Introduction: The Many Hands of the State

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Abstract
In this paper, Morgan and Orloff survey the contemporary study of states in the social sciences. They begin by tracing the history of scholarship on the state. The authors identify six main clusters of research on states that emerged through the effort to “bring the state back into” history and the social sciences. These clusters include the institutionalist turn; state formation and building; states, culture, symbolic power, and violence; states, empires and the transnational/global turn; implementing states; and states and social stratification. Discussing the contributions, salience, and limitations of these different approaches, Morgan and Orloff offer guiding statements for theoretically conceptualizing the state. First, the authors argue that the state cannot be replaced by concepts such as “governmentality,” “governance” or “institution.” Second, they contend that scholars should consider the ways in which states concentrate and use material and symbolic powers. Third, they suggest that contemporary states work through complex modes of governance. Finally, Morgan and Orloff assert that the “many hands of the state” offers a useful metaphor for thinking through the complexity and multiplicity of actors and institutions within the state. Morgan and Orloff conclude by reviewing the contents of their forthcoming edited volume.

Author Bios

Ann Shola Orloff is professor of sociology and political science and Board of Lady Managers of the Columbian Exposition Chair at Northwestern University. A founding editor of the journal Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society, Orloff is the co-editor of Remaking Modernity: Politics, History and Sociology (with Julia Adams and Elisabeth Clemens; Duke 2005) and the author of States, Markets, Families: Gender, Liberalism and Social Policy in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States (with Julia O'Connor and Sheila Shaver; Cambridge 1999), among other works. She is currently working on a manuscript, Farewell to Maternalism, Toward a Gender-Open Future? Transformations in Gendered Labor Policies and Feminist Politics.
The study of states over the past three or four decades calls forth a number of paradoxes.\(^1\) First, intensifying interest in studying states has run parallel to the intensifying forces of globalization. The more states seem to be challenged, undermined or entangled by global economic, social, cultural, and political forces, the more it seems that scholars reach for the term “state” in their analyses, even as they increasingly theorize states within the frameworks of empire and global relationships and let go of the “Westphalian” understanding of states as the only proper unit of analysis in politics. The intellectual focus on states also has spilled over into the policy domain, as actors operating within international organizations such as the IMF and World Bank – the very agents of globalization – have become fixated on shoring up states around the globe. Although many once advocated shrinking public sectors so as to liberate markets, policy-makers now believe that building up states and improving their “quality” (e.g. governance) is vital for economic development or political stability.\(^2\)

A second paradox is that the drive to focus on the state as an analytic category developed most powerfully within US academia, despite the widespread sense of many, correctly or not, that the US lacked a powerful state, at least with respect to its welfare functions, and has a governing apparatus that operates in fundamentally different ways than what the literature on states – above all in in Europe – suggested. We might have thought Germans, Scandinavians or the French would be the dominant intellectual force behind the study of states. Yet, in recent years, US-based scholars took the study of the state the farthest, perhaps as we felt most keenly the disjuncture between US international power and its lack of domestic capacities for

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\(^1\) We thank Alexander Reisenbichler for research assistance in preparing this chapter, and the comments of Julia Adams on an earlier version of it.

redistribution and planning; its subordination to illiberal racial arrangements; and the commitment of its political elites to “unfettered” capitalism (however much such capitalism owes its existence to the infrastructure of government). Some analysts also observed that the U.S. state fit uneasily with a European-inspired ideal-type often lurking in the scholarly imagination.³

The third paradox lies in the fact that, after a period of intense intellectual debate about the state, its autonomy (or lack thereof), and capabilities, theoretical analyses of the state waned at the same time that empirical studies of states increased and diversified. The debate between “state-centered” and “society-centered” accounts trailed off, and attempts to explicitly theorize states declined by the mid-1990s or so. Some analysts turned instead to studies of diffuse, capillary or “mobile mechanisms” of power and governance.⁴ Yet, attention to states is still pervasive in academic research and has generated enormously fruitful scholarly agendas. Clearly, this term signifies something to the authors of these works, yet explicit theoretical treatments of this concept are often limited or lacking.

