

# H-Diplo Review Essay 594

Stephanie Lawson. *Regional Politics in Oceania: From Colonialism and Cold War to the Pacific Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1009427616 (hardcover, \$135.00); 978-1009427630 (paperback, \$44.99); 978-1009427609 (ebook, \$44.99).

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Since *Regional Politics in Oceania* is an encyclopedic work, reviewing it requires some time. Not only in its painstakingly assembled arguments, but its ambition and scope—it is “encyclopedic” in providing a sophisticated analytical framework as well as a dense overview of multiple fundamental definitions of the world of Oceanian interrelations and identities.

Definitions and big pictures are at the core of this work, which is a good starting place for those who are less familiar with the Pacific Islands as central subjects for global diplomatic questions. Lawson, who is a distinguished emerita professor and longtime commentator on Oceanian politics, here presents a set of useful cross-cutting, foundational problematics to address. Critically, the narrative assumes nothing, asking what, for example, Oceania is. How can it be distinguished from a broader idea of the Pacific, or the Asia-Pacific? What about the nineteenth-century convention of designating “culture areas” denominated by Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, and how do these areas overlap Near and Remote Oceania, and what ascriptions do they carry (33-55)? What are the roles of area studies, development theory, modernization, civil society, and non-state actors, and how should any of these even be defined themselves in the Oceanian context?

As a result, most the first quarter of the book is dedicated to the sort of overview that has evolved from key literatures and debates, and is overlapped with extensive discussions about what “regional” means within Pacific Islands groups, whether or when they may include Aotearoa New Zealand, and how they configure with other regions like Australasia, or elements of Southeast Asia, like the shifting borders of postwar Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.<sup>1</sup>

The title itself, *Regional Politics in Oceania*, would suggest this to be a work of classic international relations and, indeed, there is fair attention paid to historical entities like the Pacific High Commission, the trials and colonial legacies of trusts and commonwealths, or the divides and attempts at common purpose evinced by the Pacific Islands Forum or the Melanesian Spearhead Group. The originality of the work,

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<sup>1</sup> Edward LiPuma, “The Formation of Nation-States and National Cultures in Oceania,” in Robert J. Foster, ed., *Nation Making: Emergent Identities in Postcolonial Melanesia*, (University of Michigan Press, 1997); Bronwen Douglas, “Naming ‘Polynesia’: Cartography, Geography, and Toponymy of the ‘Fifth Part of the World,’” *The Journal of Pacific History* 56:4 (2021): 375-414.

however, is that “politics” in Lawson’s narrative is not uniquely understood to be an overview of the colonial and post-colonial histories of the imperious British, French, Dutch, Japanese, Germans, and Americans, but a rendering of the political in terms of Indigenous Islander “identity politics” (11-15).

That is, which cultural and historical inheritances, legacies, and self-fashionings might dominate the constitution of communities that imagine kinship and difference? Imperial legacies are a key in terms of shared experiences of former colonial subjects, but so also are languages and social organization (the debated Polynesian, Melanesian divide), overlapping histories (Māori and Pakeha—European—in Aotearoa New Zealand, or Chinese and Austronesian communities in Taiwan), or race questions imputing hierarchies (who, for example, are the “authentic” people of the land).

To approach these questions, Lawson offers significant attention to colonial Cold War trusteeships, Indigenous articulations of “custom” (142-171) alliances, and an anticolonial Pacific Way, notably as advanced by the Fijian leader Ratu Mara, of consensus building, up through shared challenges and questions around nuclear politics, China’s military and aid influence, and continuing sovereignty struggles.

