Over-Stating the Unrecognised State?

Reconsidering De Facto Independent Entities in the International System

Submitted by James C. Harvey to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis reconsiders the theoretical and conceptual parameters of unrecognised entities and *de facto* independent territories which endure non-recognition and lack formal sovereignty in international law. These entities are traditionally assumed to represent “unrecognised states” and “*de facto* states” which endure in the international and interstate systems despite lacking legal recognition of their sovereignty. The following study examines anomalous conceptual features emerging from definitions, theories, frameworks, and discourses which situate these territorial entities alongside sovereign states in the international system. It challenges the equivalence with statehood which currently dominates mainstream thinking and assesses whether the concept of secession is still the most appropriate explanatory and causal dynamic in the emergence of unrecognised entities.

The study engages with problematic areas of theoretical and conceptual discourse applied to unrecognised state-like entities. It examines how the case of Iraqi Kurdistan (as a *de facto* independent entity in the international system) deviates from long-standing assumptions on “unrecognised statehood” and existing conceptual frameworks designed for entities in different regional contexts. The discussion questions the appropriateness of using the unitary state as a theoretical reference point through which to understand ambiguous political systems of this type. The political and theoretical spaces occupied by these entities are examined not only in terms of international relations theory but also critical thinking on the production of power, ideology, and sovereignty. The discussion induces tensions into debates surrounding unrecognised states by arguing that it is inherently difficult to advance inquiry into unrecognised entities from a point of departure on sovereignty which is already embedded in state-centrism. The discussion examines how existing frameworks and approaches are open to critical revision and how the generalised assumptions of a small body of literature continue to circumscribe debates over unrecognised entities in academic analysis. The study frames the issue of *de facto* independent territories against a critical examination of approaches to sovereignty, secession, and the state. It also proposes an examination of these anomalous entities as *Paretian systems* – a theoretical perspective as yet unexplored within the field of study.
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Last, but not least, I thank my family and friends for their unwavering support throughout my research. In particular I wish to thank my tutors from Ruskin College Oxford, Hilda Kean and Stephen Howe, for starting me off on this journey.

This work is dedicated to the memory of AH, CRMB and PWL who sadly were unable to see its completion.
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