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Unrecognized states: the struggle for sovereignty in the modern international system, by Nina Caspersen, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012, 210 pp., £55/€66/$69.95 (hardcover), £16.99/€20.40/$24.95 (paperback), ISBN-13 978-0-7456-5342-6

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A book on unrecognized states is an important book to write. Previous literature, particularly of monograph length on internal developments of unrecognized states is dated or, with one exception (Pegg 1998), not grounded in theory. Caspersen does both. She updates studies (pre-2008) on unrecognized states and challenges concepts of sovereignty with regard to unrecognized states. Moreover, whereas most work is regional (either studying the Balkans, the Caucasus, Africa, or Asia), this is a very important look at issues of unrecognized states that transcend the globe. Finally, she gives us much needed insights into internal political dynamics of unrecognized states, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5 on internal state building dynamics of the Balkans and the Caucasus, where Caspersen has done field research and previously authored several journal articles.

The most important contribution of this book is the framework she provides for debate in three areas. First is whether unrecognized states are strongly advocating for recognition and mean it. The other side of the debate of Caspersen argues that recognition is not forthcoming because the *status quo* of non-recognition serves states, the unrecognized territories therein, and the international community. For example, Northern Cyprus and South Ossetia do relatively well by current regional standards, receiving aid from much larger states Turkey and Russia, respectively. Their leaders are not actively pursuing independence. In fact, most unrecognized states have failed to materialize, in particular since the end of the Cold War, with the exception of Montenegro. At present, if you add up all of the unrecognized states' population (minus Taiwan), it is a little less than 6 million (and this is assuming that early 2000 census data are still valid). Taiwan is 23 million; and the exception with relative economic prosperity. This fact of most unrecognized territories returning to the parent state should be explored more in-depth. Why is this so? Is there a pattern or is each case unique?

Following on from this first point, it could be argued that non-recognition is to a great extent political and not necessarily due to the restrictive application of self-determination, as Caspersen argues. The history of the USSR and its autonomous regions, and the inability of trans-Atlantic diplomats to find compromise with the Russians is more a reason for the stalemate over Nagorno Karabakh, Transnistria, and the Caucasus. Indeed, it is difficult to identify a trend in the recognition of Bangladesh, Kosovo, Eritrea, and East Timor other than they were called "exceptions", each with their own unique political conundrum in gaining recognition. The issue of which states were created out of the breakup of Yugoslavia was also not solely about whether self-determination was upheld. Earned sovereignty from achieving "standards before status" referenced in Badinter Commission has only worked for Kosovo. Now, as Bahcheli, Bartmann, and Srebrnik (2004) write, we are in a "legal fog". What is the legal precedence for recognition and does it matter, given the strong role of politics?

This leads to a third point of debate. Unrecognized states analysis can, I argue, gain from the application of weak states literature. Sovereignty is in flux in weak states as well as unrecognized states. Bartelson (1995) discusses sovereignty today as divided, shared, and occurring at all levels of governance. In a chapter, I wrote for Casperson and Stansfield (2011), I queried what unrecognized states can tell us about sovereignty (Closson 2011). In following the theoretical debates on the notion of sovereignty, including empirical versus juridical and supra- and sub-state challenges, it was the linguistic turn that was most interesting. Weber (1995, 1998) as a post-positivist argues that sovereignty is not fixed to a state, and not measurable as a percentage of power or independence. Therefore, real and quasi-states are on the same continuum of statehood. Unrecognized states are as much a part of sovereignty as the "real" state. Therefore, within and beyond unrecognized states, questions remain as to who or what holds sovereignty; where does it reside over time; and, what does it mean for each community?

Applicable also from the weak states literature is the impact of the colonial legacy (including the Cold War) on state building. These legacies impacted governing structures, rule of law, educational systems, population demographics, and economic systems. Related to the latter is the literature on the role of semi-formal economies, corruption, and the resultant lack of sustainable economic development. Caspersen rightly challenged the notion that unrecognized states are black holes, victims or agents of terror separate from their titular states and neighbors. Again, there is important literature on this concerning weak states in Africa, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. Finally, she makes an important point about democratization losing its luster for leaders of unrecognized states. This is also the case with weak states. What Caspersen can provide us is a critique of the weak states literature, which would in turn say more about state-building in unrecognized states.

