

Review on a Ph.D. thesis

Tomáš Bruner, *Sinking Islands and the United States Security Council*

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The Ph.D. dissertation submitted by Tomáš Bruner focuses on the positions of states towards the possibility of using the UNSC as a platform for dealing with the threat posed to the small island states by climate change. From a more general perspective, the dissertation hence tackles the issue of how states use international institutions and seek to (re-)interpret their roles.

Overall, the thesis makes a very relevant contribution to the research on the UNSC's involvement in climate change. It is marked by several strengths. At the theoretical level, the thesis proceeds from critical legal geography. The author justifies the selection of this approach by emphasizing its innovative perspective on the relationship between the following three concepts: law, space, and power. By relying on critical legal geography, the thesis contributes in two respects to the current study of international institutions, international security, as well as global environmental politics. First, it supports in a useful way the attempts to employ the conceptual and theoretical approaches from legal studies in International Relations. In this way, the thesis represents a valuable contribution to the multidisciplinary study of international relations. Second, the thesis also helps to expand the critical interpretations of world politics. The author managed to explain very comprehensively the major tenets of critical legal geography in the second chapter of the dissertation. In addition, the thesis contextualizes the chosen theoretical perspective in the broader relevant literature.

In methodological terms, the thesis conducts a content (thematic) analysis. More specifically, the authors explores the minutes from the meetings of the UNSC and statements made at those meetings by state representatives. The analysis of statements was guided by a specific set of questions. The work with the texts was based on an explicit coding scheme. It has to be highly appreciated that the author avoided merely describing the positions of actors on the basis of their reading. Instead, he developed and systematically applied a solid methodological solution to deal with the issue.

Empirically, the thesis identifies three broad groups of countries with regard to the role of the UNSC and the sinking islands: developed states, rapidly developing states, and the sinking islands themselves. It finds out that the sinking islands argue that the UNSC has the sufficient mandate to deal with their worsening situation. On the contrary, the rapidly developing countries assert that the UNSC has not been provided with a mandate to address the issue. Although the developed states in general acknowledge the involvement of the UNSC in the deteriorating situation of the sinking islands, they are not ready to initiate or support its independent and more extensive action. These conclusions are not particularly astonishing, given the genuine interest of the sinking islands in the issue and the general reluctance of the rapidly developing states to empower and extend the authority of global institutions (as well as their concerns about the international efforts to tackle climate change due to their interest in economic development conditioned by the production of GHG emissions). However, this does not diminish the empirical relevancy of the thesis. On the contrary, it only demonstrates the validity of the empirical analysis that was carried out by the author.

Moreover, the thesis definitely has an empirical value added. There are two particular aspects that can be highlighted. First, concerning the developed states the conventional pattern that is manifested at the UNFCCC is characterized by the division between USA and the other “Anglo-Saxon” powers (Australia, Canada) and Japan (which are reluctant to the effort to tackle climate change internationally) on the one side and the EU cooperating with the small developing countries (including the sinking islands) on the other side. What is quite interesting is that the author does not find a similar division in the positions of the developed states with regard to the participation in the UNSC. Second, the last part of the empirical chapter on deviant positions brings very interesting information that again extends the intuitive and conventional understandings.

My impression is that the thesis does not completely exhaust the overall potential of critical legal geography for exploring the given issue. More concretely, I think that if the author engaged in a deeper discourse analysis he could use critical legal geography to reach even more interesting and less evident findings. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the author succeeded on the whole in his application of this theoretical approach.

After stressing the virtues of the thesis, I would also like to appreciate that the author sought to react in the text of the submitted thesis to several critical points that I raised in my previous

review of the preliminary version of the text. It still seems to me that the conventional IR rationalist/political economy perspective could both explain and predict the identified positions rather accurately. The reason is that these positions more or less correspond to benefit and costs stemming from the potential UNSC action to the respective states. However, the final version of the thesis points out several aspects of the positions that would be difficult to explain from the conventional perspective but that could be clarified with critical legal geography. I suppose that by presenting these aspects the author manages to explain considerably better how his analysis based on critical legal geography enriches our understanding. Nevertheless, I still regret that the author does not engage in a more extensive way with the existing literature on the global climate cooperation/the UNFCCC, as well on cooperation in the UNSC in general.

I completely respect that the author wants to order and structure the individual parts of the thesis in the way that he finds convenient. That said, I still did not find suitable to place the factual descriptions of the small islands issue and UNSC competences with a real literature review in a chapter entitled as a literature review.

What must be appreciated is that the author redefined/renamed his key methodological approach as content analysis (as opposed to discourse analysis that was articulated as the methodological approach in the previous version). I suppose that this corresponds better to the real methodological character of the conducted analysis. Importantly, the new version of the thesis provides crucial information on unitization and the number of identified statements.

Overall, I would only like to reiterate that Tomáš Bruner presents in his thesis a very solid empirical analysis with a good theoretical and methodological underpinning. There is no doubt that this thesis deserves to be defended.

Jan Karlas

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