

Invited Article

Meeting the Tests of Time: Small States in the 21st Century

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The analytic category of 'small states' remains problematic in the 21st century. Its legitimacy as a rigorous conceptual category continues to be debated; even as small states assume a strident visibility on the world stage because of climate change negotiations. This paper reviews the scepticism that hovers around the small state concept, and invites a largely social constructivist discussion that looks at a syndrome of behavioural issues which are more likely to occur with decreasing polity size. Education remains a key policy battleground for small states, as the latter balance human resource needs with the trans-territorial aspirations of their brightest and ablest (and often wealthiest). In spite of spectacular advances in information and communication technologies, the personality of the small state has not essentially changed; and this remains characterised by rootedness and mobility.

Introduction: Does Size Really Matter Anyway?

Ask civil or mechanical engineers about whether size is a significant variable in their work. Most are likely to agree: large animals are not merely scaled up versions of smaller ones; large and heavy land-based mammals, for instance, need to distribute their considerable weight on four legs, rather than just two. There is also a whole sub-field of technical inquiry that explores the possibilities proffered by very small size: nanotechnology.

Ask biologists whether size and scale have a bearing on environmental survivability. Most are likely to agree: smaller fauna have a larger surface area with respect to their body mass, and so their bodies lose heat much quicker; this makes them more susceptible to hypothermia.

Ask physicians whether there are any special concerns with the diagnosis and treatment of small patients. For most, this is a no-brainer. Why else would there be a long-standing specialization in paediatrics?

When it comes to matters social, economic or political, however, the self-evident nature of the case disappears. There is no general agreement that small states (however defined) have any particular 'ecology' of their own (e.g. Commonwealth Secretariat, 1985, p. 6); even though, as is argued further below, there is considerable evidence that a 'small scale syndrome' does exist.

Purpose

This paper is deliberately polemic; it reviews the scepticism and fuzziness that hovers around the small state concept, but also invites a social constructivist discussion that looks at a package of behavioural issues which are more likely to occur with decreasing polity size. In this context, and in spite of the recent revolutionary changes in information and communication technologies, education remains a key policy battleground for small states, as the latter seek to balance local human resource needs with the trans-territorial aspirations of their brightest and ablest (and often wealthiest) citizens.

It is only an enlightened few who – occasionally in the course of their work – single out small states as a 'special case' for and worth studying. Even those who would profess a serious interest in, and

belief in the validity of, that category, must do so while competing with so many other claims to their time, resources and energies. “Academia has paid little attention to small states” (The Round Table, 2012, p. 202). This widespread reticence and incredulity is the result of a confluence of various factors, and a review of the literature suggests that the following four explanations stand out:

First, small states are above all *states*, and this is how they wish to see and project themselves. They have nothing less, or more, than other states in terms of the notional equity imparted by the community of nations. Small states (but see the second explanation, below) may be the least likely candidates for welcoming such a typology. There is some resentment, if not revulsion, of the appellation because it smacks of neo-colonialism: here is yet one other way in which the hegemonic powers of the day continue to drum up pseudo-scientific arguments justifying their role as guides, mentors, consultants, advisors, and in whichever other guise to continue to engrain their ‘natural’ superiority. US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is reported to have quipped thus about the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands: “There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn?” (Vine, 2009, p. 183). In sharp contrast, small states that see themselves as successful present themselves as having done so by virtue of the nimbleness, social corporatism, canny opportunism and policy flexibility that their size provides and permits (Katzenstein, 1985). And indeed, today, the freest, wealthiest and happiest residents in the world are, as a rule, small state citizens (Hannan, 2007).