In conclusion, this work provides a platform for future exploration in several fields, including conflict resolution, security studies, and political science. There are critical questions to be further explored on unrecognized states in these fields. What effect do negotiations have on governments and communities of unrecognized states? Over time, if left unrecognized, what will the unrecognized states morph into, and what will be the regional security impact? What can be made of the paradox forming of unrecognized states being better governed than recognized ones; Somaliland and Somalia case in point? In the end, Caspersen's latest monograph on unrecognized states can and should shape future research.

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This review was originally published with errors. This version has been corrected. Please see Erratum (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.801602).

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For a long time the only book-length study of *de facto* states with theory ambitions was Scott Pegg's *International society and the de facto state* (1998). This is a good and still very valuable work, but it is already 14 years old and in need of an update. So, if for no other reason, this means that Nina Caspersen's book is a very welcome contribution.

But this new book is not only about statehood in unrecognized states, it is more ambitious: nothing less than an attempt to examine the conditions of statehood and sovereignty in the modern world in general. Most works that discuss statehood and sovereignty comparatively and theoretically limit the focus to states that enjoy international recognition and UN membership – noting perhaps in passing that there also exist some anomalies, some unrecognized entities, that do not fit, and then dismiss them by claiming that they are so few and small that they can safely be ignored. But that approach makes it impossible to study *how recognition influences statehood*. In order to find out *that*, we must study also those cases where recognition is *lacking*. And that is just what Nina does. In that way she is able not only to advance our understanding of *de facto* states, but also make a contribution to the larger literature on statehood in general.

Here I am tempted to draw a comparison with physics and other natural sciences. There are physicists who study phenomena that behave in accordance with the natural laws as we know them: their experiments seldom lead to new discoveries. It is the researchers that identify and study *anomalies*, the phenomena that do *not* conform to the natural laws as we know them, who can hope to discover new laws. So what is the link between statehood and sovereignty? Can you have sovereignty without being recognized? Should we distinguish between internal and external sovereignty, and so on? Caspersen's answer to the last question, by the way, is a clear "yes", and some (but not all) unrecognized states *do* enjoy internal sovereignty.

Nina Caspersen asks: "Are unrecognized states just states-in-waiting that have reached different levels of state-building, or is there something qualitatively different about unrecognized statehood?" (51) The answer, or answers, to that interesting question is spread out over the pages of the book, it is the meat of her discussion. Robert Jackson famously reminded us some two decades ago that among recognized states, there are quite a few that do not fulfill the basic requirements of empirical statehood. He called them "quasi-states"; others have called them "failed states". They lack functionality and internal sovereignty. Conversely, many well-functioning recognized states have less than full external sovereignty, in the sense of having ceded some degree of their sovereignty – either to a neighboring state or states, as Andorra and Monaco have done, or to a supranational organization, as the member states of the EU have done. Indeed, one may question whether absolute state sovereignty in the modern, interdependent world is at all possible.

Similarly, there are shades and degrees also among the *de facto* states when it comes to recognition and sovereignty. Some have been recognized by a handful of states, like Taiwan; or only by their patron state, like the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC); or by none, like Somaliland. At the same time, it is possible to be integrated into the world economy and the international system to various degrees also in the absence of recognition. Caspersen points out how Somaliland, for instance, being recognized by none, should presumably been the most isolated case – and yet it is in fact more integrated than some *de facto* states that enjoy recognition from a handful of states, such as South Ossetia. Also in another sense does the criterion of non-recognition fail to create a

neat, clear-cut category of *de facto* states. The issue of international recognition, of course, arises only when a region aspires to it, and for that reason Caspersen, with good reason, holds that *de facto* autonomous areas controlled by warlords, narco-cartels or revolutionary armies ought to be excluded from the category of "*de facto* states" since their leaders have not proclaimed independence and do not seek recognition. At the same time, she thinks that some *other* regions that also have not formally declared independence, like Iraqi Kurdistan between the two Gulf wars, *ought* to be included. Here she argues that excluding such entities makes us overlook cases when the absence of a formal declaration of independence can be a strategic attempt to increase the room for maneuver.

How have some states, such as TRNC and Nagorno-Karabakh, managed to create reasonably effective entities, while others, such as Chechnya and Republika Srpska Krajina, did not? To this pertinent question, Caspersen gives mostly case-specific *ad hoc* answers, pointing out specific deleterious circumstances such as infighting or imposition of international blockade in some countries, and a felicitous geographical position or support from a benevolent external patron or a wealthy and positively inclined diaspora in others. All of these factors are no doubt important, but by relying so heavily on *ad hoc* explanations she in effect cuts herself off from giving a new general theory on state-building in *de facto* states. Caspersen does not point out one decisive factor, the one criterion that would shunt the unrecognized entities into either prosperity and good governance, or criminality and misery. Well, probably no such decisive factor exists.

