

Strategies of Secession and Counter-Secession, edited by Ryan D. Griffiths & Diego Muro

London & New York: ECPR Press, 2020, 233 pages. ISBN 978-1-78552-333-5

Carles Ferreira

Assistant Lecturer and PhD Candidate in Comparative Politics at the University of Kent (United Kingdom)

Countless nationalist-related phenomena have occurred since Eric Hobsbawm wrote his largely quoted sentence “the owl of Minerva [...] it’s now circling around nations and nationalism”(1992: 192). The triumph of globalisation and liberal democracy would have opened a new era with little place for the so-called “identity politics”. Nevertheless, as one of the editors of *strategies of secession and counter-secession* showed, we are living in an age of secession, or at least, an age of secessionist politics (Griffiths 2016). Since the 1990s, independence movements have attracted growing interest by scholars and policymakers around the globe, although the scholarship on the topic is yet far from comprehensive. In this regard, professors Ryan Griffiths and Diego Muro have brought together leading scholars in the fields of comparative politics and international relations to reflect on this topic.

The main contribution of the book is the examination of secessionist and counter-secessionist strategies as a whole. This comprehensive perspective covers many cases throughout very diverse political settings. Possibly because of its importance, scholars have mainly focused on the behaviour of minority groups, leaving the role of the state in taming nationalist demands unexplored—and, more importantly, the relationship between the two. This publication addresses this oversight. The tug-of-war between secessionists and counter-secessionists is interestingly conceptualised in the introduction by the editors. Under the label of “strategic playing field” (p. 3), the authors identify the main actors and the dynamics they engage in when a secessionist movement expresses its demands. The rest of the book departs from this

interesting conceptualisation. The publication is divided into 11 chapters, five theoretical and the other six empirical, mainly case study-based. The contributions tackle three subfields of research: *de facto* states, secessionist political parties and secessionist civil wars.

The first two chapters relate to moral theories of secession by examining the discourse upon which Unilateral Declarations of Independence (UDI) are built. Kartsonaki shows that there is no correlation between a remedial case for independence and a positive outcome for the secessionists (p. 31-51). Conversely, a successful bid for independence has much more to do with considerations of regional stability and geopolitics. Chapter 3 focuses on the strategies of parental states against *de facto* states, and chapter 4 explains how security concerns account for the variation in separatist violence. Finally, Rivka Weill concludes the theoretical part of the book with a compelling chapter on constitutionalism and counter-secession. She argues that most constitutions in the world forbid secession for two reasons: firstly, because it minimises internal conflict by raising the costs of secessionist endeavours. Secondly, Weill claims that secessionist politics undermine the very foundations of constitutions, namely, the *demos* entitled to self-government.

Although the theoretical part of the book also relies on empirical material to advance our knowledge of the topic, its second part is explicitly aimed at describing and explaining particular cases. The borders between the two undertakings are a bit blurred; however, the reading flows with reasonable coherence. Moreover, while part one balances the contributions on secession with those on counter-secession, part two is far more concerned about pro-independence movements. The editors acknowledge this imbalance in the conclusions (p. 226). Hence, in chapter six Aksoy and Ayse Kocacik-Senol examine the relationship between democratic institutions and secessionist strategies. They demonstrate that violence is more typical of autocratic and hybrid regimes than democracies.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 deal with secessionism in advanced democracies. Maddens *et al.* examine the discourse on the EU by Catalan, Flemish and Scottish parties. Although traditionally pro-European, these organisations have lately been more critical due to the reluctance of the European Union to embrace pro-independence demands. In chapter 8, André Lecours performs an in-depth analysis of the two Québec independence referendums. He describes

the discourse of the secessionists during both campaigns—pro-independence discourse is a dimension surprisingly underexplored in the field of territorial party politics— and points to the difficulties for sovereigntists to demonstrate enthusiasm for their project while, at the same time, expressing reassurance and containment in the face of moderate voters.

In chapter 9, Karlo Basta outlines the role of big businesses in independence referenda. Basta's contribution is remarkably original since it introduces a new political actor that does not entirely fit in any of the categories outlined in the "strategic playing field", presented in the introduction of the book. Although mostly anti-secessionists, big businesses—together with other actors such as the media—can play their part in further conceptualisations of the dynamics of secession and counter-secession. Finally, chapters 10 and 11 move on from advanced democracies to the study of the viability of *de facto* states—chapter 10—and a comparative study of self-determination disputes in East Timor, Aceh and West Papua—chapter 11.

In the conclusions, Griffiths and Muro summarise all these contributions and suggest new paths of research. Although they briefly reflect on key issues—such as the failure of the strategies of both secession and counter-secession— this section does not include a comprehensive theoretical discussion of the findings. Broader inferences could have been drawn from the presentation of the previous abundant material. Nevertheless, they give a clear picture of what has been done and offer two pieces of advice for making secessionist politics less conflictual, both at the domestic and the international level. Regarding the former, they reject the idea of "militant democracy" to avoid the use of extra-institutional contestation by secessionists. In the international arena, they demand clearer rules to improve the practices of new states' recognition.

Although the editors implicitly advocate the integrity and stability of established polities, these conclusions are widely shared by many researchers on territorial politics irrespective of their ideological commitments. States place territorial integrity as a supreme value in most political settings because they strive for their own survival—Chapter 5 by Weill explores these elements further. At the same time, states also dominate the international arena. Here, too, they reject a more comprehensive regulation of self-determination for similar reasons, as well as for geopolitical considerations—states are driven by the pursuit of power rather than of democracy or justice.

Closing the door on any possibility of secession often triggers open conflict, as pro-independence movements feel forced to use extra-institutional means to achieve their goals. We can witness a high level of contention in ethnic wars but also in peaceful advanced democracies, where extreme institutional disruption can also take place—as the recent Catalan bid for independence shows. A growing scholarly consensus on regulating secession both at the domestic and at the international level should have more impact on institutions and policymaking (e.g. Norman 2006; Buchanan 2007): this is a major point the reader can draw from the insights presented in this book.

Beyond policymakers, who will find many chapters highly useful, this book clearly advances the existing knowledge on the phenomenon of secession. Territorial politics scholars should look at this book when undertaking new projects on the topic. Moreover, both the conceptualisation of the “strategic playing field” (p. 3) and the open questions the editors pose in the conclusions pave the way for promising new lines of research. Finally, this publication will encourage researchers to think about different actors when analysing secessionist politics, as opposed to focusing either on the pro-independence movement or on state/majority nationalism alone. This comprehensive approach can offer more analytical weight to the study of such a complex phenomenon.

References

- Buchanan, Allen. *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-Determination: Moral Foundations for International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Griffiths, Ryan D. (ed.). *Age of Secession. The International and Domestic Determinants of State Birth*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Norman, Wayne. *Negotiating Nationalism: Nation-Building, Federalism, and Secession in the Multinational State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.