

Klaus Dodds, Alan D Hemmings and Peder Roberts (eds.), *Handbook on the Politics of Antarctica* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017)

Nordicum-Mediterraneum may not seem like the most obvious title in which to find a review of the *Handbook on the Politics of Antarctica*. Nevertheless, given the increasing focus on Arctic issues in this journal and the comparisons to the opposite pole that they invariably generate, a review of this large (both physically and figuratively) contribution to polar social science is fitting. Iceland became a party to the Antarctic Treaty in 2015 but Antarctica has long been constructed through the actions, discourse and interpretations of European states, in particular Norway by virtue of the explorations of Roald Amundsen and later as a claimant state.

The edited collection - containing an impressive thirty-seven chapters by leading scholars on Antarctic law, geopolitics, social science, and even art and literature, is one of the latest in an emerging trend of "handbooks" that bring together contributions from different perspectives on topics of wide academic interest. The usual approach is to mix a fairly descriptive account to aid newcomers to the field alongside cutting-edge analysis of contemporary and - for the brave - future developments. On these terms, the *Handbook on the Politics of Antarctica* does not disappoint.

The Antarctic regime is *sui generis*. In a certain sense, *any* region of the World can be considered *sui generis* to the extent that each will have unique features that are not replicated elsewhere. However, in the Antarctic, the very foundations of international relations since (at least) the Peace of Westphalia are turned on their head. While the rest of the World has been subjected to exclusive sovereignty claims (albeit, sometimes overlapping or contested), since 1959, the sovereignty claims in the Antarctic have been frozen. This is just the first and most obvious difference between the governance of the Poles. Nevertheless, Antarctic governance is not entirely separated from other legal regimes including the United Nations, the law of the sea, and international environmental law. Further, the international regime of the Antarctic cannot be kept entirely insulated from global changes and challenges, including the rise of the Asian states, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the renaissance of Russia, and, closer to the Antarctic continent, the festering sore of Las Malvinas/the Falkland Islands. The *Handbook* presents Antarctic issue areas in a global light - it is not a simple textbook on the Antarctic Treaty System, isolated from the external international relations that construct it.

Following an introduction that outlines the basics of the Antarctic system and summarises the contents, the book is presented in four parts. The first part, "Conceptualizing Antarctica" presents the Antarctic of the imagination, including political imaginations and constructions. Part Two, "Acting in and Beyond Antarctica," explores events and participants - how are Antarctic politics *performed*? "Regulating Antarctica," the third part, examines the frameworks for governing activities in the Antarctica, with emphasis on

environmental norms (both hard and soft law), law of the sea (especially fisheries management), tourism, and heritage. The final part, ambitiously titled “Futures in Antarctica,” considers where current political imaginings of the Antarctica will lead, especially in light of global power shifts.

The Poles are generally imagined as the ends of the World – a vision that only makes sense if you start in the middle. The Antarctic is imagined as an uninhabited wilderness. If there are no people there, then perhaps there is no need for law, let alone political theory. However, this view only makes sense if you assume the Antarctic is a pre-defined natural space, not one constructed by law, politics, selective historic records, and literature. The emphasis on science as one of the tools to maintain the peace in Antarctica has led to an impressive body of natural scientific research in a notoriously hard-to-reach location. However, the extent of natural science, its existence in the first place, can only be understood using political science. *Why* does the treaty prioritise science and scientific cooperation? Answer: to maintain peaceful relations. *Why* are so many countries sending scientific missions down there? Answer: to earn the right to partake in decision-making for the continent and, in some cases, to maintain territorial claims. Social science regarding the Antarctic is lagging behind natural science and this *Handbook* is a major contribution as well as proof that you do not need a generous fieldwork budget to study the Antarctic.

The *Handbook* would perhaps best be described as a collection of essays from different disciplines than as an *interdisciplinary* work *per se* – the individual contributions are rarely themselves interdisciplinary. Not only do the contributors come from different disciplines and reflect the different assumptions at the bases of these, but they reach different conclusions. For example, political scientist Anne-Marie Brady portrays China as a threat to the stability of the Antarctic system and casts aspersions on Chinese motivations (Chapter nineteen). Meanwhile, lawyer Alan Hemmings critiques the “us and them” constructions of Antarctic activities and assumptions about the rightful place of peoples of European origin on the continent contrasted against concerns about new actors. “Science is international and value-free until it isn’t one of us doing it” (Chapter thirty-two). In this reviewer’s favourite chapter, Elizabeth Leane explores the implicit racism in Antarctic fiction that assumes the normality of the white, European, male presence and paints the Asians as the “other” (Chapter two).

Notwithstanding the diversity of approaches and views, some general themes emerge. Sovereignty may have been frozen but the original parties to the Antarctic Treaty (including only one Asian and one African state – and the African state at the time of signing being the white supremacist South Africa) still determine whose voices are heard. Colonialism and the image of the white male conqueror of a hostile frontier were and remain bases for

contemporary legitimacy in Arctic politics. Science is a ticket to the decision-making table - something that keeps “troublemakers” from developing countries at bay (108). The “old” Antarctic states must find a careful balance between defending their hegemony and accommodating “new” actors so that the latter do not threaten to undermine the system.

It is perhaps harsh to criticise a text of over 600 pages for what is missing but this reviewer was surprised that the *Whaling in the Antarctic* case and the broader issue of whaling in the Antarctic was not more directly addressed. However, since the handbook’s publication, Japan has announced its decision to leave the International Whaling Commission and to cease taking whales in the Southern Ocean, changing the basic premises of the legal dispute. Tim Stephens’ chapter on the law of the sea left this reviewer wanting more: each of the subsections could have been the subject of an independent chapter. What is the role of the International Seabed Authority in the Southern Ocean? Does it have one? The tension - and snobbery - between science and tourism might have been explored in more depth (though Chapter twenty-three, by Christina Braun, Fritz Hertel and Hans-Ulrich Peter, presents the depressing reality of the impact of scientific missions and the inadequacy of implementation of environmental protection and implicitly argues that it is not the tourists that are the problem). Ruth Davis (Chapter thirty-five) touches briefly on the precautionary principle but the pre-eminence given to “science-based decision-making” in the Antarctic poses a major barrier to the application of a precautionary approach that could have been more explicitly explored. Some leading Antarctic experts such as Jill Barrett and Kees Bastmeister are also missing. These gaps should not be viewed as criticisms of the *Handbook* but rather a reminder to interested readers to go beyond it as they continue their research.

Share this:

- [Share](#)