally recognised sovereign non-state entities. Such a definition is useful because it narrows the subject matter and avoids connotations, improving the focus of studies about micronations.

The relevance of a discussion that distinguishes micronations from entities with limited or no recognition is timely with regard to the current conflict in the Ukraine. The Donbas region on the Ukrainian-Russian border has been politically unstable since the Russian occupation of Crimea (Nikolko, 2019; Oleinikova, 2019) and saw two areas of eastern Ukraine with largely Russian populations declare themselves the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” in 2014 and subsequently maintain that claim despite no external recognition of their legitimacy. These regions subsequently crossed the threshold of recognition when Russia recognised them and then used these entities as a pretext in the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. These “people’s republics” are significantly different from more rhetorical entities, such as the Sovereign Yidindji Government, in Australia, which claims an area of north-east Queensland (Hobbs & Williams, 2021a)¹. Despite this micronation’s talks with the Russian embassy in Canberra to “discuss issues related to Yidindji culture and Indigenous disadvantage” (Daley, 2016), it is inconceivable that such engagement will produce any development of similar magnitude.

This feature review provides an overview of *Micronations and the Search for Sovereignty* and highlights the value of this book for readers of this journal, scholars and general audiences. The book has 256 pages comprising six chapters and one appendix. Pleasingly, despite being authored by legal scholars the book is written in a lively and accessible style, avoiding losing itself in technicalities and legal terminology. The first chapter is an introduction dedicated to the idiosyncrasies of three micronations, the Principality of Sealand, the Principality of Hutt River, and the Kingdom of North Dumpling, and sets the

¹ See <https://www.yidindji.org/>

tone of what readers should expect of this book. The largest section of the book, chapter 2, is dedicated to the topic of statehood and micronations. This chapter begins with a discussion regarding statehood and international law, followed by a proposed statehood spectrum. The discussion then shifts beyond the statehood spectrum and, finally, building on the breadth and depth of all items discussed, arrives at a section dedicated to what micronations are. The third chapter is an expanded version of a previous publication by the authors, Hobbs & Williams (2021b), dedicated to examining the motivations leading to the establishment of micronations. The fourth chapter is about performing sovereignty and provides a throughout discussion regarding the search for legitimacy, followed by a section discussing the mimicry of statehood. The fifth chapter presents a captivating discussion regarding state responses and the sixth discusses themes related to the future of micronationalism. An appendix then provides a list of micronations. While the chapters can be read as standalone pieces, one drawback of this compartmentalisation is that the content of the book becomes slightly repetitive in parts.

It is worth noting that Hobbs & Williams identify *Shima's* Micronationality anthology (2022) as a scholarly resource for the field, evidencing the extent to which this journal has contributed to research on this topic. Consequently, the book draws on many of *Shima* articles, namely Butkus (2014), Bicudo de Castro and Kober (2019), Grydehøj (2014), Hayward (2018), Khamis and Hayward (2015), MacKinnon (2014), Royle (2014), and Bicudo de Castro and Kober (2018).²

In order to highlight the value of Hobbs & Williams' work, it is pertinent to examine three prior books on micronationalism, namely, *How to start your own country* (Strauss, 1999), *Micronations: the Lonely Planet guide to home-made nations* (Ryan et al., 2006) and *Let's split!: A complete guide to separatist movements and aspirant nations, from Abkhazia to Zanzibar* (Roth, 2015). *How to start your own country* was first published in 1985 and is thought-provoking (and borderline subversive to nation states). The different approaches Strauss outlines lead to different types of new-country projects and he ponders the costs and benefits of each approach and their overall chances of success. Strauss then lists and describes, albeit often briefly and with very few pictures, more than a hundred new-country projects, occasionally referring to how each project fits into the approaches presented. It is little wonder the book became a seminal text for micronationalists in the pre-Internet era. *Micronations: the Lonely Planet guide to home-made nations* is a travel guide book focussing on more than fifty micronations. Following the typical structure of a travel guide, this book has colour photographs and micronations' maps, flags, and stamps. There are plenty of facts, figures, cultural information, things to see and do, and how to get to the destinations concerned. *Let's Split!* is a mammoth work with more than 600 pages with an extensive list of separatist, nationalist, and independence movements and an outstanding number of maps and flags; the list includes, but is far from limited to, micronations.

The advantages of the work of Hobbs & Williams' volume over previous books becomes apparent with regard to the uniqueness of the topic discussed in Chapter 4 ('Performing Sovereignty') and in Chapter 2's concentrated analysis of statehood and micronationality.