As Caspersen points out, if we measure democratic performance in terms of the Freedom House ratings (a ranking that, to its credit, includes also many *de facto* states) we cannot say that lack of recognition is a factor that significantly influences the level of democracy, accountability, or freedom of speech, either positively or negatively. At the same time, she notes how the tendency in *de facto* states has been going in the wrong direction in recent years, toward somewhat more authoritarian rule and more restrictions on civil society. This unfortunate development Caspersen links to the process leading up to the partial recognition of Kosovo. Initially, the slogan in the Kosovo case was "standards before status": the Kosovars were told that they would be recognized once they had brought their house in order. This encouraged leaders in *other* unrecognized states to introduce more democracy in their entities, in the hope that the "standards before status" principle would be generalized to include them as well, that the Kosovo case would set a precedent. But then somewhere along the line, the demand for standards was silently dropped in Kosovo, and this sent a clear message to other *de facto* leaders: democracy is *not* a *sine qua non* for recognition: cynical great-power politics is what matters.

So the question is then: after Kosovo, do the leaders of the world have any instruments in their tool kit to influence internal developments in *de facto* states?

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The world's unrecognized states reveal much about sovereignty in the international system. In this survey of contemporary *de facto* states, Caspersen challenges us to rethink the relationship between sovereignty, statehood and international recognition.

The book focuses on questions of state-building, drawing on a wide range of empirical cases and fieldwork in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and the erstwhile Republic of Serbian Krajina. It is empirically informed, theoretically relevant, and an important contribution to the literature examining variations in contemporary sovereignty.

Unrecognized states are surprisingly tricky to define. Conceptually, the book limits its focus to unrecognized states that exercise de facto independence, engage in institution-building, make a claim to formal independence or actions that signal separate statehood, receive minimal formal recognition from other sovereign states, and exist for at least two years (11). By Caspersen's count, there have been 16 such entities since 1991, including well-known cases like Chechnya and Northern Cyprus, and more obscure examples such as Bougainville and Gagauzia, but excluding the "borderline" cases of Kosovo and Taiwan. Caspersen acknowledges that the boundaries are blurry. Using the same criteria, for example, we might consider entities such as South Sudan prior to its recognition in 2011, Tatarstan in the parade of sovereignty that emerged out of the collapse of Soviet rule, occupied Palestine, and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

The book's main arguments revolve around the effects that the lack of international legal recognition has on the character of statehood in these polities. The lack of recognition creates barriers to engagement with other actors in the international system, including existing states, most obviously, but also complicating relations with international donors, international organizations, and commercial investors. Thus, even as most of these entities remain dependent on the support of stronger external patrons for their survival, as Abkhazia looks to Russia or Northern Cyprus to Turkey, "the dominant trend is one of isolation" (49). This contributes to schizophrenic forms of statehood: legacies of secessionist warfare and state collapse tend to push their leaders towards centralization, militarization, ethnic exclusion and forms of authorianism, while the need to legitimate sovereignty claims with outsiders pulls in the direction of democratization, pluralism and liberalism. These forces leave unrecognized states "in an ambiguous and largely transient position" (121). Caspersen emphasizes how non-recognition exacts a cost for all of these entities. "It constrains their ability to create entities that are sustainable in the long term and it puts a strain on their internal legitimacy" (147–148). The book thus recommends forms of accommodation and engagement that bypass insoluble questions around the legal status of these states in favor of pragmatic forms of engagement to promote stability.

The empirics draw on a diverse set of contemporary unrecognized states. This diversity is at once the book's primary strength and weakness. On the one hand, the sheer breadth of cases makes this a valuable contribution to a literature that has drawn primarily from single cases or regionally organized case studies. On the other, the array of cases raises questions about just how comparable unrecognized states as diverse as Taiwan and Nagorno-Karabakh are with one another. While the book does not engage in comparative analysis, the anecdotal evidence makes it difficult to derive meaningful and generalizable comparisons about the effects of non-recognition. There is a trade-off here, as Caspersen observes. "While this variation presents some analytic difficulties, it also allows the book to engage with broader issues, such as the link between internal and external sovereignty, the meaning of statehood, and anomalies in the international system" (24).