Our collective project emerged, in many ways, out of these paradoxes. It is precisely the complex, puzzling, and multifaceted operation of political authority in the U.S. that has proven so fruitful for theoretical reflections upon the state, and inspired a number of scholars in our group. The drive to situate states in global contexts – economic and political interdependencies, imperial or neocolonial relationships, and transnational flows of ideas and cultural products – is another preoccupation of many, including those among us who thematize their concerns as those

of “empires,” with metropolitan and (neo)colonial states embedded in a transnational field of power. And many of those we have brought together have been engaged, for the most part independently of one another, in reflections upon larger theoretical questions about the meaning, contours, and reach of state power. With so much research veering off in so many different directions, the time is ripe to reconnect with one another on a higher, theoretical plane and reflect upon where we have been and where our research could go next.

Our aim in this introductory chapter is to provide some overarching reflections about the contemporary study of states. We offer our preliminary sense of the literature on states over the past few decades by reviewing some of the main clusters of research, highlighting in each body of work some strengths but also various tensions, limitations, or caveats. From these observations, we derive some general statements about how to conceptualize states. Our aim is not to impose a one-size-fits-all definition of the state or theoretical apparatus for studying it, but rather to highlight some of the key lessons that have been bequeathed to us by a rich, varied, and ever-expanding literature. In a final section, we briefly review the contents of this volume.

**Studying States: Intellectual Origins and Evolution**

Our interest in states, power, and politics was encouraged by the “sound of marching, charging feet” that was all around in the sixties and seventies, and then by the fallout, political and intellectual, from the decline of those movements and the new challenges of the “right turn” of neoliberalism. The 1970s had ushered in a shift within history and the social sciences to consider the *political* significance of *social* arrangements and processes. Traditional approaches toward politics and power had kept scholars focused on formal institutions, elites, and conventional forms of participation. Instead, social science historians and historically oriented
social scientists insisted on the significance of “politics from below,” and the social sources of power and interests, particularly as rooted in capitalism.\(^5\) And soon after, debates emerged around how “the state” (it was singular in those days) should fit into analysis of politics and power. A number of scholars who many in this group would call intellectual progenitors – including Skocpol, Tilly, Evans, Bourdieu – addressed the failures of neo-Marxist or, more broadly, class determinist accounts of politics with an approach that highlighted the state as potentially autonomous actor and institution, drawing on Weber, Tocqueville, and others. Specifically political logics derived from struggles over the means of coercion and administration, and competition in the world system of states. Against the grain of much previous social-historical analysis, scholars argued that politics was not fully determined by economic forces, either in the near term or in the “lonely hour of the last instance.”\(^6\) This critical intellectual move is captured in the phrase “bringing the state back in,” the title of the 1985 volume that still merits our attention – a move that can be seen in many ways as the epicenter of the scholarly movement Adams, Clemens and Orloff called the “second wave” of historical social science.\(^7\)

The movement to bring the state back in sparked controversy and debate, with some arguing the state had always been an important topic of scholarly analysis that did not need to be brought back in, while others saw this analytic move as both new and troublesome, substituting a vague, reified object for more precise concepts and terms.\(^8\) Scholarship on the state from the 1980s through the early 1990s, often conceived of the state as an actor that concentrated and

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institutionalized political authority and used that authority to mold the social, political, and economic world. Debates pitted neo-Weberian or state-centered accounts against neo-Marxist, pluralist or society-centered accounts, and focused on the issue – central to the Marxist theoretical framework that structured many academic debates – of the state’s relative or potential autonomy from dominant social forces, capital above all.9

This proved to be both a compelling and contested way to think about the state. It was compelling because it threw off the presumed subordination of the state to dominant economic groups while drawing attention to the weighty influence of states in the lives of the ordinary people who paid taxes, served in the military and were subject to laws and regulations. The political significance of the state was grounded in the assumption that states could be forces against capitalism, as for example, when Esping-Andersen wrote about “politics against markets” in social democratic Scandinavia, and US scholars considered the progressive legacies of the New Deal in curbing capitalism.10 Moreover, this approach helped link analyses of domestic and international politics, with the state as the central, sovereign actor that lies between these two spheres.11 Instead of thinking of states in terms of an essential class character, or merely as terrain upon which class struggle took place, they could be seen as reflecting also the concerns of political actors anchored in domestic political competition and the world system of

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9 The emergence of the question of states as actors may have been one of the first symptoms of a larger intellectual shift away from structuralism, and structural determination, toward agency. In neo-Marxist accounts, the state was almost wholly determined by class forces, its autonomy forever only “relative,” limited by “structural forces.” Was “agency in the air” as state actors, too, were seen as learning, puzzling, applying schema, intentionally pursuing goals?


