

ISLANDS AND MICRONATIONALITY

An Introduction

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Abstract

Since the 1970s the term ‘micronation’ has been applied to small territories that have been declared as independent but are largely unrecognised as such. Although micronational status has been claimed for various types of location, islands have been particularly prominent as the bases for such endeavours. This essay serves to provide a brief pre-history of island micronations; to characterise the attributes and circumstances of notable micronations; to identify conceptual frameworks pertinent to their promotion; to introduce the case study articles on the topic presented in this theme issue of *Shima*; and to provide a bibliography of relevant previously published analyses of island micronationality.

Keywords

Micronations, micronationality, islands, seasteading

Micronations are largely notional entities. They are territories that have been declared independent by individuals or groups despite the minimal likelihood of their being recognised as independent by any established nation state or international body. As the term ‘micro-’ suggests, these entities are usually small in either land area and/or population. It should be emphasised that micronations are distinct from ‘small states’ of the type recognised by bodies such as the United Nations and the World Bank (with the latter organisation defining ‘small states’ as those with populations of under 1.5 million [online]). The smallest of these – such as Niue and Tokelau, with populations of under 2,000 – are often referred to as ‘micro-states’. Similarly, micronations are distinct from ‘small island developing states’, a sub-category of countries recognised by the United Nations as having particular developmental and environmental challenges.¹ Like many micronations, many of the smallest of the ‘small’ and ‘micro-’ states are constituted on islands located some considerable distance from continental mainlands and have achieved independent statehood on account of historical patterns of autonomy from larger national entities.²

While there has effectively been a ‘pre-history’ of micronationalism,³ concepts of micronations and of micronationality were formulated in the 1970s with regard to a number of attempts by individuals or small groups to assert independence for various small territories for personal, political and/or commercial reasons in the preceding decade. The first wave of these enterprises was largely based on islands, offshore platforms or floating structures. This was far from accidental. Islands offer micronational aspirants clearly defined territorial areas to claim and the water that surrounds them

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creates a distance and barrier from nearby nations that may wish to dispute their claims. Sealand, a micronation established in 1967 on a World War Two sea fort in the North Sea located outside British territorial waters, owes its origins to the establishment of an unlicensed ('pirate') radio operation that broadcast pop music into Britain (see Grimmelman, 2012⁴). Sealand remains one of the best-known micronations and something of an inspiration for other micronational aspirants by virtue of its continuing autonomy. A similar mixture of entrepreneurial invention and autonomist aspiration inspired the creation of two notable floating micronations, the Republic of New Atlantis, established in 1964, and the Repubblica Esperantista Insulo de la Rozoj⁵ (commonly known in English language as 'the Republic of Rose Island'), established in 1968. The former was initiated by Leicester Hemingway (brother of Ernest, the famous author), who anchored a small floating platform off the southwest of Jamaica, just outside that country's territorial waters, and declared it independent.⁶ Assuming the role of president, he issued stamps and press releases announcing various grand plans until the platform was broken up by storms in 1967 (see Hale, nd). The Republic of Rose Island was constructed on a floating platform in the Adriatic Sea by radical Italian engineer Giorgio Rosa. Unlike New Atlantis, which was regarded with bemused tolerance by the Jamaican and US governments; Rosa's Adriatic platform was occupied by Italian police soon after the Republic declared its autonomy and was subsequently destroyed by the Italian Navy (see Cerviere, 2009). Another venture that was poorly received by national governments was the Republic of Minerva, created by American millionaire and libertarian polemicist Michael Oliver by dumping dredged sand on top of the shallow Minerva Reefs, south of Tonga, in 1972. Following discussions between regional powers, Tonga claimed sovereignty over the reefs and ejected a small group of micronational aspirants from the area (see van Fossen, 2001). Further noteworthy island-based micronations were claimed in the following decade, such as the Conch Republic, declared in the Florida Keys following disputes with the US federal government (and resulting in considerable publicity for the region and its tourism industry - see Steinberg and Chapman, 2009). These (and other) examples were addressed in the first scholarly article to consider islands and micronationality (Menefee, 1994) and were also included in O'Driscoll's pioneering history and analysis of micronations in general (2000).



Figure 1 - Repubblica Esperantista Insulo de la Rozoj, 1968 (photographer unknown)

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With the rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, existing and aspirant micronations and micronationalists found both a forum through which to publicise their claims and, increasingly in the 2000s, a stage for the creation of fanciful micronational entities in locations that claimants did not need to *visit* (let alone *occupy*) in order to claim micronational status for (and/or claim an individual's right to be ruler of). Indeed, in some cases the claimed micronation has no referent physical location and solely exists as a fiction expressed on the Internet.⁷ Scholarly activity has mirrored this and Megret and Harrison (2010) even created their own imaginary island micronation in order to discuss the issues arising from such enterprises in their paper 'The Rise and Fall of Eunomia' (described by the authors as "an allegorical story of what international law might become in a world where non-state actors have an increasingly prominent role"⁸).

