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BOOK REVIEW

Why Do "Failed States" Exist?

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Susan L. Woodward. *The Ideology of Failed States: Why Intervention Fails*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 324 pp., $89.99 hardback (ISBN: 978-1107176423).

The concept of a "failed state" presents theoretical and empirical problems due to definitional complexity and the insufficient precision given to identifying a failed state. Moreover, the political ramifications of the term threaten countries labeled this way. Such propositions guide *The Ideology of Failed States*, an in-depth investigation into the role that labels play in the relationship between states and institutions. In this book, Woodward criticizes international institutions and the interventionist model of "failed states" they employ for sustaining the existing ideology surrounding the term. Her analysis of social reality—a reflection of why and how names matter in the international system—centers on the notion that the "failed state" concept is not only controversial but also needs to be deconstructed constantly. This entails understanding how failed states are framed, considering three core aspects: what ideology governs failed states, what sustains that ideology, and why intervention rooted in that ideology fails.

The central argument of the book—that "failed state" is not merely a simple label but rather an ideology—builds on Appleby (1978), who considers ideology to be the process of establishing a set of *beliefs and perceptions* with regard to a specific reality. Woodward argues that "failed state" works as an ideology because institutions, motivated by their beliefs and perceptions, apply their institutional policy agendas to countries that receive the "failed state" label due to a "need to accomplish their own organization mandates and goals" (7–8). At the same time, international institutions provide shared meaning and enable social action around it, making ideology a co-constitutive practice among different actors and levels. It is worth noting, however, that ideology does not function as a granted, determined, positivist assumption but rather is something constructed constantly through the engagement of local, national, and international actors as they address and (re)solve their issues of concern.

Throughout the eight chapters of the book, Woodward illustrates her analysis with numerous examples of countries and institutions—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, to mention a few—that work within the context of a "failed state," giving special attention to Bosnia (chapter 5; also the focus of her previous research [see Woodward 1995]) and Mali (chapter 7), supplemented with discussions of Liberia and Yemen (chapter 8). These various examples demonstrate that a label does more than merely attach a name to a place, person, or behavior. Moreover, while the book presents different *facets* of the same general idea, it also explores a range of thematic discussions

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around the central argument: the direct relationship between naming and framing, on the one hand, and the establishment of norms and frameworks designed to manage the labeled country, on the other (chapter 2); a historical perspective of how the East-West dynamic contributed not only to the emergence of the "failed state" concept but also to its reinforcement through different intervention mechanisms (chapter 3); and a critical analysis of state-building—still designed to be *the* solution to failed states, even if it perpetuates the "failed state" label and focuses on the performance of institutions instead of the target state (chapters 4–5).

Woodward's work highlights *the real problem* of the failed state, referring to sovereign consent, political will, and capacity as the three operational constraints that explain both why the "failed state" ideology fails (chapter 6) and why failed states are seen as a consequence of how institutions apply their state-building models (chapter 7). Intervening actors, for example, perceive the practical problems of failed states as the manifestation of a process in which "the onus of change lies on the countries at issue rather than on the intervening actors" (8). This ideology sustains itself by what I identify as "validity": states classified as "failed" represent the target of institutions that share common perceptions about what constitutes a failed state, generally legitimized and validated by the fact that "the problem lies on the state" (3). If true, the labeled state must then be rebuilt to become more secure and developed. Yet, as Woodward argues, this model of intervention fails because—even though the institutions "are actually focusing on their own capacities and resources [and] preparing their organizations" (7) "to do *their* work" (8)—there are "difficulties these [failed states] present to intervening actors to provide assistance according to their organizational procedures and international norms" (223). In addition, the intervention is also influenced by myriad factors, including the context, institutional capacity, and the perception of the labeled state (which also tends to reinforce the label and, consequently, justify the need for a more improved intervention, strengthening the ideology over the years).

The book will be essential for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars—particularly those focused on intervention, peace, and conflict studies. It clarifies important aspects of institutional work, contributes to demystifying the reasons why institutions pursue a collective desire, and demands that we think outside the box to go beyond the traditional model of intervention—to consider a change in theory and practice that departs from worn labels. It also opens new avenues of research. Woodward's analysis rests on the notion that institutions solve local problems through the "failed state" lens, and the target state speaks back to the institution through this lens. Future research might consider an analysis of how failed states recognize themselves as part of the label attached and how they operationalize such labeling as an instrument of political bargaining.

References

Appleby, Joyce. 1978. *Ideology and Economic Thought in Seventeenth-Century England.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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