11 In the words of Nettl, the state is the “basic, irreducible unit” in international relations, the “equivalent of the individual person in a society.” See J.P. Nettl, “The State as a Conceptual Variable,” World Politics, 20, No. 4 (July 1968): 559-592; and Kenneth N. Waltz, Man, the State, and War (NY: Columbia University Press 1959; Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979).
states. Scholars therefore paid attention to variations in state structures and capacities and the ways in which these features shaped politics.¹²

Yet, initial conceptualizations of the state-as-actor were heavily influenced by a particular interpretation of Weber, one that did not emphasize Weber’s cultural analysis and built upon a few historical examples – Prussia and France being the paragons of modern “stateness” – and therefore emphasized centralization, coherence, and autonomy as intrinsic features of “strong” states.¹³ Other states showed signs of being effective and powerful, yet lacked either the European historical trajectory or distinctive administrative apparatus. The U.S., long a paragon of statelessness in the academic literature and the national self-conception shared by many Americans, clearly lacks the idealized state architecture yet mobilized collective power to conquer and settle a vast geographic terrain, impose a violent slaveholding system, fight two world wars and a cold one, and project power across the globe.¹⁴ Turning to the global south, we also see governing apparatuses that differ from the bureaucratic ideal-type, and while some of their difficulties may be rooted in the absence of these qualities – problems of patrimonialism and/or truncated projections of power, for example¹⁵ – viewing these non-European states solely

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¹³ Nettl, “State as a Conceptual Variable.”


through the lens of how they fail to measure up to a Western standard views states according to preconceived ideas about what they should be rather than analysis of what they are.16

Another limitation of the initial literature was the small number of key actors in these stories of political conflict – capital, the working class, and “the state” or, in somewhat less anthropomorphic lingo, “state actors” (political or policy entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, political leaders). But as scholars criticized the limits of framing politics and states in terms of class only and asserted the “autonomy of the political,” many more potential political actors – women and men as gendered actors, religious leaders, ethnic organizations, sexually-categorized groups, colonial officials and more – entered our analytic frames as relevant for shaping state activities and influencing outcomes. And outcomes of interest also proliferated, including policies, categories of the census and citizenship, how public/private divides were drawn, and legal systems. Yet the state remained quite central, as for example when feminist theories of the state analogized from “politics against markets” to ask if states could roll back the frontiers of male dominance,17 and scholars of race examined the role of states in securing white supremacy or beginning to unravel it.18 This work contributed to a larger rethinking of the “political” as not merely that which takes place in formal politics, but as an ongoing set of struggles of everyday life, including in voluntary organizations, workplaces, homes, and schools. Here, we see as well the development of interest in open struggles or quieter processes of fixing the very boundaries

of the state, as well as defining the “public” and “the private,” as many feminist analysts have described, or in the explorations of porous boundaries and mixed public-private forms of organization.\(^\text{19}\)

Perhaps most damning for all approaches that conceived of the state as actor was the charge of reification – that viewing the state as an actor risks subsuming sprawling, complex concatenations of governing institutions under one presumptively unified bureaucratic apparatus. In so doing, one may obscure the actors and processes at work within the state that are crucial for making sense of its actions. In response, much scholarship has sought to unpack this tightly packed concept, disaggregating the state into its many functions, organizations, and purposes while complicating the initially sharp boundaries drawn between public and private, state and society. This disaggregating drive has produced much of the literature that inspired this collective project, starting from the many modalities of state action that a metaphor like the “many hands of the state” implies.