² In the context of this review, it is also worth directing readers to another recent resource, issue 35 (2021) of the journal *Transformations*, entitled 'Autonomous/Anomalous', which includes case studies of micronations such as the Principality of Pontinha (Bicudo de Castro & Hayward, 2021), the Kingdom of Tavolara (Farinelli, 2021), the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean (Gardinetti & Vézina, 2021), the Japanese experience with micronations (Streich, 2021), and an imbroglio regarding a floating cabin anchored in the Andaman Sea near Thailand (Simpson, 2021).

Informed by their legal expertise, Chapter 4 examines the legal justifications that individuals who create their own country offer, with a detailed discussion regarding the use of the Magna Carta, the Antarctic Treaty, the Law of the Sea, the doctrine of *terra nullius*, and other assertions of historic legitimacy used by micronationalists. Chapter 4's discussion of the performance of sovereignty is a major advance on Strauss's discussion regarding the different approaches and chances of success on how to start your own country. While Strauss's book provides a list of reasons as to why people create their own country, these ideas are presented in a fairly disorganised manner. Roth (2015) and Ryan et al. (2006) are quite rich in information, flags, maps, and pictures however, they lack a critical analysis of the topic.

Chapter 2's discussion of statehood and micronations is not unique to this book. For instance, Roth (2015) and Ryan et al. (2006) both have a brief discussion regarding what a micronation is and how it differs from nations with disputed or indisputably real claims for nation status. However, the legal expertise of Hobbs & Williams elevates their discussion of statehood and their understanding of how developments in international law have affected notions of international legal personality. An overarching definition of what comprises a micronation has proven elusive to previous authors, who have acknowledged a difference between micronations and sovereign states but not able to specifically pinpoint what it is, e.g., Ryan et al. (2006, p. 5) state "we're not touching Taiwan or West Papua with a bargepole". Hobbs & Williams' reflection of how the statehood spectrum relates to micronations is, thereby, valuable. Within the statehood spectrum, there are comprehensive discussions regarding what comprises of microstates, 'disappearing' states, entities with limited or no recognition, internationally recognised sovereign non-state entities, and indigenous nations. Beyond the statehood spectrum, the authors discuss intentional communities, free cities and economic zones, and sovereign citizens. Finally, the authors analyse why micronations are not states for the purposes of international law and, building on the breadth and depth of the discussion, come up with a definition of what is a micronation:

self-declared nations that perform and mimic acts of sovereignty, and adopt many of the protocols of nations, but lack a foundation in domestic and international law for their existence and are not recognised as nations in domestic or international forums. (Hobbs & Williams, 2021, p. 76)

The definition of a micronation proposed by Hobbs & Williams is convenient because it provides elements of what micronations *do* (e.g., mimic acts of sovereignty, adopt protocols of nations, etc.) and set the boundaries of what micronations *are* – or, rather, *are not* (i.e., are not recognised as nations). It is a useful definition but being labelled a "micronation" remains a stigma for entities that are striving for international recognition, e.g., the previously mentioned Sovereign Yidindji Government (Hobbs & Williams, 2021a).

The remainder of the book follows the overarching message but lacks the uniqueness or contribution examined in Chapters 2 and 4. For instance, Chapter 3 ('Motivations') is an expanded version of Hobbs & Williams (2021b), dedicated to examining the motivations leading to the establishment of micronations. It should also be noted that Chapter 5 ('State Responses') has merit for exploring the responses of recognised sovereign states through a detailed collection of bizarre events related to micronations (such as gun battles, declarations of war and offshore platforms being dynamited), showing to what extent sovereign states can threaten micronations when their *status quo* is challenged.

Hobbs & Williams keep the tone set in the first chapter throughout the book. Reaching the final chapter, the authors provide a quite pragmatic view regarding micronationalism when pondering the paradox of defining a micronation as an entity that is not recognised as a nation while acknowledging that micronations strive for some sort of recognition:

At one level, it might appear that this book has told a story about failure... While the likelihood that a micronation will achieve real sovereignty is remote, success should be judged in light of each individual micronation's motivations and intentions, not in respect of the impossible dream of statehood. (Hobbs & Williams, 2021, pp. 213-214)

Hobbs & Williams thereby do a good service to scholars in transmitting the message that research regarding micronations should not focus on whether micronations are able to succeed in their search for sovereignty, but rather on how micronationalism is *performed* (Hayward, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; MacKinnon, 2014). Following this message, the themes, and discussion presented in the final chapter can be seen as potential future research topics. It is worth noting that the appendix with a list of micronations may assist in contextualising the micronations discussed throughout the book but, as noted by the authors, readers interested in an updated and comprehensive list of micronations should check online platforms. It is also of note the book does not have pictures or illustrations such as flags and maps, which is understandable, as the aim of the book is to discuss the overarching phenomenon of micronationalism leaning towards the context of international law. Consequently, the book lacks a discussion regarding the close association between vexillology/vexillogical imagination in creating visual symbols that appear to legitimise micronational claims (see Bicudo de Castro & Hayward, 2021; Hayward, 2019b) and readers looking for pictures or illustrations of flags and maps should check Ryan et al. (2006) and Roth (2015).

