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Review by Alexander Mawyer, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Gerard Prinsen and Séverine Blaise’s article on “Islandian sovereignty” presents a timely, streamlined argument that the global system’s non-sovereign insular states are something other than anachronistic holdovers from an unfinished postwar decolonial project. Instead, these states and territories may be bellwethers for the current status of sovereignty in the wild—that is, sovereignty not as a more or less coherent set of political ideas, ideals, and values but as particular assemblages of governance practices, legal regimes, and articulating institutions. In conversation with others who have recently drawn attention to sovereignty in insular contexts, Prinsen and Blaise argue that the apparent slow-down or cessation of the non-sovereign insular territories’ march toward full self-governance or independence, which could seem paradoxical given old expectations that local sovereignty is inevitable, may be a pragmatic and realpolitik response to the contemporary and emerging global order. Prinsen and Blaise propose that convergent developments in distinct polities may be leading to a recognizable set of governance norms, “new forms of autonomy” (64) for formally non-sovereign insular states and territories.

Drawing on an expansive meta-analysis of geopolitical work identifying non-sovereign insular territories that Westphalian sovereignty conceptions might predict as candidates for absolute self-governance on the basis of territorial integrity—for instance, through the lens of the UN General Assembly’s Resolution 1514 (XV) on the granting of independence to ‘colonized countries and peoples,’ or on the basis of non-territorialized historical-cultural ties as conceived in the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—

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Prinsen and Blaise point out that since 1983 not a single insular entity has gained significant political independence or absolute self-governance. Noting the role of ‘absolute’ in most foundational definitions of sovereignty, despite intense and highly visible sovereignty expectations and independence discourses in many contexts, no insular non-sovereign state has achieved Westphalian sovereign status in twenty-five years and, during the same time period, “large majorities of voters” on “more than a dozen non-self-governing islands” have rejected independence (54). By itself, this is quite striking. Moreover, other insular states and their peoples and governing bodies appear to be, if not rejecting, actively avoiding the Westphalian-sovereignty trajectory once held to be postwar common sense about the political futures of colonial dependencies.

Old sovereignty expectations die hard. As Prinsen and Blaise note, a well-developed bundle of historical critiques; observations on the effects of globalization on governance rationales and practices; emergent Indigenous perspectives related to territoriality, community, and governance; and other epistemological, ontological, and ethical realignments point to the need for fresh empirical studies of sovereignty’s contemporary actualities and future possibilities. In an attempt to synthesize existing studies, and energize further work on “non-self-governing islands and their metropoles” (58), the authors identify five mechanisms insular governments are using to strategically negotiate political arrangements, shedding some light on sovereignty’s current plasticity. They highlight the case of New Caledonia as exemplifying the deployment and realization of these mechanisms—a French overseas territory with a remarkable history of contestations and political and economic developments entangled in the political aspirations of the islands’ indigenous Kanak peoples, as well as more recently arrived communities, especially from the late 1960s to the present.

These five mechanisms or hallmarks of an emerging “Islandian Sovereignty” are to be found in insular territorial governments’ and communities’: (i) ‘no’ votes in independence referendums in which rupture with the political metropole is rejected; (ii) engaging in a more or less continuous (re)negotiation of the ties that bind the insular state to the metropolitan power; (iii) bending ‘national’ rules and regulations by not quite rejecting but creatively interpreting, modifying, or localizing their enactment or significance in the insular context; (iv) creatively managing and supporting insular governance through regular budget transfers and other accounting maneuvers vis-à-vis the national political metropole; or (v) leveraging distance and insularity to play the international field of relations, thus seizing some of the right to negotiate international agreements separate from the metropolitan or national government, knowing that the metropole cannot easily react harshly due to international norms and the contemporary politics of visibility regarding odious repressiveness by (neo)liberal states, as well as desires to avoid political polarization in the insular community.

This stimulating piece clearly calls for additional nuanced case studies of comparable non-sovereign insular states in which the mechanisms and operations of “Islandian sovereignties” demonstrated for New Caledonia can be further explored. Beyond the primary argument, Prinsen and Blaise deserve credit for flagging the challenge of materially identifying sub-national or non-sovereign entities (62-63, 75-76). The act if not the art of recognizing and characterizing the status of states that can legitimately be compared is another notable contribution of the article, along with the authors’ appreciation of the ‘unruliness’ of sovereignty in extra-territorial contexts.2 I was reminded of robust discussion of the similar challenge of identifying insular

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‘indigenous groups’ at law and calls for heightened and perhaps more nuanced scrutiny of the non-metaphorical operations of sovereignty movements across material contexts.

The cross-regional conversation between Caribbean and Oceanic and other “Islandian” contexts was also a welcome dimension of Prinsen and Blaise’s article. However, the task of puzzling out what binds insular contexts together in a distinct and discrete category for purposes of comparison or analysis, in relation to non-insular contexts, remains a challenge. If the answer is not merely geographical, implicit in such features as boundedness, distance to metropole, or size—a response which some might conclude to be infelicitously reductionist—is the answer historical? What is the reader to make of the authors’ intriguing category “remnants of colonial histories” (76)? Despite profound differences in colonial projects and their historical developments, is it a shared experience of colonialism’s traumas and (dis)orders that binds non-self-governing islands into a coherent category in which new sovereignties are emerging or, perhaps, a singular “new form of sovereignty” (56) which might be termed an ‘Islandian sovereignty’ has emerged? It is the challenge of identifying concretely satisfying criteria comparison? Additional work establishing a convincing typological framework for non-sovereign insular states seems both timely and likely to support further and fine-grained comparative analysis.

As the authors note, additional detailed studies of other insular non-sovereign cases that are comparable to the dense and rich New Caledonia case would be welcome and might reveal that sovereignty in and across Island worlds is currently in a state of historical evolution or transition. Similarly, a deeper analytical comparison of the political and economic negotiations and strategies used by non-self-governing insular states in their dealings with suprastate capital or extra-national institutions and entities would also be valuable. How do global capital or extra-national institutions and entities bear down on non-sovereign insular states as compared with their sovereign neighbors? In their responsiveness to the forces brought to bear by trans- or extra-national development banks, resource extraction industries, and global Leviathans, are sovereign islands not also drawing on mechanisms comparable to those identified by Prinsen and Blaise? How might attention to the strategies and mechanisms enacted by insular states (sovereign and non-self-governing alike) in their engagements with global capital and other extra-national entities complement a study of Islandian sovereignty beyond, perhaps, the category non-self-governing island states?

If this is the twilight of Westfälischeristisch ideas of sovereignty, one expects a significant analytical murk to encompass and obscure the relevant objects, entities, and processes under scrutiny. Prinsen and Blaise’s work on “An emerging ‘Islandian’ sovereignty of non-self-governing islands” suggests that significant clarity is nevertheless possible. Further, this well-referenced work establishes that regional and global political imaginaries and emerging normative governance practices will require significant attention across disciplines. As the authors suggest, again drawing on the case of New Caledonia and the thoughts of the late Jean-Marie Tjibaou, a leading voice of the Kanak political community, today the “fine line between autonomy and

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sovereignty” (62) is becoming visible in island states and their communities’ governance over “the right and power to negotiate interdependences” (69).

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