The “state-centered” versus “society-centered” debates that characterized the era in which \textit{Bringing the State Back In} was conceived and written fell, by the late 1990s, into intellectual exhaustion and diminishing returns, especially as Marxist influences waned and many in history and the social sciences took cultural or institutional turns. Further, we have been moved by – and our analysis of states made more complex by – the breakdown of the Soviet state and its satellites in 1989 through 1991, 9/11 and the emergence of non-territorial political forces like al-Qaeda, and the intensifying global flows of labor and capital, fiscal crises, economic collapses and austerity regimes that have thrown into relief the limits of states’ capacities and the

increasing influence of units both above and below the nation-state. In light of these developments, some counseled us to leave states altogether, to investigate instead governance, governmentality, or “state effects,” and to conceive of power principally in its “capillary” rather than its “juridical” mode.20

Nevertheless, since the publication of the germinal Bringing the State Back In volume in 1985, the state has remained a central category and topic of analysis. The academic and policy literature on the state is now vast, transcending disciplines, subfields, methodologies, epistemologies, and geographic areas of study. Scholars periodically proclaim the need to “bring the state back in” to yet more domains,21 and the modifiers used to characterize states – administrative, austerity, carceral, centaur, competition, delegated, developmental, disaggregated, emergency, familial, failed, hidden, hollow, Keynesian welfare, laissez-faire, neoliberal, patriarchal, penal, predatory, regulatory, Rube Goldberg, Schumpeterian workfare, standardizing, straight, submerged, taxing, uneasy, warfare – continue to multiply. The concept of the state, however varied and contested it may be, clearly reflects some qualities that have become indispensable to contemporary scholarship. The concept is surely fuzzier than in 1985, with its global and temporal reach seemingly running into infinity, but we think the analyses are even more exciting.

Moving past the “state-society” debate also spurred theoretical and empirical innovation. A great many other social scientists and historians, no longer mired in disagreements over how to

20 See the discussion of this vein of scholarship in Sawyer, “Foucault and the State.”
theorize state autonomy vis-à-vis social classes seen as more or less coherent political actors, turned to analyses of diverse manifestations of state power and action, interactions with myriad political actors, and processes of boundary-making and unmaking. Others have focused their attention on empires, arguing that many of the nation-states whose experiences have been treated as prototypical of state-building and state-formation are in fact better conceptualized as multinational and spatially expansive, non-contiguous empires. What is notable in this flourishing of research is the proliferation of sites, historical eras, and policy domains.

Given this spreading out of state-focused scholarship and its evolution along transnational lines to encompass also empires, colonies, and global systems, we think the time is ripe for people who have been involved in this dizzying array of analyses to enter into deeper intellectual exchange with each other – for those studying specific processes and policies to talk to those studying other policies and practices. Thus, a large number of the papers to be collected here address different functions of states. When various “theories of the state” (singular) predominated, analysts conceived of different functions – legitimation and accumulation, for example – as cohering in some way or betraying some inherent contradiction, but did have a way to keep their eye, simultaneously, on both. Bourdieu gave us a slightly more useful metaphor, of “right and left hands” of the state. We have been struck, in the midst of analytic profusion, by the metaphorical inadequacy of this concept – instead of right and left hand, we have “many hands,” or multiple functions. Perhaps Kali, multi-armed Hindu goddess of time and death– enduring concerns of historicizing political analysts – would be a better metaphorical

representation, though her singular embodiment does not help with the “boundary issues” of interest to many analysts of states and empires.

We also find ourselves at a moment when it seems relevant to reflect upon what the state is, taking account of the many functions and failures we have been busy charting. Moving political analysis down a few notches on the ladder of abstraction may have been essential to study states in vastly different societies, historical eras, and policy domains. Yet, we propose that the time is now ripe for us to move back up the ladder a rung or two, drawing upon what we have learned about the nature, functioning, and force of states; about the processes which create and undermine the variably porous boundaries of states; and the diverse interactions among states, subnational and supranational entities, and private organizations and actors.