What is notable about this work, and what sets it apart, is that the identity politics of Oceania is rooted in deep history, not just contemporary concerns: “Colonialism to Cold War” here reaches back not only to postwar legacies, but 50,000 years, endeavoring to show how regionalism from primordial Sahul or Meganesia, Austronesian migrations, and archaeological evidence of the pottery-based Lapita Cultural Complex of Oceanian seafarers of coastal settlements and canoe rafts shaped, and continue to shape, so much of the deeply cultural inheritances of the identities which are Lawson’s true definition of regional “politics.” As a result, the analysis here is deeply indebted to generations of sociopolitical and geostrategic studies, linguists, anthropologists, and also the anticolonial or postcolonial analyses of Edward Said, Epeli Hau‘ofa, and Ron Crocombe.<sup>2</sup>

The latter two certainly come to bear strongly as the chapters shift into the politics of regional political representation, and here the author begins detailed and extended accounts of the colonial institutions of rule such as the South Pacific Commission, and the ways that both agitation and skillful diplomacy moved toward the creation of bodies such as the South Pacific Forum, with Indigenous leaders rather than European and American colonial officials at the head. Notably, the French maintained a strained and often absent relationship with these efforts, due to continuing nuclear testing and few efforts toward granting independence to French Polynesia or to Kanaky New Caledonia, contests which continue to the present day.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Verso, 1993); Epeli Hau‘ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” in Eric Waddell, Vijay Naudu and Epeli Hau‘ofa, eds., *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993): 2-16; Ron Crocombe, *The Pacific Way: An Emerging Identity* (Lotu Pasifika Productions, 1976). Note also that the “Meganesia” noted here is a reference to prehistoric Papua-New Guinea and Australia (also called Sahul) and not to be confused with the culture and political region of Melanesia.

<sup>3</sup> Nic Maclellan, “France and the Blue Pacific,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5:3 (April 30, 2018), 426-441, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.228>; JM Regnault, “L’ONU, la France et les décolonisations tardives: l’exemple des terres françaises d’Océanie,” (Presses universitaires d’Aix-Marseille, 2013).

What Lawson reminds the reader here is that these are discussions and trials of both Indigenous identity formation and textbook decolonization, subjects that in much critical historiography have moved past the diplomatic and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s and into the sovereignty struggles and cultural claims of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>4</sup> Here we see the author's argument recapitulated. This is, after all, still a work of "identity politics," but it is presented in a way that is so apparently standard and traditional (i.e. diplomats, prime ministers, commissions, telegrams, and regional meetings), that the key points might be missed. Notably, by using the salient example of Fijian leader Ratu Mara and his articulation of "the Pacific Way," the analysis turns adroitly around the ways in which Mara and other Islander leaders were attentive to both idealism and self-interest. They created a subtle and complex assertion of their own historical autonomy—and also held back from more radical currents when their own political power was threatened.

In a slowly unfolding chronicle, Lawson traces the ways that Oceanian leaders developed and based their political leadership on claims to custom and tradition. The question comes to mind as to what custom and tradition are, and who defines them and to what purposes. Lawson makes the case that these customs were in contradistinction to Western models of adversarial and even democratic politics; that Mara's Pacific Way was, consciously or not, almost a *noblesse oblige* system of understandings between Oceanian aristocratic elites with, in the case of Fiji, continuing loyalty to the patronage of British colonial practices and status within the context of independence.

Many new nationalisms were asserted through cultural identity politics, particularly through localized interpretations of "custom" and tradition, and selective, strategic rejection of Western models as inapplicable to Indigenous state development. The particularistic features of this diplomatic history are worth nothing. This history is structured by policy briefs and debates yet is only understandable through the aforementioned 50,000 years of Aboriginal, Papuan, and Austronesian migrations, human settlements of Oceanian archipelagoes, and deeply interpolated village rulership, status ranks, and legendary ancestors and genealogies that undergird so much of what defines politics through the Cold War and into the twenty-first century. By restoring the millennial history rather than relying only on the representations and employment of that history, *Regional Politics* engages with, without entangling itself, in the debates about what is "authentic" or "appropriated" about the past.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, even within these distinctions lie more complications. Such post-colonial efforts traded on strong hierarchical and particularly Polynesian governance models, often with disdain for Melanesian localized rule and, indeed, fear that large entities like Papua New Guinea could dominate Oceanian alliances and influences. While acknowledging the uniqueness of Oceanian sovereignty, Lawson also strongly notes the

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Ratuva, "Oceania," in Yifat Gutman, Jenny Wüstenberg, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (Routledge, 2023), 336-340; Epeli Hau'ofa, "The Ocean In Us," in Stewart Firth and Vijay Naidu, eds., *Understanding Oceania* (Canberra, 2019), 341-359.