Second, and in sharp contrast to the first explanation above, some small states – particularly the 38 grouped under the United Nations SIDS (small island developing states) umbrella – have tended to brandish their smallness as a bargaining chip, arguing that their size renders them especially vulnerable (to financial, trade, economic and environmental shocks, above all else), in spite of sometimes quite impressive quality of life indicators, and as a result they claim that they are deservedly in need of international assistance and/or special arrangements (Charles, Jacovides, & Mata’afa, 1997; UN, 2012). For scholars searching for plausible definitions, what characterizes a small state is “a shortage or lack of certain ‘normal’ attributes of state power, autonomy and international standing” (Bailes, 2010, p. 2). What is of particular interest, we are told, is “how the small nation state [sic] can develop and manage...services and opportunities,” given that it is “severely constrained” to do so (Packer, 1991, pp. 517-9). This persistent “deficit discourse” (Baldacchino, 2012) is probably the best known representation of states as small in vogue on the international stage, taken up since the early 1980s by such international organizations as the Commonwealth and the United Nations Development Program (e.g. Commonwealth Secretariat, 2012a; UNDP, 2012), and also by the SIDS themselves: “[t]here are many disadvantages that derive from small size” (SIDS, 2012). International and regional agencies, banks, critics, politicians and other observers may have noted and acknowledged these arguments; however, they have not generally endorsed or tagged along with this line of reasoning. Is being a small state really such a handicap? Indeed, some scholars claim the very antithesis of these assertions of vulnerability: small states are only facing “small problems” (Easterly & Kraay, 2000); their smallness allows for a strategic flexibility that is often not acknowledged (Baldacchino & Bertram, 2009); their economies often perform better than those of larger states (Armstrong et al., 1998, p. 644).

Third, 20th century social science scholarship has mostly shied away from considerations of scale in relation to statehood. Development economics and political science have presented tried and tested theories of economic growth, democracy, administration and good governance that were expected to be copied and adopted by many decolonizing jurisdictions, irrespective of culture, history or size (e.g. Huntington, 1968; Porter, 1990). If these templates did not work, or did not

work as expected, it was those trying to adopt the models, who were invariably to blame; the plausibility of the model itself was not questioned. There were various attempts to oblige the smallest colonies – particularly in relation to the post-1945 dismantling of the British Empire – to gain independence only as part of something larger than themselves: the West Indies Federation; Malaysia-Singapore; Gilbert and Ellice Islands; St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla...but nationalism made short shrift of most of these. Nowadays, it is the regionalization initiatives of independent states that somehow seek to achieve economies of scale and unity of voice and purpose while maintaining the autonomy, privileges and powers associated with being small polities. The best – and quite successful – example of this is probably the nine-member Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS, 2012).

Fourth and lastly, most mainstream geography and social science generally have rushed to embrace the appeals of post-structuralism in the context of a digitized, borderless world (Ohmae, 1990): “the digital planet will look and feel like the head of a pin” (Negroponte, 1995, p. 6). Everything and everyone is now connected, engaged in a global village, where places and spaces are at best social constructions, at worst mere illusions carried over from a now defunct pre-IT age. The hubris of post-modernity makes any reference to size, scale and even location appear spurious, irrational and passé. Deleuze (2004) argues that space “is imaginary and not actual; mythological and not geographical” (p. 12); the same dismissal would apply to size.

This means that, as long as we feel obliged to define our subject, we will remain stuck at the conceptualization phase; endlessly contesting whether there is, first of all, such a thing as a small state; and, if there is, how do we recognize it.

Moreover, it is not only when one observes small state dynamics – whatever they are – in play, but also when one expects them to pan out, and behaves accordingly, that the small scale syndrome also operates. If people operate in accordance to perceptions, their consequences will be real, irrespective of whether those perceptions were crafted out of impressions, myths or assessments of praxis (Thomas, 1966). Moreover, purposive individuals, community groups, corporations, and governments behave in terms of the institutional constraints and horizons of possibility within which they operate (Brinton & Nee, 2002). From such social constructivist and neo-institutionalist lenses, a small state is a state that either believes it is small, and/or else is seen to be one, and is expected to behave accordingly; also because of its historical unfolding and resource availability. “[Q]uite convincingly, it can be argued that a state is ‘small’ when it feels and acts small – implying that it could become smaller or less small at different points in its history” (Bailes, 2010, p. 2). Some interesting international relations episodes – such as the ‘cod wars’ between Britain and Iceland – have occurred when actions have flown dramatically in the face of such expectations (Baldacchino, 2009; Ingimundarson, 2003).