Counter to the prevailing tendency of national states to either suppress or (more usually) simply ignore micronational claims; Thomas Frey, 'Senior Futurist' at the independent DaVinci Institute, has advocated the selling of islands and associated recognition of their subsequent micronational statuses as an economic enterprise for nation states with either islands to spare, and/or the ability to construct new ones. After initially raising this idea at the Dubai Business Forum in 2008, Frey advocated this approach in an article in *The Futurist* magazine (2009). Taking his cue from the construction of the artificial Palm Jumeirah and Palm Jebel Ali islands in the Persian Gulf, off the coast of Dubai, Frey contended that:

innovations in the creation of land could lead to the creation of real estate that is unattached and unaffiliated with any existing nationstate or indigenous group – land that can be sold as an autonomous country. No such opportunity has ever before existed in human history. (2009: online)

While the latter characterisation may be somewhat overstated, the commercial potential is clearly viable and the legal consequences (discussed in Megret and Harrison, *op cit*) are undoubtedly complex. In a passage that could equally well refer to the history of the micronational projects summarised earlier and discussed by various contributors to this issue of *Shima*, Frey contended that:

For each person, the freedoms associated with any self-governing country will be prioritized differently. Some will see this as a mere scheme to avoid taxes, while others will see it as an opportunity to build something great. Perhaps the greatest value of an independent island nation is as a proving ground for experimentation. (ibid)

Frey offered a series of predictions at the conclusion of his article, many of which both reflect existing patterns of micronational development and decline and point to possible elaborations of these; providing a 'grid of possibilities' for island micronations that may emerge as a result of economic interventions:

- Island countries will begin to emerge within the next 10 years, and they will dramatically shift the face of global politics.*
- New forms of government and unusual political models will begin to emerge, including corporate nation-states, religious states, tax-free zones, single-function countries, cause-related countries, and even rental nation-*

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states, where organizations can “rent a country” for a year or two to test a specific project.

- Many experimental nation-states will fail, giving rise to a resale market for island countries.*

- Existing nations will buy their own island countries as a way to extend their influence in other parts of the world, creating a subsidiary country to test new systems.*

- “Open enrollment” citizenship may emerge. The concept of creating a virtual citizenry, where citizens do not have to reside in the country they are affiliated with, gains popularity. Open enrollment will cause many new laws to be created to sort out responsibilities between countries and their people.*

- Once the number of new countries created starts to climb, many existing countries will begin asking that a moratorium or limits be placed on the building of new countries.*

- As more and more countries come into being, vying to attract the wealthy and talented, existing countries will be forced to compete to retain their own citizens. A great migration of wealthy families will begin to cause grave concerns among established governments. (ibid)*

Together with the established history of minimally facilitated micronational enterprises over the past four decades and the potential emergence of newly purchased micronational territories; a third strand closely allied to the previous phenomena is the rhetoric and nascent practice of ‘Seasteading’. The term refers to the creation of permanent places of residence that float offshore, either in fixed or mobile locations. The concept was popularised by Wayne Gramlich (1998), who later co-founded the Seasteading Institute (SI) in 2008 with political economist Patri Friedman and with financial assistance from entrepreneur Peter Theale (co-founder of the online service PayPal). Over the last five years the SI has run conferences and workshops on practical aspects of off-shore platform construction and related topics and has a frequently updated website (<www.seasteading.org/>) that helps connect and inform interested individuals and companies about the Institute’s vision and purpose, with the latter described on their website in the following terms:

we work to enable seasteading communities – floating cities – which will allow the next generation of pioneers to peacefully test new ideas for government. The most successful can then inspire change in governments around the world... This is an audacious vision that will take decades to fully realize. We strongly believe in incrementalism – breaking this huge vision down into manageable, practical steps. Our current strategy centers around the Floating City Project, through which we are crafting practical plans for the world’s first seastead, designed around the needs of actual potential residents, and located within a “host” nation’s protected, territorial waters. (SI, nd: online)

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While the Floating City project, effectively a prototype of the kind of structure seasteaders might use in future,⁹ has been subject to a number of delays; the SI's website currently identifies that the first step towards constructing an initial floating city (after securing sufficient crowd-funding, market research and design) will take the form of an open-access 'white paper' to be made available in late 2014. Should the SI's project actually be materialised and deployed, a number of further possibilities beyond Frey's predictions for geo-engineered, autonomous, offshore micronations will arise. While much of the rhetoric of seasteading is entwined with technological futurism, at its core is a similar vision of anarcho-syndicalism to that attributed to maritime pirate societies in the 18th Century by Hakim Bey in his influential essay 'The Temporary Autonomous Zone'; that of island-based "intentional communities", "whole mini-societies living consciously outside the law" (1991: online) for as long as they could sustain that position; a characterisation that again returns us to the micronational enterprises established on Rose Island and Sealand.