<sup>5</sup> See such classic debates as, Jocelyn S. Linnekin, "Defining Tradition: Variation on the Hawaiian Identity," *American Ethnologist*, 10:2 (1983): 241-252; Jocelyn S. Linnekin, "Cultural Invention and the Dilemmas of Authenticity," *American Anthropologist* 93:2 (1991), 446-449; Roger Keesing, "Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific," *The Contemporary Pacific* 1 (1989): 19-42; Haunani-Kay Trask, "Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle," *The Contemporary Pacific* 3:1 (1991): 159-167.

continuing highly differentiated identity politics and regionalisms of her thesis, which results in the fracturing any simple, collective, shared alliance of “Pacific” peoples and their interests. She draws out the larger similitudes with comparisons to other regional alliance networks, particularly ASEAN (the Association for Southeast Asian Nations) and collectivities of African states.

As such, the question of interests, histories, and cultures is particularly (and literally) demarcated in chapters dedicated to subregionalisms. They build off of Mara’s Pacific Way, but also strongly focus on the developing sense of non-inclusivity, where, for example, politician and jurist Bernard Narokobi of Papua New Guinea and political and independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Kanaky New Caledonia, articulated stronger Melanesian identities as compared to Fijian, Tongan, or Samoan “ways.” The Melanesian Spearhead Group was also notably much more militantly anti-colonial than the largely Polynesian articulations, and strongly attached to *kastom*—as an often-radical articulation of local practices and authority.

The book also likewise discusses Micronesian assertions, though they are, in an argument that can be elaborated, presented to be less overtly militant in this period, while strongly anti-colonial and anti-nuclear.<sup>6</sup> Islander communities and leaders found themselves in shifting roles, agitating for autonomy and expression, yet cautious of disengaging or affronting the United States, France, and other powers in the region with their resources and influences—along with the continuously fluctuating roles of Australia and New Zealand as regional brokers.

As such, for example, British, French, American, and Chinese geostrategic interests in shaping territorial waters, fishing rights, military bases, trade agreements, and political alliances were constantly in tension with questions of “true” or “authentic” ancestral inheritances. Even these “subregional” questions had their own distinctions: conflicts between Taukei Fijians and Indo-Fijians; Kanak and Caldoche in Kanaky New Caledonia; Papuans and Indonesians in Irian Jaya.<sup>7</sup>

Notably, with the chapters framed around the workings and standings of the member states, salient historical moments, like the sinking of the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* by the French government, the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement, attempts to create an integrated commercial airline (Pacific Air), and the clashes of pro-independence Kanak groups with the French government and the FLNKS leading to Tjibaou’s assassination, are viewed here largely through the actions or discretion of the Forum and “the pragmatic approach to regional politics mediated by a range of more recent considerations” (223).

That pragmatism was often tested after the 1980s with significant upheavals that shook the elite model of multiple subregional “ways.” These included the series of Fiji coups after 1987, widespread armed violence

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<sup>6</sup> For a view on “Indigenous acts of resistance,” see Martha Smith Norris, *Domination and Resistance: The United States and the Marshall Islands During the Cold War* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Kalipate Tavola, “Towards a New Regional Diplomacy Architecture,” Greg Fry, Sandra Tarte, eds., *The New Pacific Diplomacy* (Canberra, 2015), 29; Kate Stone, “Oceania: A Critical Regionalism Challenging the Foreign Definition of Pacific Identities in Pursuit of Decolonised Destinies,” in Timothy M. Shaw, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Regionalisms* (Routledge, 2011), 253-269.