The paradox is that, while a general refusal to acknowledge any idiosyncrasies associated with smallness (as explained above) persists – there is still “no widely accepted definition of a small state” (Crowards, 2002, p. 143) – most of the world’s states tend towards the small. After all, out of 267 jurisdictions (of which 195 countries and 72 subnational territories) listed in the US Central Intelligence Agency’s latest edition of the *World Factbook* (CIA, 2012), only 23 have populations of over 50 million; and 160 have populations of less than 10 million (of which 43 have a population of not more than 100,000). Lay out jurisdictions in order by population size, from the People’s Republic of China to Pitcairn, and the median spot would be taken by Kyrgyzstan, with a population of just 5.5 million. Alternatively, lay out jurisdictions in order by land area, from Russia to the Vatican City, and the median country size turns out to be occupied by Latvia, with

64,000 square kilometers. Clearly, the so-called small state is the typical state size (as it has also been for most of recorded history). In contrast, the large state is the quirk and the anomaly: notice how hard it can be for large states to control diverse nations and other nationalist aspirations within their borders: think China and Tibet; India and Telengana; Indonesia and Aceh; Irian Jaya and Timor; Russia and Chechnya; Canada and Quebec; and Sudan and South Sudan. Perhaps we should establish 'large states' as a field of inquiry and ask ourselves: is a large state a state of the wrong size (e.g. Lewis, 1991)? And, meanwhile, why is normalcy too hard to bear and acknowledge?

Moreover, and as already observed (Baehr, 1975, p. 466) and in spite of some quantitative attempts (Crowards, 2002), there is, and can be, no sharp dichotomy between 'small' and 'large' states. The choice of boundary is arbitrary, subjective and purely instrumental. The Commonwealth has defined small states as "countries with a population of 1.5 million or less"; but the larger member countries of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica and even Papua New Guinea (with over 5 million population) are included "because they share many of the same characteristics of small states" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2012b). So much for a rigorous upper limit (Hindmarsh, 1996). Nevertheless, this grouping is even less discretionary than the UN's listing of SIDS, which includes members that are not small (Cuba), are not islands (Belize, Guinea-Bissau, and Guyana) and are not developing (Singapore). This leads one to think that the listing is perhaps one of convenience, driven by political opportunism. Meanwhile, within the 27-member European Union (EU) bloc, all members states except the 'big six' – France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland and the United Kingdom – are considered small (Panke, 2010; Thorallsson, 2000); the largest of what are notionally 'small states' within the EU would be the Netherlands, with a population of almost 17 million. It is worth considering whether the reference to "smaller states" is preferable to "small" in most (though not necessarily all) instances, resurrecting a formerly preferred usage (Benedict, 1966; 1967; Berreman, 1978; reviewed in Baldacchino, 2011a).

A Small Scale Syndrome

This is not to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. At decreasing levels of size, certain parameters are likely to become more important, more prevalent, more difficult to ignore or resist. Smallness – often accompanied by the geographical delineations and remoteness afforded by islandness – is perhaps best seen as a dynamic interplay of three variables: *monopoly* (meaning that the natural number of most 'things' tends towards just one: one hospital, one university, one college, one area specialist, one internet service provider, one ferry service provider – impacting on the workings of the 'free market'); *totality* (meaning that the state and its manifestations are ubiquitous and omnipresent, much like the workings of a total institution); and *intimacy* (meaning that the threshold of privacy is low, familiarity is excessive, information is power, who you are and who you know is important, and where role multiplicity and overlap are rife and unavoidable) (Puniani Austin, 2002). The signature of a small state is probably best rendered in the excessive personalization of decision making; the poverty of civil society; the power of information about, on and by people; the sheer impossibility of avoiding role conflict. Should one not particularly enjoy operating within this "small scale syndrome" (Baldacchino, 1997), there is really only one realistic option: pack up and leave.

