

Postcolonial Archipelago

About: Sébastien Chauvin, Peter Clegg and Bruno Cousin,
*Euro-Caribbean societies in the 21st Century. Offshore
finance, local elites and contentious politics*, Routledge

By Jack Corbett

Small jurisdictions of the Caribbeans are not only offshore facilities, but also political entities, products of colonial history and local societies. An edited volume explores the different ways in which non-sovereign territories of the archipelago have maintained ties with their former European colonisers.

As the colonial project waned in the aftermath of the Second World War, the smallest territories of former empires presented world leaders with a dilemma: were these micro-jurisdictions viable on their own or was some sort of alternative arrangement to full sovereignty possible? The leaders of these societies faced an inversion of the same question: were they better off seeking full independence or opting for semi-autonomy in return for preferential treatment and closer ties with former colonisers? *Euro-Caribbean Societies in the 21st Century* documents the experience of these latter non-sovereign territories.

There is a growing body of scholarship on this dilemma arguing that when compared with sovereign states in the Caribbean, remaining an overseas territory has proven the wiser choice, at least in simple economic terms. Like similar small island communities in the

Pacific, 'Euro-Caribbean' societies tend to be wealthier than their independent neighbours. The problem, as the editors of this interdisciplinary volume, which brings together contributions by economists, political scientists and geographers, highlight, is that while some are richer many are poorer than their metropolitan masters. Unravelling this disjuncture and explaining how it shapes contemporary politics is the core contribution of this book.

The pitfalls of non-sovereignty

From afar, being a non-sovereign jurisdiction appears to offer the 'best of both worlds'. Overseas territories in the Caribbean, be they British, French or Dutch, enjoy numerous advantages: they have considerable devolved powers and are a long way from the metropole whose populations (and politicians) have very little interest in or knowledge about their affairs. As a result, they tend to have considerable formal and informal autonomy without having to bear the full costs of statehood. They also have preferential access to European markets, often receive generous subsidies and welfare transfers, and are able to exploit loop holes and niches in the global economy and the financial sector in particular to their economic advantage.

When you look closer, however, as the authors of the chapters in this volume do, the picture becomes more complex, and the strength of arguments in favour of non-sovereignty begin to fray around the edges. For starters, despite apparently enjoying a favourable deal compared to independent Caribbean states, many of these societies are seeking further devolution of power to their local governments. The reason, as chapters on issues ranging from same sex marriage (Schields), to financial regulation (Vleck), governance (Bishop and Phillip) and Brexit (Clegg) illustrate, is that policies and regulations designed by the metropole for the metropole are often inappropriate for small societies with different economies and cultural norms. So, for example, Overseas Territories of The Netherlands have resisted same sex marriage legislation while attempts to curtail tax avoidance have brought the UK government into conflict with their British Overseas Territories whose economies are reliant on financial services. Unavoidably, the limited ability of overseas territories to exert political influence over the metropole increases the perception that they are at best patronised and at worst re-colonised. This experience is exemplified by the Dutch territories of Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius who voted in 2010 for further integration into the Kingdom of the Netherlands but by 2015 were considering devolution again. But also chapters on the French *départements* (Daniel) and the Cayman Islands (Hen) which highlight tensions between locals and expatriates about who should hold political authority and make key decisions.

What's more, the advantages of non-sovereignty do not always eventuate as these communities' hope. For one, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis the financial services sector, which is the heartbeat of many Euro-Caribbean economies, has been placed under greater scrutiny and increased regulation. But also, many of these territories have found themselves unsupported when, for instance, natural disasters like hurricanes occur. And the fear is that calls for assistance will continue to go unheeded as populism and nationalism sweep through Europe (again), begetting a more insular politics. The result is what started out as the 'best of both worlds' can, in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane, quickly become the worst: these territories do not qualify for official development assistance or ODA and any additional expenditure on them is resented by metropolitan populations increasingly concerned that charity should begin at home.

A way forward for Euro-Caribbean societies?

One long touted solution to the tension between self-determination and the viability and development of these micro-jurisdictions is to band together as Caribbean communities, thus effectively making small territories larger. The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, of which Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and Montserrat are members, is an example of the potential for this type of solution. But the problems are readily identified by chapters using the former Netherlands Antilles as exemplars (De Jong and Van Der Veer, and Veenendaal); enmities between neighbouring islands are often as charged as those between overseas territories and the metropole.

The upshot is that we are left with a complex picture and very few clear solutions or ways forward, either for individual cases or these territories as a group. This is both the greatest strength and weakness of the book. As an avowedly inter or multidisciplinary endeavour the book succeeds remarkably in marrying the depth of individual case studies with a breadth of examples and themes. In this sense it is a model of the very best area studies has to offer: the reader, either of the whole volume or individual chapters, will come away with a more nuanced appreciation and understanding of the case(s) under examination.

If, however, they seek a more parsimonious or generalisable story then they might feel short-changed. Each of these cases are intrinsically interesting. But the editors also argue that

they are at the nexus of global processes, be they political or economic, and can thus shed important light on topics and themes of general relevance. Rather than exotic settings for journalists seeking stories about misbehaving celebrities (p. 1), the editors implore us to see these territories as emblematic of inherent tensions in the liberal order: between popular sovereignty and state capacity, or trade liberalisation and protectionism, for example (p. 2). The problem is that while individual chapters make this link between the general and the specific—Bishop and Phillip on the parallel processes of ‘Europeanization’ and self-determination, for example—the book as a whole doesn’t quite deliver on this promise. In part, this is the inevitable nature of uneven edited volumes. But it is also a function of certain editorial choices: the absence of a concluding chapter, for example, or a more structured set of core questions for each author to address. The result is that while I entirely agree with the claim that these cases should be treated as more than idyllic settings for gossip or odd colonial throwbacks, I am not sure that the volume escapes the problem of exoticisation it identifies.

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