in Bougainville tied to mining, and questions about the stability of the Solomon Islands government at the turn on the twenty-first century. The limits of consensus strained comity when states and communities confronted tensions and outbreaks from within, and continuing rejections of “Western values” were demonstrated increasingly problematic as non-traditional male leaders made little headway in gaining authority, just as women almost categorically faced widespread discrimination as purportedly out of line with tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the major struggles induced direct intervention, usually by Australia and New Zealand, including East Timor’s brutal struggle for independence from Indonesia, which occasioned a UN peacekeeping force, and initiatives such as the Biketawa Declaration of 2000, on security and cooperation in the face of regional crises. Such actions often developed in response to policy debates with racialist overtones suggesting Oceanian upheavals were evidence of an “arc of instability,” or “Africanization,” or their shadow, “failed states” (261-291). All of these derogatory claims, as Lawson points out, were made despite the fact that most independent Pacific Island countries had impressive records of constitutional stability, including Samoa, the Cook Islands, Niue, Nauru, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands ranging from longevities from 18 to 42 years (266).<sup>9</sup>

The through-line of these arguments is that the deadly upheavals as in Bougainville, East Timor, and the Solomon Islands represented cases whose very violence tended to overshadow the complex intertwining of disparities and injustices linked to even broader factors: the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the command economy model of the Soviet sphere, and the unleashing of neoliberal globalization processes. These transformations—particularly neoliberal globalisms—were often promulgated from Australia and New Zealand, advanced by familiar contempt for local values and cultures in favor of economic development and privatization of island resources and commons. Yet members of the Pacific Forum themselves were also keen on exploring possibilities for trade and income. In their cases, however, they equally maintained a sharp focus on attending to “complex vulnerabilities, dependencies, and uncertainties that arise...with modernity, the processes of globalization and the damaging effects of climate change” (319).

As a grand survey, *Regional Politics in Oceania* navigates inexorably to the current century. Lingering decolonial tensions between Indonesia and West Papua continue to weigh on the situation, as leaders in Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Kanaky support independence for the Papuans

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<sup>8</sup> David Robie, *Blood On Their Banner: Nationalist Struggles in the South Pacific* (Zed, 1990); Geoffrey White, Lamont Lindstrom, eds., *Chiefs Today: Traditional Pacific Leadership and the Postcolonial State* (East-West Center, 2009); Tui Nicola Clery, Robin Metcalfe, “Activist Archives and Feminist Fragments: Claiming Space in the Archive for the Voices of Pacific Women and Girls,” *Education As Change* 22: 2 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/3594>.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart Firth, “Sovereignty and Independence in the Contemporary Pacific,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 1, nos. 1&2 (Spring and Fall, 1989), 75-96; Stephen Levine, “The Experience of Sovereignty in the Pacific: Island States and Political Autonomy in the Twenty-First Century,” in Eve Hepburn, Godfrey Baldacchino, eds., *Independence Movements in Subnational Island Jurisdictions* (Routledge, 2013), 44-61.

from Indonesia. Perhaps, though, the phenomenon that captures the most news attention of the contemporary Asia and Pacific regions is the oft-noted “rise of China.”<sup>10</sup>

Long histories tie China, which is sometimes called a new actor in the Pacific, very strongly to the seas from the age of Treasure Fleets in the fifteenth century, with a recurring theme, that of Chinese diasporas and labor migrations, particularly from the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Still, these histories stake out key modern moments after the normalization of relations in the 1970s, the accession of China to the World Bank, IMF, and WTO by the turn of the millennium, and the emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>12</sup> This marked a commitment to create trade and infrastructure networks across Asia, with strong investments in the Pacific Islands, which are sometimes criticized as debt traps, yet often welcomed by local leaders with little attention from the United States or Europeans.<sup>13</sup>