Of course, we are aware of the real dangers of essentializing our subject matter. After all, such leitmotifs do not develop exclusively in a small state milieu: similar goings on may prevail in tight ethnic communities, total institutions, urban ghettos or other social enclaves. And yet, other things being equal, such and similar dynamics are perhaps more likely to occur in small state settings.

Today: Mobility and Immobility

A closer look at the presumed smallness of states, however, allows us to engage somewhat more critically with the subject at hand. Given the vantage point of the present, we can afford ourselves a critique of small state size, in a context of an era of inexorable space-time compression (Janelle, 1969, p. 359; Harvey, 1990), a creeping globalization of consumer tastes, a rapid dispersion of information and communication technologies: the world is now flat (Friedman, 2005). The “end” or “death of geography” concept is beguilingly simple and has become a fashionable narrative in many academic, business and marketing circles (e.g. Ohmae, 1990). Yet, perhaps this very drive towards sameness and fluidity is fuelling a slate of: place branding initiatives; bordering and security concerns; a renaissance in interest in local cultures and languages; and area studies (including border studies and island studies) in academe (e.g. Sidaway, 2012).

This is a contradictory time that we are living in: of interconnectivity and porosity, as much as of (state-led) excision and regulation. A poignant example of these dilemmas is presented by the predicament of the state of Kiribati, with 100,000 people perched on less than 900 square kilometers of fragmented land area, clearly a small state; but responsible for an immense swathe of Pacific Ocean as its exclusive economic zone. This is an atoll archipelago with a significant number of its citizens working as ship crews on foreign flagged vessels, or else studying or working in places like Auckland, New Zealand and Sydney, Australia. This is a country threatened, certainly by no fault of its own, by global warming (which trumps borders) and concomitant sea level rise: its highest natural point above sea level is less than 3 metres. No amount of broadband, satellite phone access or internet connection speeds can change this. A country that may have to evacuate its total resident population, but is as yet unable to secure an alternative site over which to transfer its sovereign status, should matters come to a head (Byravan & Rajan, 2010). Mobility and immobility. Kiribati may be an extreme case; but various observers writing from/about small (and island) jurisdictions – think Joël Bonnemaïson (1994), James Clifford (1997) and Karen Fog Olwig (1993) – have been keen to emphasize the rich yet messy co-presence of the values of roots/trees and routes/boats, of openness and closure (Villamil, 1977).

The exit option aligned to the small scale syndrome is a powerful reminder of how small states may appear small from a statist or juridical perspective; but can otherwise loom pretty large. Polynesian Epele Hau’ofa made such a point in a seminal essay: Western powers may have carved up his Oceania into small polities – Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Niue – but the ocean, and their common ancestry, history and languages, unite them as one. Not only that, but the Polynesian reach has now extended to other settlements, especially in Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand (Hau’ofa, 1993). Indeed, we have known for some time that, the smaller the state, the more likely is it that a considerable part of its population is either outside the country at any point in time, or even permanently resident elsewhere (Lowenthal, 1987, pp. 41-43; Ward, 1967, p. 95). We need to acknowledge “transnational corporations of kin” (Bertram & Watters, 1985), households and networks of relatives that straddle political borders, successively or simultaneously, maximizing revenue or career opportunities, and minimizing taxes, by a deliberate resort to “jurisdictional shopping,” made possible by protocols that permit brain/brawn circulation or rotation (Baldacchino, 2006), such as the acceptance of dual citizenship, now in place in almost 100 countries. Economically, the smaller the state, the more likely is it that it survives by virtue of its connectivities with other states (and their wealth); in fact, many small states do even better than their larger neighbours given the open nature of their economy and the sheer necessity of ex/importing or perishing (Armstrong & Read, 2002), providing a contrasting evaluation of what others have decried as “vulnerability” (Briguglio, 1995). Thus, even a mini-jurisdiction like Pitcairn – with a total current resident population of about 50 – can

