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Navigating the binaries of island independence and dependence in Greenland: Decolonisation, political culture, and strategic services

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, islands and archipelagos undergoing decolonisation have opted not to pursue independence. Many have instead become autonomous subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs), maintaining links with their former colonisers in order to gain economic, social, and political benefits. The age of island independence movements has largely ceased. One exception is Greenland, an SNIJ in which the public overwhelmingly favours independence from Denmark. This desire for independence is linked to a binary understanding of Greenlandic identity and Danish identity as well as a binary understanding of independence and dependence. Greenland's colonial experience has trapped it in a Denmark-oriented conceptualisation of Greenlandic identity, which prevents the pursuit of potential political and economic futures, for example gaining economic benefits through the provision of strategic services to a patron state. This study demonstrates how island status and centre-periphery relations can influence political culture and, by considering the exceptional case of a present-day island independence movement, sheds light on the dynamics of island-mainland relations more generally.

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1. Introduction

Research in the field of island studies has highlighted the ways in which island and archipelagic spatiality condition politics and governance. It has also highlighted the ways in which these always-already-bordered spaces frequently confound the deep-seated human impulse to envision island isolation and integrity. The present paper concerns Greenland, an exceptionally autonomous subnational island jurisdiction of Denmark. Greenland's political culture has run counter to global trends in a manner that has gone largely unnoticed in the local scholarship, and the case of Greenland has failed to adequately inform island political geography research.

This paper examines Greenland on the basis of the wider literature concerning island politics and governance. Focusing on the overwhelming popular desire for Greenland to become an independent state, I suggest why Greenlandic political culture diverges from international norms and highlights some of Greenland's missed opportunities. I do so by examining how centre-periphery and colonial processes have led to the construction of problematic Greenlandic and Danish identities and have prompted Greenlanders to regard economic dependence on Denmark as a continuation of the colonial process. As such, this study is at once a detailed analysis of a particular political culture, with results that are relevant to political actors in that system, and a contribution to the global demand for "more creative conceptual models to understand geographies of power" (Mountz, 2013, p. 831).

The present study utilises document analysis, yet my interpretation of historical and present-day materials is informed by periods of living and researching in Greenland. Over the course of 2014 and 2015, I spent 12 weeks in Nuuk, split between three visits while employed as a guest lecturer in political science at Ilisimatusarfik/University of Greenland. Besides interacting with students and undertaking participant observation in the community, in February 2014, I carried out a series of seven semistructured interviews with Greenlanders of various ages and backgrounds concerning Greenlandic identity, politics, and political participation. Ethnographic fieldwork experience in numerous island communities in Denmark, Norway, and the UK since 2001 has furthermore informed my comparative perspective.

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2. Islandness and independence

Scholarship and the popular imagination have bestowed peculiar qualities upon islands and archipelagos: Unambiguous maritime borders and separation from other land masses, small land area and/or population size, and frequently genuine cultural and environmental distinctions render island spaces relatively comprehensible and especially suitable as symbols of or carriers for mainland preoccupations (Lowenthal, 2007). Islands are especially amenable to encapsulation within systems of political power (Grydehøj, 2015; Steyn, 2015), and their portrayal "as distinct spaces and often distinct polities or jurisdictions creates a disposition for differentiated control and socio-political engineering that departs from the norm" (Baldacchino & Tsai, 2014, p. 15). These island conceptualisations are frequently projected out from the mainland and subject to reaction from islanders themselves (Baldacchino, 2008). Nevertheless, an island's easily defined limits – its self-evident beginning and ending – genuinely facilitate efforts to implement, assess, and communicate the results of radical or divergent policies (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2016a, 2016b).

Because islands and archipelagos are so easy to conceptualise as a whole, they are often regarded as naturally integral, as single units, notwithstanding their internal complexity. This results in resistance to: countenancing differentiation within an island (Picornell, 2014), the division of an island between two or more states (Baldacchino, 2013), and the interconnectedness of island boundedness and openness (Hay, 2013; Pugh, 2013a). Although different cultures conceptualise islands differently, the sense of island or archipelagic integrity, wholeness, and specialness from the perspective of the mainland and other small islands is a truly global phenomenon (Baldacchino, 2013). Islands seem to push political thinking into the 'territorial trap' against which Agnew (1994: 53) warns, privileging a "clear spatial demarcation of the territory within which the state exercises its power." Indeed, the image of the island holds a central position in our understanding of political authority more generally. As Steinberg (2005: 263) demonstrates, island geography proved instrumental in the formulation of Western conceptions of the territorial state "as a bounded, unified and homogeneous unit existing amidst a world of equivalent units." Even today, Mountz (2015: 637) argues, "Islands occupy a prominent place in the geographical imagination of politics. They frequently become sites of territorial conflict for their occupation of interstitial zones where power struggles unfold."