Micronations and the Search for Sovereignty is an interesting read for a general audience and a must for scholars interested in micronationalism since Hobbs & Williams achieve their goal by presenting a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of micronationalism, developing a rich body of material through which to reflect on conventional understandings of micronations, statehood, sovereignty, and legitimate authority.

REFERENCES:

- Bicudo de Castro, V., & Hayward, P. (2021). The metamorphosis of Madeira's Ilhéu do Diego into Forte de São José and the short-lived Principado do Ilhéu da Pontinha. *Transformations*, 35, 40-51.
- Bicudo de Castro, V., & Kober, R. (2018). The Principality of Hutt River: A territory marooned in the Western Australian outback. *Shima*, 12(1), 143-159.
- Bicudo de Castro, V., & Kober, R. (2019). The Royal Republic of Ladonia: A Micronation built of driftwood, concrete and bytes. *Shima*, 13(1), 115-135.
- Butkus, C. M. (2014). North Dumpling Island: Micronationality, the Media and the American Dream. *Shima*, 8(1), 84-94.

- Daley, P. (2016, 16 March). Murrumu: one man's mission to create a sovereign Indigenous country inside Australia. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/2006/murrumu-one-mans-mission-to-create-a-sovereign-indigenous-country-inside-australia>
- Farinelli, M. A. (2021). The Kingdom of Tavolara and the Republic of Malu Entu: Micronations, tourism and substate nationalism in two Sardinian near islands. *Transformations*, 35, 22-39.
- Gardinetti, R. G., & Vézina, V. (2021). Anachronistic Progressivism: Advancing Sovereignty through Monarchy-The story of the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean. *Transformations*, 35, 52-64.
- Grydehøj, A. (2014). Captain Calamity's Sovereign State of Forvik. *Shima*, 8(1), 34-48.
- Hayward, P. (2018). Secessionism, submergence and site-responsive art: The embassy of the Commonwealth of New Bayswater at the 1st Fremantle Biennale. *Shima*, 12(1), 160-171.
- Hayward, P. (2019a). Oecusse and the Sultanate of Ocussi-Ambeno: Pranksterism, misrepresentation and micro-nationality. *Small States and Territories*, 2(2), 183 - 194.
- Hayward, P. (2019b). Under the mermaid flag: Achzivland and the performance of micronationality on ancestral Palestinian land. *Coolabah*, 27, 72-89.
- Hobbs, H., & Williams, G. (2021a). The demise of the 'second largest country in Australia': micronations and Australian exceptionalism. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 56, 206-223.
- Hobbs, H., & Williams, G. (2021b). Micronations: A lacuna in the law. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 19(1), 71-97.
- Hobbs, H., & Williams, G. (2021). *Micronations and the search for sovereignty*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khamis, S., & Hayward, P. (2015). Fleeting and partial autonomy: A historical account of quasi-micronational initiatives on Lundy Island and their contemporary reconfiguration on MicroWiki. *Shima*, 9(1), 69-84.
- MacKinnon, L. (2014). "Give me fish, not federalism": Outer Baldonia and performances of micronationality. *Shima*, 8(2), 105-119.
- Nikolko, M. (2019). The annexation of Crimea and continuing instability in the Black Sea region: Dynamics of regional security and new challenges for the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM). *Shima*, 13(1), 27-43.
- Oleinikova, O. (2019). Crimea - Almost an Island? *Shima*, 13(1), 1-11.
- Roth, C. F. (2015). *Let's split!: A complete guide to separatist movements and aspirant nations, from Abkhazia to Zanzibar*. Litwin Books.
- Royle, S. A. (2014). "This mere speck in the surface of the waters": Rockall aka Waveland. *Shima*, 8(1), 72-83.
- Ryan, J., Dunford, G., & Sellars, S. (2006). *Micronations: the Lonely Planet guide to home-made nations*. Lonely Planet.
- Shima* (2022). Micronationality anthology. <https://shimajournal.org/anthologies/micronationality.php>
- Simpson, I. (2021). Performing freedom: An examination of Ocean Builders' successful failure in Thailand. *Transformations* 35, 65-87.
- Strauss, E. S. (1999). *How to start your own country* (3rd ed.). Paladin Press.
- Streich, P. (2021). The Japanese experience with micronations. *Transformations*, 35, 118-128.