survive, mainly thanks to its successful claims and overtures to British taxpayers, American stamp collectors and Filipino sailors: “the only cash economy of Pitcairn is the sale of stamps and the sale of handicrafts to passing ships” (Ridgell, 1995, p. 149). In the act of government, all states contemplate bold extra-territorial adventures, but particularly so for increasingly smaller states and territories. In an age where the principles of the Treaties of Westphalia (1648) that ushered in the modern state are increasingly challenged – think supranational integration, economic trade blocs, customs unions, bilateral trade agreements – the notion of a small state sounds increasingly like an oxymoron. Why indeed (and echoing Foucault, 1991) should one restrict any analysis to the territory over which a state exercises authority, when that same territory (and its residents) is also subject to competing laws and incentives forthcoming from elsewhere that still impact on the actions of the locals?

Education, Mobility and Policy Dilemmas

Education, especially higher education, helps to fuel these trans-territorial connectivities and lifelines of survival, providing portable, transnational skill-sets; and therein lies a key dilemma. In spite of significant attempts to indigenize educational provision the world over, education remains – amongst many other things – a vehicle for outmigration, especially for the smallest states which are most needy of talent. No wonder that significant resources have long been, and continue to be, directed at the provision and management of education in small states: capacity building programs, training workshops, and unpacking the dilemmas of multi-functional administrators (Bacchus & Brock, 1987; Farrugia & Attard, 1989; reviewed in Mayo, 2010). Meanwhile, small state policy makers waver between restricting and facilitating the movement of their brightest and ablest. Analysts debate whether a high level of outmigration – especially of highly educated personnel – is, in the longer term, a good or a bad thing. Are governments to be chastised and shamed for seeing so many graduates, many completing rigorous professional and vocational degree programs, pack up and leave? If policies privilege and speak to the choice of small state citizens to leave and migrate, should we not also privilege their choice, and right, to stay?

Nonetheless, trying to keep at home those who want to leave is probably not a good idea. Everywhere today, many young people in particular wish to embark on adventures that take them out of their home and country, *especially* if it is a small state (where living with monopoly, totality and intimacy can elicit behaviour reminiscent of cabin fever and claustrophobia). Any policies intended to restrict international movement by the upwardly mobile – mandatory domestic service after graduation is a common consideration – are soon going to run into significant objection and resistance by the well heeled and politically powerful elites; and are not likely to come into force, or stay in force for long, in most democratic polities. The circumstances point to an unravelling of the state-territory nexus, making it increasingly difficult for state regimes to impose their laws (and especially their tax codes), and more so on their more powerful and affluent (and mobile) citizenry; what Sheller and Urry (2006) call the “kinetic elite” (p. 219). If anything, the very opposite policies may be put in place: long-term emigration leave to tenured public servants; state-assisted passages to emigrants; and international scholarship offers to graduates.

Today, the key policy objective is not so much keeping human resources at home. Nationalist and nation-building rhetoric does not travel far with ambitious (and locally frustrated) college and university graduates. Moreover, there are economic benefits in having them leave: they reduce the local labour supply, easing unemployment; they nourish the overseas diaspora, maintaining the flow of significant amount of remittances; they accrue new experiences, contacts and knowledge, which can at some point be tapped by their country of origin (for which they develop some

nostalgia, which helps to maintain a sense of attachment and commitment). In the medium term, they can be enticed to return: if so, they would probably be better and smarter 'glocal' citizens than had they stayed, and not gone away at all; although this assertion cannot be proved. These returnees tend to invest in their local community, and set up local business ventures (e.g. Baldacchino, 2005). Circulatory migration may even help avoid discussions about whether to stay or to leave: you could leave and return, over and over again; there is no need for definitive or dramatic choices about such movements any more. Thanks to smartphones, electronic mail, Skype, Facebook, social media sites, blogging, texting, tweeting and the like, connectivity even when away is so much improved; and so, for example, small state diasporas are today more solidly, intimately and regularly involved in what is going on in their country (e.g. Forward Home, 2011).

