

**Godfrey Baldacchino (ed.), *The Political Economy of Divided Islands: Unified Geographies, Multiple Polities*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2013. 288pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-02312-4**

Franck Billé\*

This recent collection edited by Godfrey Baldacchino focuses on divided islands, a rare phenomenon that affects only 10 islands worldwide. Each of these islands is featured in a dedicated chapter of the book, making the collection a comprehensive study of this political scenario. The volume is prefaced by a short piece by geographer Philip Steinberg in which he reflects on the political nature of islands and their complex positioning with regard to the nation-state. The categories “island” or “state,” he insists, are neither absolute nor stable in time and space but are ideological – there are instead levels of stateness and islandness (p. ix). The preface is followed by a strong introduction by Baldacchino who further elaborates on the cultural imaginary of islands. He convincingly argues that the very separation and boundedness of islands reverberate core elements upon which the nation-state rests: “geographically defined, and often imagined as circular, an island is easier to hold, to own, to manage or to manipulate, to embrace and to caress” (p. 3). Partitioned islands therefore illuminate the fiction of the state as a discrete entity, a fiction reiterated time and time again through cartographic practices.

Steinberg’s preface and Baldacchino’s introduction both offer tantalizing insights that whet the appetite of the reader and set the scene for an intriguing exploration of local cultural interpretations of islandness. Unfortunately, the bulk of the book fails to deliver on that promise. The majority of the ten chapters that follow, each foregrounding one particular case study, do not pick up on the theoretical concerns elaborated by Baldacchino and barely extend beyond the descriptive. All authors are careful to present their data in a way that is unbiased and balanced, with ethnographic accounts that are well written and detailed, but these accounts for the most part lack in critical analysis and engagement. With a few exceptions, the chapters focus on the historical and cultural dynamics of the divisions effected on these islands but the insular nature of these struggles remains but a backdrop to the discussion. The chapter on Cyprus for instance vividly describes the tracing of the Green Line, which has hermetically, and lastingly, insulated one half of the island from the other, but we are told nothing about the situation beyond the coastline. Yet, in a book on divided islands, these concerns are paramount. What happens at the shore in terms of access to the sea, maritime exclusive zones, or fishing rights and practices are precisely the aspects that require analysis and unpacking. We are not told for example whether the Green Line extends into the sea (as it does at the border between California and Mexico).

The chapters all retrace the struggles and wars that have led to the division of these islands,

---

\* Frank Bille is a researcher at the University of Cambridge, and can be contacted at: fb265@cam.ac.uk

and they also do a wonderful job in describing the tension between, on the one hand, the will to separate and insulate and, on the other, the economic and cultural drive toward integration and reunification. However, the materiality of these islands never enters the discussion, to the extent that, at several points in the book, the reader occasionally forgets the setting of these disputes. Tellingly, the terms “fishing” or “shore” are not even listed as entries in the index.

The book also suffers from poor organization and unevenness. The first chapter that follows the introduction is not a case study as the reader might anticipate, but another theoretical piece, which goes over similar ground to the introduction, albeit in a less stimulating and evocative way. This “second introduction” breaks the flow and weakens the impact of the introduction, and it might have been preferable to combine them into a longer single introductory piece. The last chapter of the collection also stands out. Very strong analytically, it doubles up as a conclusion or afterword. While this is not necessarily a problem, it further emphasizes the analytical weakness of the intervening chapters. Finally, the island of Bolshoi Ussuriiski/Heixiazi is misspelled twice: “Teixihazi” (instead of “Heixiazi”) in the introduction, and “Bolshoi Urrusiyski” (instead of “Bolshoi Ussuriiski”) on the map (p. xxv).

Overall, the quality of the collection is uneven. Some chapters, like Marie Redon’s “Hispaniola” or Steven Hillebrink’s “Saint Martin/Sint Marteen,” are especially strong and offer tantalizing if somewhat under-theorized insights. Others, such as the one by May, Matbob and Papoutsaki on “New Guinea” are weaker. To a large extent this unevenness is due to the nature of the project. The book aimed to offer a comprehensive overview of all divided islands but, as Baldacchino himself notes, sourcing a suitably competent author proved difficult. At times the reader is left to wonder whether some of the chapters have been included merely for the sake of completeness.

Despite these weaknesses, several chapters such as the introduction by Godfrey Baldacchino, Marie Redon’s piece on Hispaniola, and the final chapter by Ray Burnett make this edited volume well worth reading. As the first collection bringing these intriguing cases together, it will be of interest to island studies scholars, and will also make a valuable contribution to the emerging field of border studies.