

Review – James Ker-Lindsay’s YouTube Channel

Written by Irene Fernández-Molina

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IRENE FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA, JAN 24 2021

James Ker-Lindsay’s YouTube Channel

By James Ker-Lindsay

YouTube, since 2019

The COVID-19 pandemic has got many of us trying our hand at online teaching and learning. But some academics were ahead of the pack in foreseeing the possibilities of unrestricted knowledge dissemination through popular video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. That is the case for Professor James Ker-Lindsay, whose channel has recently celebrated its first anniversary. Over the past year, this channel devoted to “international relations, independence, statehood and the origins of countries” has accumulated some 60 videos and over 6,000 subscribers. In about 10 to 15 minutes, the videos accessibly examine key concepts such as the state, state recognition, self-determination, remedial secession, UN membership and *de facto* states, as well as a wide range of cases of secessionism, contested states and statehood conflicts from (Southeast) Europe, the post-Soviet space, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania. Happy endings following particularly intricate paths to independence – from Belgium to Eritrea to Bangladesh – are also discussed in a separate section.

Clearly scripted, concise and finished off with a helpful wrap-up, the videos mostly rely on Ker-Lindsay’s on-camera speaking. This means that, while they incorporate useful graphic support (e.g. maps, flags, pictures of political figures, screenshots of newspaper headlines, websites, primary documents and academic articles), they can also easily be listened to as podcasts – as I did myself with several of them. In either format, James Ker-Lindsay’s channel appears to be an incredibly valuable pedagogical and dissemination resource. The discussion of all issues and cases benefits from an authoritative voice, accuracy and effectiveness. A wealth of factual information is presented combining insights from history, law and politics, often in a welcome effort to clarify misunderstandings. This leaves the spectator/listener with a sense of satisfaction and a solid basic understanding. In this regard, the aims and style of the channel largely coincide with the thrust of Ker-Lindsay’s recent co-authored book *Secession and State Creation: What Everyone Needs to Know* (with Mikulas Fabry). Greater analytical depth and more distinctively original arguments can be found in the videos that build on previous ones on the same topic, especially when dealing with current affairs. Some of the analyses of topical issues sound like media commentary at its best.

Indeed, besides being a sort of introductory audio-visual textbook on statehood and secession, the channel works as a handy companion to help one make sense of a surprising amount of the international news. For instance, just looking at events from September-October 2020, a video in the channel talks through the historical background, in the context of decolonisation, of the ‘unhappy union’ at the origin of the secessionist uprising that is now reportedly in the making in Western Togoland – where the 1956 status plebiscite that resulted in integration in the soon independent Ghana did not settle all grievances. Another video addresses the debate as to whether a secessionist dispute involving a *de facto* state may be legally resolved by military means – by an attack from the parent state to retake and forcibly reintegrate the break-away territory – as apparently sought by the recent Azerbaijani offensive over Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Ker-Lindsay, the answer is mixed in terms of international law, given the tension between the established right of states to territorial integrity in general and the UN Security Council resolutions calling for a peaceful settlement of this conflict in particular. And the small print is even more relevant in the sphere of legitimacy, where the international community’s double standards regarding the use of force coexist with a growing scrutiny of war crimes and grave human rights violations.

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Finally, a third video sheds light on the recent US-sponsored Kosovo-Serbia agreement, including the strange triangle created by the incorporation of Israel as an unexpected guest in the “final bullet point.” Ker-Lindsay contends that the strictly bilateral deal is not the “major breakthrough” announced and adds little value to the EU-led economic normalisation process already under way. Its only novelty lies in Serbia and Kosovo’s commitment to pause their international recognition/derecognition battle for one year. Yet, the Trump administration’s real aim would have been to foster Israeli interests by securing mutual recognition between Israel and Kosovo as well as the (re)location of both the Kosovan and the Serbian embassies in Israel to the city of Jerusalem.

As these examples show, Ker-Lindsay’s offers many instructive answers. If there is any downside to this, it is that some outstanding question marks seem to be pushed to the background. This is, unsurprisingly, in line with the positivist approach that dominates the statehood and state recognition literature in IR. While by its very nature this field cannot be but state-centric – and for Ker-Lindsay, states indeed remain the “fundamental building block of the international system” – critical IR scholarship and statehood are still strange bedfellows. In the case of this channel, without changing the author’s own epistemological position, some core notions could be further problematised, if only to reflect the fact that the intense politics surrounding them is not a mere matter of conceptual or factual misunderstandings. A case in point is “the meaning of self-determination,” which is referred to as if this was a settled issue, as if the restrictive legal interpretation of such right (vs. the principle of state territorial integrity) and the prioritisation of so-called internal self-determination “within established states” that have prevailed following decolonisation, were no longer contentious and open to debate.

In fact, acknowledging the muddle may be the most accurate approach. This is clear from the discussion of the liminal political creatures existing in a “strange limbo” that are *de facto* states. According to Ker-Lindsay, the term *de facto* states is “highly subjective” and the subject is “marred in confusion and disagreement.” “Just as there are deep divisions over terminology,” he explains, “there are also fundamental differences over which territories ought to be understood as *de facto* states and which shouldn’t.” Similarly, while the point of departure in the video on state recognition is akin to the conventional, dualistic legal view of this concept, the subsequent examination of its practice leads to highlighting the “surprising number of ways” in which such recognition can be signalled bilaterally and multilaterally, including significant grey areas and “room for confusion.”

In other words, when it comes to the international politics of statehood and state recognition, one does not need to go full-on post-positivist to admit that some of our fundamental parameters have always been somewhat shaky. At the same time, the effort to unsettle assumptions and consider issues of positionality does not exempt us from getting the facts right, striving for accuracy and clarity, as Ker-Lindsay does so masterfully.

About the author:

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