A review of ‘Invisible Countries: Journeys to the Edge of Nationhood’

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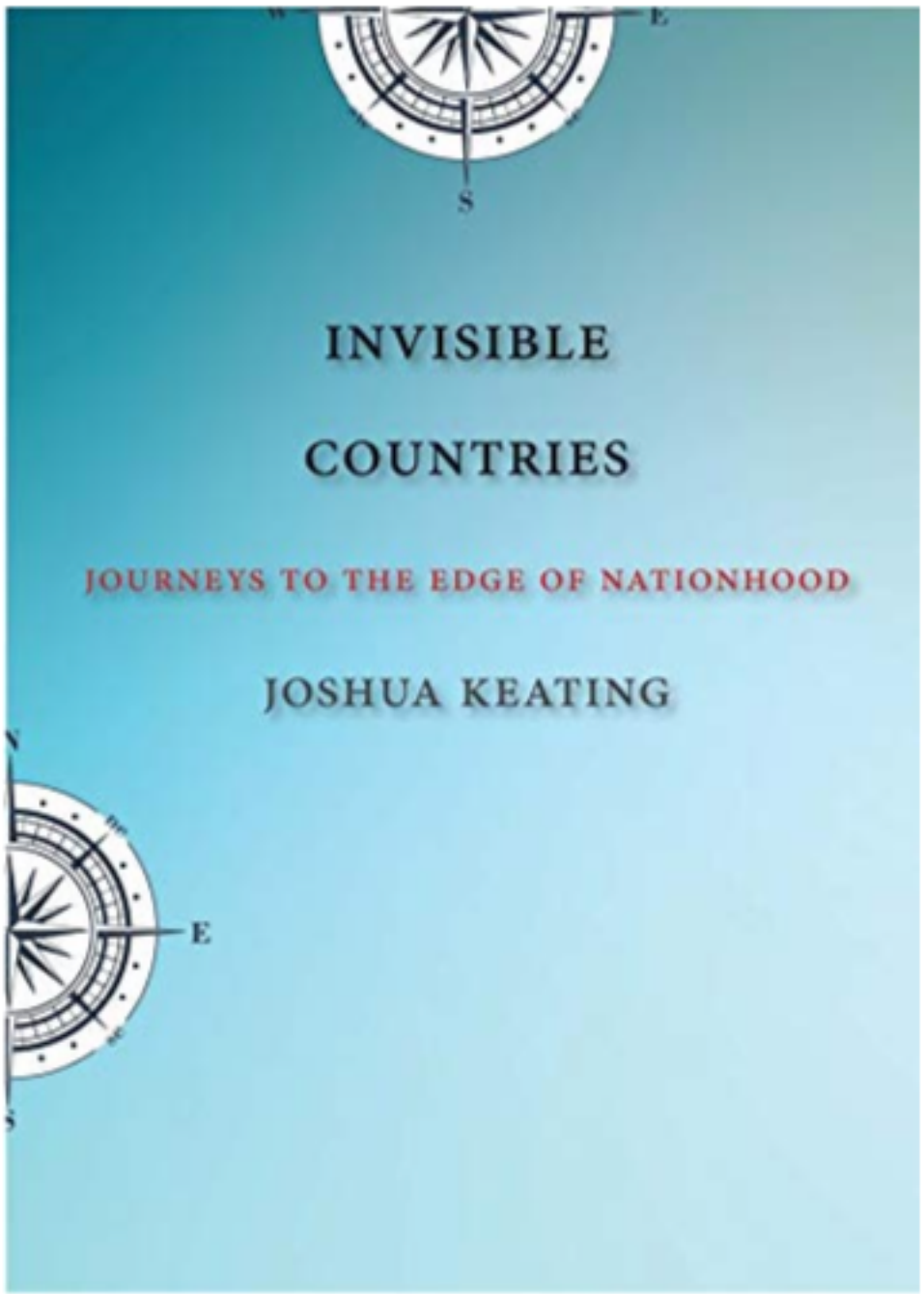

Keating, J. (2018) *Invisible Countries: Journeys to the Edge of Nationhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

Abstract

Joshua Keating's *Invisible Countries* weaves together personal narrative with historical fact and academic conjecture to produce a highly engaging book, which steps back from modern geopolitics to take a long, hard look at the model of 'countries' driving it all. Although not yet central in the canon of geopolitical literature, Keating's work goes a long way to prompt discussions on the nature of borders and how they can be adapted to serve their people. He also addresses how notions of sovereignty can work to reinforce oppression, and how these can be brought into the modern world, although his lack of critical engagement somewhat limits the book's utility as a driver of cartographical change. This review builds on these discussions, supporting and critiquing his ideas and transferring them into the world of contemporary geopolitics.

