the state in an era of unfettered capitalism was shown to belong to another century. Of course, the state cannot eliminate market pressures in the same way that it might, in theory, destroy the terrorist threat. The eurozone crisis is in part a story of financial markets bringing spendthrift governments to heel. But only states can resolve problems they themselves have created; whether the state operates from a position of strength or weakness, it remains the agent to which all eyes turn in an emergency.

The diversity of states

The enormous contrasts of population, wealth and power between countries are often underemphasized by those analysts who concentrate on either the formal equality of states (all are equally sovereign) or their form of government. But, clearly, neither sovereignty nor democracy matter for, say, small island nations at risk of disappearing into the ocean as a result of rising sea levels. Sovereignty is exercised by all states, but in varying conditions and with varying resources.

An overview of the distribution of states by population, income and their former colonial status provides insight into these divergent political realities. In particular, it shows how the strong form of the European state has not been fully replicated in a significant number of small, dependent post-colonial states. So, this section seeks to provide an assessment of the value of sovereignty in real-world conditions.

Population

We begin with an obvious contrast: between states large and small. At the top end of the distribution, China’s population exceeds that of the 160 smallest countries in the world combined. At the bottom end, the population of most countries in world is less than 10 million; one in five fall below 1 million (Table 2.3). In median position sits Switzerland (7.9 million) – a country usually presented as ‘small’ but which can only be viewed as such from the perspective of larger, usually Western, states.

Most microstates are islands in the Caribbean, the Pacific or off the African coast. They are, indeed, best understood as islands rather than states. Mostly, they possess limited capacity to shape their own destiny. They are what Jackson (1990, p. 1) calls quasi-states, ‘lacking many of the marks and merits of empirical statehood’. In practice, microstates must seek protection from larger patrons. Their formal designation as sovereign entities is largely a tribute to the power of statehood as the world’s overriding principle of political organization.

We should not, however, assume that all small states are dysfunctional. Newer regional groupings such as the European Union provide nests in which small countries can grow and develop. And several established microstates in Europe have combined political stability with economic success. In the 1970s, Dahl and Tufte cited democratic Luxembourg, then the fifth wealthiest country in the world.