The tendency to confine the state to its territory encourages the idea that an island with a population ethnically distinct from that of its associated 'mainland' state possesses a natural trajectory toward independence. Because islands are so clearly demarcated on the map, they are exceptionally likely to be regarded as comprehensively bordered from the start and as potentially independent units. This is more likely to occur in a mainland society without direct cultural, political, or economic interest in the small island in question than it is in the island's metropolitan power. That is, the perceptions of citizens of China regarding Taiwan, of Australia regarding Norfolk Island, of the United Kingdom regarding Shetland, and so on may differ from those of citizens of other states. This point should not, however, be pressed too far, for just because metropolitan powers often regard islands as part of their territory does not prevent metropolitan powers from marking these component islands as territorially distinct: It is thus that states such as China, Australia, and the UK have all granted some of their constituent islands special administrative status and/or empowering or depowering exemptions from national law.

The same does not necessarily hold for mainland territories, the land borders of which may be messy, contested, or diffuse. Non-Danes may be naturally inclined to feel that the (island) Inuit of Greenland are destined for independence, but this inclination does not extend to the (mainland) Sámi of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. This is in part due to a circular causality in which island status (relatively) discourages cultural and economic integration, thereby ultimately reinforcing visions of island difference. Distinctions of the geographical imagination influence political predilections. Although most of the world's islands are unlikely to ever be perceived as potentially independent, all else being equal, this perception is more likely to apply to an island space than it is to a mainland space.

As developments in island studies have shown, it is insufficient to *merely* consider islands on their own terms: Islands must instead be understood relationally, in a way that transcends simplistic centre-periphery relationships and that addresses islands' interactions with the sea, other islands, mainlands, and the activities that span them (Grydehøj et al., 2015; Hayward, 2015; Pugh, 2016; Stratford, Baldacchino, McMahon, Farbotko, & Harwood, 2011). Even the islanding process – the conceptualisation of a place as an island – is contestable and fundamentally relational (Baldacchino & Clark, 2013; Pigou-Dennis & Grydehøj, 2014; Swaminathan, 2015).

This results in a tension between the perception of islands as spaces of difference and the perception of islands as subordinate to the mainland. According to Baldacchino (2015: 91):

> Islands come with a suite of features that allows them to 'work' quite effectively as 'others' in national-state formation […]. Their obvious material separation from the mainland (wherein the national capital typically resides) creates the optics for a close yet distinct island development trajectory and narrative.

Islands are perceived as especially suitable as independent spaces, yet their enhanced territoriality also allows them to play an ambiguous and potentially fruitful role within the larger state.

Islanders themselves do not universally regard their islands as naturally sovereign: Following the initial waves of post-World War II decolonisation, encouraged by the United Nations Charter's 'Declaration Regarding Non-Sovereign Territories' (1945) and the United Nations General Assembly's 'Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples' (1960), few substantially autonomous subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) have exhibited much urgency to pursue independence in recent decades. Although over 130 new sovereign states have emerged since World War II (including 33 small island states), just two island states (Palau and East Timor) have become sovereign since 1984 (McElroy & Parry, 2012). Meanwhile, 38 islands and archipelagos remain substantially autonomous but non-sovereign territories. It is not necessarily that such SNIJs have been denied independence by their colonial powers. Instead, these SNIJs tend to *resist* independence, "stubbornly refusing to budge" (Baldacchino, 2010, p. 47). Furthermore, many of those territories that became independent did so as a result of "imperial exhaustion" (Levine, 2012, p. 440) rather than through passionate struggle. Today, there are nearly as many SNIJs (38) as there are small island states (43), despite attempts by some mainland powers to push former colonies toward independence.

The propensity for SNIJs to remain non-sovereign may be linked to the advantages associated with this status. Although the causality is complex (Bertram, 2015), quantitative comparison of SNIJs and island microstates consistently finds that SNIJs significantly outperform their sovereign counterparts in terms of economic, health, and social measures (Armstrong & Read, 2000; Bertram, 2004; McElroy & Pearce, 2006). As Baldacchino (2010: 19–20) notes in his landmark exploration of *Island Enclaves*:

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