1. Introduction

If the words Abkhazia, Akwesasne or Kurdistan mean anything to you, then you're doing better than most; perhaps the more run-of-the-mill Somaliland or Kiribati sound familiar. I doubt the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta (The Knights of Malta) is ringing many bells. *Invisible Countries* is essentially a study of why. Most of these actual or would-be 'nations' are facing threats to their very existence, while some are still trying to prove that they exist at all. Using those first five as case studies, interspersed with smaller oddities such as the Knights, Keating analyses, undermines and builds on the idea of a 'country', where it came from and where it might be going, who it serves and who it oppresses. In this way, Keating builds on the work of Caspersen and Stansfield, who offer a comprehensive analysis of the role of unrecognised entities in the 'international country system of sovereign states' (Caspersen and Stanfield, 2014), as well as Wallerstein (who investigates the development of the 'interstate system') (Wallerstein, 2004) and many others. While Keating's innovative synthesis of case studies with geographical theory, current events and critique of nationalism does diverge from this existing canon, he ends up a fence-sitter, arguing both that the country/nation-state model will remain useful and practical into the future, and that its numerous shortcomings require a serious rethink of that system.

2. Discussion

2.1 Neat little boxes

Absolutely integral to the book is the idea of a neat country-filled map, refreshingly imagined by Keating as a 'club', with bylaws including that every

person and piece of land must belong to only one country, and that the current set of countries 'should be left in place wherever possible' (pp.8-9). Throughout the book he disparages this notion, pointing out that somewhere can have 'all the trappings of countryhood' (p.108) and yet be unrecognised, seeing the granting of sovereignty as an entirely political process – Taiwan is an apt example, as a 'country' well known for buying off poorer (but UN-recognised) countries like Gambia in return for recognition (Anderson et al., 2019). Keating is also curtly critical of the western predisposition to see bigger and stronger countries as more important, criticising the denotation of Kiribati as only the 'canary in the coal mine' for rising sea levels. At times he seems to slip up in this moral crusade, however, questioning whether countries like Greece have any more right to their artefacts than the powerful UK (disregarding the dramatically different importance placed on the artefacts by their respective populations), and suggesting that Liberland (a well-known micro-nation between Croatia and Serbia) is less valid than other unrecognised states because no-one has 'fought and died' for it (p.146). Both attitudes perhaps betray a certain unconscious sympathy for the power-driven worldview of his native America.

Keating also repeatedly returns to the concept of nationalism, skilfully attacking it for the unreasonable prerequisite that all people should be grouped into homogenous masses without overlap, on which the concept of a 'nation' is ultimately based. This goes against the work of established geographers like Andreas Wimmer, who draws attention to the positive role of nationalism in decolonisation processes (2019), although Keating defends his ideas convincingly. However, he pushes this a step further to make arguably his most contentious point, that ethnically cohesive nation-states today (like Romania) only became so 'through a process of ethnic cleansing and genocide' (p.55). While this criticism is important, it seems too broad-brush, especially regarding historically peaceful (yet homogenous) nations like Iceland, and it seems to disregard the benefits of a 'nation', for example the support of displaced Tibetans provided by their 'national' government-in-exile (McConnell, 2009). Many scholars point instead to the current so-called 'Long Peace' which nation-states have produced (Gaddis, 1986), while some have even pointed to the importance to state creation of profit networks arising from ethnic conflict (King, 2011).

2.2. Team America: World Police

Keating describes the aforementioned global 'club' of countries as a largely western invention, and sees western powers (most importantly the USA and UN) as its modern guardians, both politically and militarily. He condenses this key idea into that of a 'cartographical stasis', referencing the recent decline in the number of border changes, for which he provides several explanations.

Inertia is partially to blame, because the reasons for countries to form (decolonisation, post-war turmoil etc.) have largely disappeared as interstate wars and colonialism have become rarer (as part of the aforementioned 'Long Peace'). He references Pinker's 'decline in violence' theory to support this, that today's world is simply less violent (2011), although he points to the Syrian Civil War as a counterexample to this, and others have also been critical of Pinker. Another reason for stasis is the production of political norms against redrawing borders: Obama's 2014 speech against the Russian annexation of Crimea is Keating's well-chosen example, where Obama claims that military intervention and redrawing borders are radically different things, of which the latter is a far worse crime.

This knee-jerk aversion to disrupting stasis is typical of the America Keating portrays, which utilises the UN Charter's assertion that it opposes any 'disruption of the national unity or territorial integrity of a country' (1960) as cover for protecting the status quo, often through force. Keating points out that America had actually been terrified of the USSR breaking up, due to the possibility of nuclear proliferation and ultimately instability. This mindset is still dominant today, especially after the failure of South Sudan – a rare US-backed independence movement – reinforced the view that border changes bring no good (Rudincová, 2017). Even America's closest allies have been stung: the Kurds received strong US backing in their fight against ISIS on top of repeated pledges of independence across their history, but were left conspicuously alone after declaring independence in 2017 (Calamur, 2017). This is causing wannabe nations like Somaliland to start thinking they might be better off without false American promises; the US is, above all, a self-interested guardian of stasis.