It would be fair to say that the current key policy dilemma for small states and territories is precisely the consolidation of this access to the rest of the world, an umbilical cord on which their whole life, economy and society depends. The policy agenda of small states is driven by the need to secure, improve and widen the ability of their products, their services and their people to tap potential foreign markets, investors, workplaces, tourists and clients. This is precisely the main condition that prevents many potential small sovereign states from taking the plunge to political independence and full sovereign status (Baldacchino & Milne, 2008; Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012). Back to Kiribati: had that archipelago not taken the decision to go independent in 1979, it might today have had the benefits and trans-territorial assurances accruing to such neighbouring jurisdictions as the Cooks, Niue and Tokelau – who have considerable local autonomy and no appetite for independence. Indeed, there are much larger populations of Cook islanders, Niueans and Tokelauans in New Zealand than there are resident in their own countries. Theirs is a 'best practice' in the use of regionalism to navigate seamlessly across national frontiers, while still reaping the benefits of the security and national identity that they also provide (Baldacchino, 2004).

Education will continue to serve as the key passport to development for small state citizens. These should continue to thrive – whether at home or abroad – by virtue of the transnational portability of their skill sets, their qualifications, their language proficiencies, and their recognized niches of expertise (remember the trained sailors from Kiribati). Access to privileged labour markets is likely to be tightened in the years to come; and, in such cases, higher qualifications are bound to emerge as the basic requirements for selection. That the local education system does not address the small scale syndrome is no big deal. The institution's main objective is opening doors to wider and greener pastures beyond one's ever-so-limited home turf. I believe this to be the key challenge for small states in the 21st century, just as it has been in the 20th. Should educational practice help to foster a deeper and more critical understanding of one's own socio-economic and political predicament in a small state *qua* small state, then so be it. Such a dash of relevance would be a welcome bonus; but only a bonus.

Conclusion

This paper has acknowledged the limited interest in the small state *qua* small by those engaged in social science research and policy making; and paradoxically including most scholars from, or working in, small states. The concept is championed by a few obvious regional and international agencies, who do not appear troubled by a lack of definitional rigour. And perhaps, there should not be any such rigour at all: the social, political and economic circumstances that increasingly come into play with decreasing size are understood well enough that one may not really need to ring-fence them in/as a clear-cut category of analysis. A tight theoretical definition that re/

defines small states continues, unsurprisingly, to prove elusive.

Moreover, if trends in global academic practices are anything to go by, the signs of any concrete developments in 'small state studies' are not promising. There is still no scholarly peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the study of small states; and there is still no single professorial chair in any university that is dedicated to the study of small states. Even universities located in and for small states hesitate championing the concept of the small state within their curricula, perhaps fearful that any departure from internationally sanctioned curricula may dampen their claim to the portability of the certificates that they issue. At best, we have a handful of tertiary education institutes and centres dedicated to the study of small states (Martin & Bray, 2011; also Baldacchino, 2011b), as well as the occasional course, workshop, summer institute, conference (or even special journal issue, as we have here) that resurrects the notion and invites (at least a temporary) critical consideration of its ontological premises. But nothing mainstream yet.

And yet, ironically enough, the small scale syndrome is, meanwhile, alive and well. We do have a handy and general understanding – even if rudimentary and possibly still riddled with anecdotes – of a small state conceptual and analytic framework that could help develop a better understanding of why we may want to single out small states as a 'special case' meritorious of being studied for their own sake, and on their own terms. Our current information and communication technologies may have shifted and tweaked the dynamics and operations of the small state: cell phones exacerbate gossip; personality politics is accompanied by candidate blogs and websites; migrants are a free Skype video-audio conversation away. Small states – however defined, or even if left undefined – have assumed a new international visibility: note the ongoing diplomatic efforts of AOSIS with the "1.5 to stay alive" campaign in connection with sea level rise and international climate change negotiations, which are nothing short of commendable (AOSIS, 2012). Like Kiribati, small states may take pride in the fact that they continue to passionately argue the limitations and weaknesses resulting from their size (often compounded by insularity, archipelagicity and peripherality) on the global and regional stage. Watch this space.

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