To date, micronational initiatives have largely been focused on land areas that are either fully above high-tide/storm surge levels or else have either involved attempts to create such areas by dumping sand on reefs (as in the case of Minerva) or else building platforms (as in the cases of Rose Island and New Atlantis). Aside from such elaborate Internet fantasies as the Principality of Lyonesse, announced in 2012 as purporting to claim mythical flooded lands off the south west of Cornwall (and, subsequently in 2013, the Scilly islands - Principality of Lyonesse, 2013: online); few micronations have engaged with the possibilities of claiming aquapelagos (integrated terrestrial and marine territories, see Hayward, 2012a) as coherent autonomous entities. Indeed, the most explicit recognition of the latter (to date) has been provided by the Canadian Government in their establishment of the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site in Haida Gwaii (The Queen Charlotte Islands) in 2010, which includes terrestrial and marine areas conceived as a coherent and innately interconnected whole (Hayward, 2012b).

While the future scenarios sketched by Frey and the SI above potentially comprise a new horizon for Island Studies; this theme issue of *Shima* addresses various aspects of islands and micronationality that *have* occurred to date. Individual articles address a variety of topics, including disputed marine regions (Tran, on the Spratly/Truong Sa archipelago dispute); temporary quasi-micronational entities created by administrative accidents (Long, on various southern Japanese islands); constitutional intricacies and their exploitation for quasi-micronational ends (Johnson, on Sark and Brecqhou; and Grydehøj, on Forvik and Shetland), a rich property owner's grand aspirations (Butkus, on North Dumpling Island) and strategic assertions of micronationality to promote specific issues (Royle, on Waveland/Rockall; Lattas, on the Gay and Lesbian Republic of the Coral Sea Islands; and Hayward, on Lamb Island). The various discussions re-emphasise the convenience of bounded islands (and islandness in general) for conceptualisations of distinct spaces and the societies and cultures that can inhabit these; and, as explicitly addressed in Lattas, allow for re-examination of the nature, rhetoric and value of nations and nationalism in general when deployed in such small scale contexts.

Note: *Shima* welcomes further contributions to discussions concerning islands and micronationality and/or analyses of particular island micronational claims.

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Endnotes

¹ Despite its prescriptive title, not all of the 52 SIDS are island-based: Belize, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana and Surinam being part of continental mainlands. (See UN Conference on Trade and Development [2013] for a full listing.

² Also see Baldacchino (2010) for a discussion of subnational 'island enclaves' that enjoy particular autonomies without reaching the threshold of independence.

³ This includes small, autonomous entities of various kinds. During the 17th-18th centuries, for instance, various Western companies effectively administered islands as company 'colonies' (see Royle, 2007, for an account of the East India Company's administration of St Helena in the 17th Century). Later entrepreneurs also set up their own fiefdoms in various locations; see, for instance, John Clunies-Ross's private state in the Cocos (Keeling) islands in the early 19th Century, which operated until the island was annexed by the United Kingdom in 1857 (see Ackrill, 1984). More in keeping with the shadowy and often quasi-fictional nature of micronations, de facto micronational status has been claimed for the tiny Redonda island in the Caribbean since the 1800s, principally by speculative fiction writer M.P. Shiel and subsequent followers (see Squires, 2011). The clearest precursor to contemporary micronations was Outer Baldonia, off the coast of Nova Scotia, in the 1950s (see Coe, 1967).

⁴ Also see Johns (2011) for an historical background to offshore 'pirate' radio and the establishment of Sealand.

⁵ An Esperanto language term translating as 'The Esperanto Republic of Rose Island'.

⁶ He initially declared half of it as independent and the remaining 50% as US territory.

⁷ See Micronational Central's 'List of Virtual Micronations', online at: www.listofmicronations.com/listvirtual.html - accessed February 2014

⁸ Description on the Social Science Research Network website: papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1983135 - accessed February 2014

⁹ See description on SI website: www.seasteading.org/floating-city-project/ - accessed February 2014

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