Our aim in this chapter is not to impose a singular conceptualization or theory of the state that all should adopt. Precisely what is interesting about today’s scholarship on the state is that it has gone in so many directions – there has not been a linear development of scholarly approaches, but a kind of spreading out of scholarship across time and space, accompanied by an uneven adoption of broader intellectual currents in the contextualizing precincts of the human sciences. Thus, the study of states has influenced, and been shaped by, the turn away from structure and toward agency; new ways of conceptualizing power and politics, with investigations of capillary and productive powers alongside the juridical powers of states; the “return of the repressed,” with greater attention to religion, sexuality, culture; and the partial reversal of exclusions of categories and dimensions left out of high-modern theorizing, such as
women and gender, or people of color and racial processes. We have no desire to truncate these varied pathways of research.

Instead, we put forward a series of anchoring observations about how to conceptualize states and empires. We derive these observations from our analysis of scholarship on states over the twenty-five-plus years since the project to bring the state back in was enunciated in the eponymous volume. In each cluster of scholarship, we find promising avenues of research that push forward our conceptualization of the state, but also some potential intellectual pitfalls. Analyzing the strengths and shortfalls of these currents of research helps us arrive at a definition, or set of workable definitions, of the state; a better understanding of why this concept remains central to social science and history and what analytical work it performs; and some directions for future analysis.

Clusters of Scholarship on States since Bringing the State Back In

The institutionalist turn. Historical institutionalists are the direct descendants of the scholars who brought the state back in. Moving to correct the problems of “state as actor” approaches, analysis flowed into the wider move to put institutions at the center of social scientific and historical analysis, and to acknowledge the significance of a wider range of political institutions besides states. Analysts thus favored a polity- or institution-centered approach, viewing the component institutions of states and, more broadly the political system, as sites within which

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24 Adams, Clemens and Orloff describe these intellectual currents with reference to historical sociology. See Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, “Social Theory, Modernity, and the Three Waves of Historical Sociology.”
social and political struggles occur. These approaches helped counter the overly aggregated portrayals of states that initially marked the literature. Some of this work has highlighted the importance of law, a key political institution that had been neglected in initial work on the state and that is powerfully operative in the Anglo-American context, for example. Economic and other rationalist approaches have viewed states as either institutional venues in which games unfold, or as the ultimate enforcers of social and economic institutions. Some sociological institutionalists went down another path in exploring the cultural and organizational scripts that often subtly order societies and polities. Institutionalists of all inclinations also shed much light on how different institutional forms mediated or shaped economic and social relations. Particularly in seeking to make sense of the products of the state – policies and laws, for instance – an institutionalist approach helps pinpoint actual processes and actors at work.

In viewing states merely as collections of discrete institutions, however, one risks losing sight of the state as a whole. One may be tempted to view state institutions as like all other institutions and devise theories of institutional origin, stability, and change that efface that which makes the state arena distinctive. We can see this in Schmitter’s definition of the state, for instance, as “an amorphous complex of agencies with ill-defined boundaries, performing a great variety of not very distinctive functions.” Such an approach may obscure the ways in which

29 Cited in Mitchell, “Limits of the State.”
state actors at times engage in cohesive and purposive action. Moreover, states are not just organizations or institutions like any other – precisely the reason why scholars sought to move states back to the center of our field of vision is because of their capacity to re-order the human, geographical, economic, political and social landscape. This very insight was an important legacy of the state-centered literature of the 1980s for thinking about politics – the notion that differently structured states, with their distinctive capacities and institutional configurations, could shape the identities, interests and goals of political actors and organizations. It is also why so many social and political theorists have tried to grapple with the meaning of the state, recognizing that the distillation and concentration of power in states, while taking varying forms in different places and time periods, generates a distinctive and often potent organization form.

We also are skeptical of some rationalist institutionalist accounts of states. Many presume a fixedness of human motivations that historically- and culturally-grounded analyses have disputed. Even some economists now recognize the limits of rationality as a tool for understanding economic phenomena and human behavior. Moreover, although the enthusiasm of some political economists for the study of states has helpfully drawn attention to the role of institutions and politics in underpinning and sustaining seemingly spontaneous, self-regulating markets, the conceptualization of politics is often a thin one in which politics and institutions are


32 Bourdieu refers to the state as holder of metacapital, for instance. Durkheim viewed the state as a form of political consciousness, but “one that is limited but higher, clearer and with a more vivid sense of itself” than political society as a whole (“The Concept of the State” in *Durkheim on Politics and the State*, p. 40). For Weber, it is the way in which states compel obedience that sets it apart from other forms of power.