The key question here is whether these regional relationships will be configured from north-south to south-south, with strong Chinese financial, political, and perhaps military and security advocacy. Will they be forms of neo-colonialism or a balancing act of “friends to all” from the perspective of Pacific Island leaders? Critically, these shifts have not gone unnoticed, with leaders of the United States, European Union, Australia, and New Zealand all speaking of rebalancing, stepping up, and resetting relations, often neglected, with Trans-Pacific Partnership plans, or pivots to Asia. Likewise, on the diplomatic end—the Indo-Pacific articulation, exemplified by alliances such as the Australia-India-Japan-US Security Quadrilateral Dialogue (the Quad).<sup>14</sup>

In all, the point remains that the analysis must be “historically informed and politically attuned,” in order to make sense and telescope temporalities from “earliest human settlements and continuing through European exploration and colonization... decolonization, the Cold War, the various phases of regionalization, the rise of subregionalism” (361), all of which are woven through with the dynamics of culture, race, ethnicity, rights, democracy, and neocolonialism, as well as identity and agency.

Lawson makes an able case that, in many ways, there are only regional politics in Oceania. Her own expertise favors the examination of matters that are often related to the South Pacific Forum with an

<sup>10</sup> “79 ACP States Call for Human Rights Situation in West Papua to Be Addressed,” *Daily Post Vanuatu* (14 Dec 2019), [https://www.dailypost.vu/news/79-ACP-states-call-for-human-rights-situation-in-west-papua-to-be-addressed/article\\_9e25a50a-1cbe-11ea-bd79-375821e25846.html](https://www.dailypost.vu/news/79-ACP-states-call-for-human-rights-situation-in-west-papua-to-be-addressed/article_9e25a50a-1cbe-11ea-bd79-375821e25846.html); Edgar A. Porter, Terence Wesley-Smith, eds., *China in Oceania: Reshaping the Pacific* (Berghahn, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> See Paul D’Arcy, “The Chinese Pacifics: A Brief Historical Review,” *Journal of Pacific History* 49:4 (2014): 396–420.

<sup>12</sup> Xiaodi Ye, “Explaining China’s Hedging to the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *The China Review* 20:3 (August 2020), 205–237; Zia Ur Rahman, “A Comprehensive Overview of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its Implication for the Region and Beyond,” *Journal of Public Affairs* 22:1 (July 2020), 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2298>.

<sup>13</sup> Michal Himmer, Zdeněk Rod, “Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality of Myth?” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18:2 (2022), 250–272.

<sup>14</sup> On the shifting nature of relations, see Zulfqar Khan, Fouzia Amin, “Pivot and Rebalancing: Implications for Asia-Pacific Region,” *Policy Perspectives* 12:2 (2015), 3–28; Tomohiko Satake, “The Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Possibilities and Challenges,” Bhubhindar Singh, Sarah Teo, eds., *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific* (Routledge, 2020), ebook, chapter 3.

emphasis on “south.”<sup>15</sup> The deep time frame and broad strokes of globalism and globalization nonetheless stand out. This work is a necessary corrective to views that the Pacific Rim—if underscoring only Asia and the Americas—adequately defines a critical construct called the Asia-Pacific.<sup>16</sup>

Here, instead, is—as noted—an encyclopedic argument for the salient roles of the many regionalisms of Oceania, whether near or remote, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, or Australasia, and the shaping force of the identity politics of Pacific Islanders themselves. Importantly, the narratives and analyses turn out to be not only in Oceania but of Oceania, and cognizant of the thousands of years—not just hundreds—that continue to shape its many regions.

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<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Lawson, *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa* (Cambridge, 1996); Lawson, *The Failure of Democratic Politics in Fiji* (Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Cummings, “Rimspeak; or, The Discourse of the “Pacific Rim,” in Arif Dirlik, ed., *What Is In a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, (Rowan & Littlefield, 1998), 53-72, and Arif Dirlik, “There is More in the Rim Than Meets the Eye: Thoughts on the “Pacific Idea,” in in Dirlik, ed., *What Is In a Rim?:* 351-370.