At the same time, closer attention as to how variations in the origins, contexts and trajectories of these states bear on the questions at hand would benefit the analysis. For instance, Tamil Eelam and the Republic of Serbian Krajina share the absence of external recognition, but their dissimilarities in most every other respect make it difficult to parse out the effects that non-recognition has on processes such as democratization,

state-building, and legitimation. The absence of international legal sovereignty affects these processes, to be sure, but other factors often have far greater effects. To know more about the causal and constitutive effects of recognition, the study of *de facto* states needs to move beyond the narrow focus on a heterogeneous set of unrecognized states. More might be learned about how sovereignty works by comparing unrecognized Somaliland to recognized Somalia, or to Puntland, which has so far abjured claims to independence, or to a succession of other failed state-building projects elsewhere on Somalia's territory.

Good books raise more questions than they answer and *Unrecognized states* is no exception. One useful line of research the study suggests would look to the ways unrecognized states are accommodated by other sovereign states. Caspersen rightly charts the exclusionary effects of non-recognition on the political development of these entities. Yet the demands of a globalization make it difficult to avoid cooperating with unrecognized states, especially in numerous domains of overlapping interest. In many ways, the sorts of "fudging" Caspersen recommends to solve intractable debates over sovereignty between these entities and the states who claim their territory is already happening in a range of functional areas. Security, commerce and investment, development, humanitarian assistance, and democracy and human rights all pull existing states into devising various arrangements to cooperate with unrecognized states in ways that temper their international isolation.

The book also poses interesting questions regarding the sources of popular legitimacy and how these affect the domestic politics and foreign relations of these entities. Caspersen locates tensions between domestic and international strategies of legitimation. For example, it is difficult for separatist state-builders to reconcile popular demands for ethnic citizenship with their origins in polarizing identity conflicts with the sorts of civic citizenship and minority rights that appeal to liberal outsiders. Likewise, reliance on powerful outside states can boost the international survival prospects of these entities, but generate domestic criticism for the interference in domestic affairs these outside states demand as the cost of protection. The obstacles to building international legitimacy in an international society reluctant to discuss status issues also reverberate on the popularity of incumbent governments and impact beliefs about the state-building project more generally. We need to know more about how citizens perceive the domestic legitimacy of their governments and their foreign policy choices.

Finally, unrecognized states need to be placed in comparative perspective. Book length treatments tend to focus on successful *de facto* state entities that emerged out of state collapse and state dissolution in the 1990s. We understand relatively little about the historical antecedents, in two senses. First, we need to know more about these nation-state projects before the conflicts that preceded their attainment of *de facto* independence. The local legitimacy of these entities is often bolstered by longer national memories, both real and imagined, with consequences for contemporary state-building outcomes. Second, we need to know more about how unrecognized states worked in previous eras. The "puppet states" that emerged in World Wars I and II, the failed state projects that emerged during and after these wars, and unrecognized states that emerged out of struggles over decolonization all offer insights into how sovereignty regimes operated at crucial junctures. Closer comparative examination of other cases of unrecognized statehood in a century marked by struggles for national self-determination would tell us more about the features that make the contemporary era unique.

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This book was very much born out of curiosity. I was visiting the Caucasus to do research on the micro-dynamics of intra-state conflicts, in the cases of Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh, but found myself becoming more and more interested in how these "places that don't exist" manage to survive without international recognition; are they states or are they something else; and how does this impact on the prospect for conflict resolution? I began looking for literature on these topics but found very little and what I did find on unrecognized states tended, with a few exceptions (most notably Pegg 1998), to focus on the external relations of these entities, not on their inner workings, and they were often portrayed as something akin to anarchical badlands – an image which I did not recognize from this initial visit, nor from further visits over the years.

So what I wanted to do with my book was to fill this gap in the literature: to provide a comprehensive analysis of unrecognized states, which examines their origins, the factors that allow them to survive and their likely future development. But even though the project began as an analysis of the micro-dynamics of conflict, the book also aims to answer the bigger questions about statehood, sovereignty and international recognition: how do these anomalies survive in a system of sovereign states; in what way does (non)recognition affect the development of statehood?

A book that charts new ground, and especially one that concerns itself with anomalies, is almost bound to raise as many questions as it answers. I am, therefore, delighted that *Nationalities Papers* have given me the opportunity to explore some of these with three of the leadings experts on unrecognized states: Stacy Closson, Pål Kolstø and Lee Seymour. Their very kind comments and challenging questions have given me plenty of food for thought and alerted me to possible avenues for future research. I will try to address their main points below.

Delineating the universe of unrecognized states posed a significant challenge and it is possible that I have left out cases that could, or indeed should, have been analyzed within the same framework – as suggested by Seymour. However, a number of cases such as Palestine were very consciously omitted since they did not meet the criterion of territorial control. Now these cases may illuminate other aspects of the effect of international recognition, and I very much welcome research into this, but my concern was with entities that are *de facto* independent and how the lack of international recognition affects their attempts to develop functioning statehood.