Keating fascinatingly links this attitude to colonialism, especially in relation to Native American nations within the USA itself: he eloquently paints pictures of the complex and resilient indigenous societal structures that existed before European contact. He further reminds us of how these were continually ground down by American box-drawing and impositions of foreign institutions, and that all American land is in fact contested. He praises the Mohawk structures being revived today in the Akwesasne reservation (Alfred, 2014), along with the 'gurti' elders in Somaliland's parliament (Farah, 2007), which Keating argues might help explain their greater stability than Somalia. In this way he discusses how nationalism can actually be empowering to today's native peoples, contrasting his earlier viewpoints, but he is also right to address downsides including rampant smuggling and casino operation. American influence is rarely a 'blessing' without baggage, especially when it comes to protecting cartographical stasis.

2.3. Here today, gone tomorrow

The clear counterpart to this discussion of space is Keating's references to time, which pervade the book's geographical discussion, including the refreshing depiction of thought systems before the conquest of the country model. Entities like the Holy Roman Empire operated with a 'fluidity which is startling to the modern mind' (Wedgwood, 2005: 15), where changes to the complex and often overlapping borders, rulers and alliances of their supposed ruling entities meant little to most people (far less so than their identified religions or social groups). Today, even the most repressive regimes at least claim to rule on behalf of their people, and Keating recognises the role of nationalism in giving people a stake in their own societies. Between those two realities he sketches out a series of consequential movements and agreements, amongst them the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, 1919 Paris Peace Conference and 1933 Montevideo Convention, all of which moulded today's reality. He also raises the intriguing link between countries that coalesced earlier into nations and those that built the biggest empires, although he fails to probe further into examples like the UK with its distinct home nations.

Turning to the future and the now, Keating highlights a plethora of modern threats to sovereignty, including the depopulation of Ukraine and the question of whether countries can die, as well as the attempts of ISIS to establish a political entity separate from the two countries it was formally within (Mabon, 2017). He repeatedly comes back to the Crimean question, still fresh at time of the book's publication in 2018, which he sees as a potential 'turning point' indicating an end to cartographical stasis. However, time seems to have proved him wrong, with Crimea subsiding into another frozen conflict zone much like Abkhazia.

2.4. International modelling

Although tentative in this respect, Keating does go some way to providing us with alternative models to the nation state, having waxed lyrical about its drawbacks. The Knights of Malta make another appearance here for their unique arrangement of sovereignty – more like a charity crossed with a political party, but one recognised by over a hundred UN member states (Cox, 2006). While using this as a model for other groups and countries 'seems a long way off' (p.64), he is more optimistic about Rojava, the self-proclaimed state in north-eastern Syria with a federalist, secular and surprisingly feminist structure (although Keating doesn't shy away from allegations of torture and use of child soldiers). He calls it 'a critique of the nation-state model itself' (p.184), although in practice it operates much like a traditional country, suggesting perhaps an unwillingness to explore more radical examples. Keating's discussion of Native American nations and their model of 'nested sovereignty' (Simpson, 2014: 11) is more adventurous, with their community-focused structures diverging much more from the European model, although

he is understandably reluctant to propose them as a model due to their history as victims of genocide.

Keating is admirably unafraid of ascending to theoretical heights, incorporating Burkett's model of 'ex-situ nationhood', which proposes that countries like Kiribati be represented internationally even without any land (when it inevitably sinks into the Pacific). A symbolic team might man some floating platform to guard their marine claims, although he dismisses this idea as preserving cartographical stasis 'to the point of parody' (p.220). The internet is also brought into the discussion: Keating moves to ridicule the 'old-fashioned' notions of 'online' as some utopia removed from the shackles of geopolitics, and he draws attention to moves by countries 'to impose authority and territoriality over the Internet' (p.104) like China's Great Firewall. On the other hand, with VPNs gaining popularity and a myriad examples of global movements utilising the internet (such as 2021's BLM protests) (Olson, 2021), this is certainly one area that he is disappointingly reluctant to properly explore.

3. Conclusion

Ultimately Keating concludes that countries are the best way of guarding both individual freedoms and world peace, but also that 'All borders should be questioned' (p.176), which perfectly distils his extensive and engaging critique, as well as his tendency to report problems rather than provide solutions. At once insightful and grounded, this book has much to offer the geographical community, including highlighting the very real problems facing the politicians and populaces of the world's contested zones. He brings together a wide spectrum of scholars for new discussions on the merits (or otherwise) of different models for international politics, and threads this all through with anecdotes and personal style that bring these weighty subjects down to earth. Those interested could explore the innovative model proposed by Buzard et al. for the categorisation and understanding of unrecognised states (Buzard et al., 2016), Nina Caspersen's analysis of the impacts of non-recognition (Caspersen, 2017), or Tim Marshall's pop-Geography classic *Prisoners of Geography*, which illustrates the strengths and challenges of various players within the 'country club' (Marshall, 2015). In short however, for experts, newcomers and anyone in between, it pays to sit down with this book and take a journey to the edge of nationhood.

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