Closson questions if the leaders of unrecognized states really want recognition. Despite elite interests in the *status quo* – which I agree can be found in some cases – I will maintain that recognition is an existential question for these entities. Unrecognized entities are afforded no protection by the norm of nonintervention and consequently always face the threat of extinction, as recently evidenced by the bloody reintegration of Tamil Eelam. This is the case even if the lack of recognition no longer comes at the same price as it used to – even if sovereignty has effectively been blurred, as Seymour suggests, and unrecognized states now enjoy greater access to the international system. In my research, I have found some indication that ensuring access to the international system is now a priority for the leaders of unrecognized states. But this co-exists with a continued commitment to the goal of international recognition – as elusive as this goal may seem in the current international system. International recognition comes with the promise of security and prosperity and the leaders of unrecognized

states have found it hard to create a similar narrative for a future of partial or no recognition.

Kolstø and Seymour both point to the immense variation between unrecognized states and the potential problems comparing them. Some unrecognized states remained largely anarchical entities while others created surprisingly effective, and even democratic, entities. Krasner (1999, 228) is therefore right when he argues that "non-recognition does not condemn an entity to death and oblivion". But lack of recognition affects all of the cases; both the very well-functioning and the more chaotic ones. (External) sovereignty is still a dichotomy in the international system; an entity is either sovereign or not sovereign. External support, which these entities need in order to survive, is therefore always problematic. Long-term survival necessitates either patron state dependence, which undermines their *de facto* independence, or access to the international system, which ultimately hinges on parent state acceptance and comes with its own vulnerabilities. The absence of recognition moreover also affects their internal dynamics. Despite their variation in state-building success what tends to develop are militarized entities that emphasize unity, rely on a narrow definition of identity, and are reliant on external patrons. Unrecognized states are not just states in all but name; their statehood takes a specific form. Sovereignty matters, even in today's globalized world. Lack of recognition has a significant impact on the kind of entities that develop and despite their variation it makes sense to treat unrecognized states as a conceptual category.

Seymour and Kolstø are right that the significant variation between the cases means that it can be difficult to isolate the specific effect of nonrecognition or point to decisive factors for state-building. The general effects of nonrecognition are, however, analyzed in the book and the impossibility of identifying the decisive factor for state-building in unrecognized entities is actually revealing as it can be used to reject a number of common assumptions, such as the crucial importance of patron states, preexisting institutions and ethno-national ties. But based on existing research, it is easier to say what unrecognized states are not (states-in-waiting or anarchical badlands) and to identify the type of constraints they are faced with, than to provide a succinct description of their characteristics. Further research into individual cases is needed and comparisons with recognized states may, as Seymour suggests, prove a useful avenue – just like lessons can also be drawn from the weak states literature, as suggested by Closson.

All three reviews identify a number of further avenues for future research. Kolstø asks if internal developments in unrecognized states can be influenced after Kosovo. To a considerable extent, this depends on whether a new principle of international recognition emerges. Remedial secession is now more widely accepted, which at least would make the leaders of unrecognized states keen to be perceived as the deserving victims, whereas no one really talks much about "earned sovereignty" anymore; except the leaders of unrecognized states. In June 2008, the chairman of the Somaliland electoral commission, for example, described the entity's upcoming elections as "a test for Somaliland's recognition bid" (*UNPO News*, June 30, 2008). As Kolstø and Closson suggest, the more likely conclusion is, however, that great power politics is what matters for recognition. Even though international recognition – as Closson rightly points out – remains the exception such an interpretation of the politics of recognition would increase the impact of external patrons on the internal developments of unrecognized states but reduce the possibility of more general (often unintended) international influence.

Closson asks what happens if the unrecognized status of these entities persists in the longer term. In the book, I argue that the "outsider" position of these entities in the long-term risks undermining their internal legitimacy. But this depends on whether they

are facing international isolation or allowed greater engagement. Their access to the international system will affect the kind of entities that develop and the security risks associated with them. Engagement, moreover, creates a possible basis for influencing internal developments, even if the idea of "standards before status" is laid to rest.

These critical questions and others point to the need for further research on unrecognized states. I wrote this book hoping that it would act as a catalyst for a rethink of unrecognized states, sovereignty and statehood, and I am pleased that an increasing number of analysts – including a large number of PhD students – are now focusing their attention on these "places that don't exist".

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