33 Steinmetz, “Culture and the State,” pp. 49.
disembedded from their cultural bedrock. Here, the focus of political scientists on the power of economic doctrines and of economic sociologists on the cultural foundations of economic structures and systems, has been an important counterweight, yet one that has not altered the mode of reasoning of many of those working in contemporary political economy.

*State Formation and Building.* Many scholars have engaged the question of the emergence of distinctive state structures and the building of particular capacities. This work has importantly drawn attention to states as the powerful institutions of our time, the very embodiment of modernity that emerged out of and reinforced capitalism, geopolitical competition, imperial expansion, racial hierarchies and masculine domination. The fruitful scholarly dialogue around state building has helped identify the factors shaping the historical emergence of states and the varied forms they have taken around the globe. Other work has homed in on the specific instruments of state building – taxation for example – or the development of bureaucratic

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capacity and autonomy in subparts of the state apparatus, including the welfare state.\(^{37}\) One of the contributions of this work has been to shift our understanding of states away from the Lockean, social contract view of states toward one that highlights the messy, violent, and historically contingent processes by which states are made or unmade.\(^{38}\) These studies also help combat the utilitarian functionalism that often underpins rational institutionalist approaches: states may help solve collective action problems, yet how states emerged in the first place cannot be derived from their ultimate utility. The study of states as works-in-progress also helps avoid reifying them, eschewing a sharp demarcation of state-society boundaries, for instance, and instead examining the processes by which such boundaries get defined.\(^{39}\)

If there is a limitation to this literature it is a tendency to emphasize material aspects of state building – the construction of raw administrative power and its imposition over geographic space. Many operate with a more-or-less spelled-out Tilly-esque understanding of states and their origins, with the focus being on physical force and control over borders, resources, and people – \textit{Capital and Coercion}, in varying degrees, as Tilly had it. Yet, states have a monopoly over not only the use of physical force, but also over the use of symbolic force, as culturally attuned historical and sociological scholarship has shown.\(^{40}\) A state’s power lies not only in its ability to prevent exit and coerce compliance, but to induce agreement – to manufacture categories, standards, and principles of social, economic, and political organization that penetrate

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\(^{39}\) Mitchell, “Limits of the State.”


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deep into individual consciousness. 41 We thus need to understand not only how states construct their material power but also how they produce, in the words of Abrams, “a managed construction of belief about the state...[that binds] subjects into their own subjection.” 42 Linking state building to the emergence of representative politics may be one avenue – an intellectual project that could challenge the presumption that autonomous, state-building civil servants should lie at the center of the story (see below). Another may lie in greater emphasis on the moral or cultural force of states. 43

*States, Culture, Symbolic Power and Violence.* The cultural turns in sociology and history, and the constructivist one in political science, have shaped views of the state as a social, cultural, and ideological construction. Viewing the state as a “sociocultural phenomenon” compels us to scrutinize the narratives that state officials (and their analysts) produce – about legitimacy, sovereignty, disinterestedness, and coherence, for instance – as a set of cultural or ideological products that should be analyzed for what they tell us about both states and the worlds that bring them into being. 44 In this vein, authors have written about states as myths and “a consensus of accepted stories” (Ringmar); products of “the political imaginary” (Jessop); legitimating acts of performativity (C. Weber); ideological constructs; and “a series of contingent and unstable cultural practices” (Bevir and Rhodes). This work often indicts scholars as complicit in the

41 Scott, *Seeing Like a State.*
ideological manufacture of the state. In Bourdieu’s lectures on the state at the Collège de France, for example, he warns against adopting the self-legitimating categories of the state that only deepen its mystifying character:

The state is this well-founded illusion...This mysterious reality exists through its effects and by the collective belief in its existence, which is the principle of its effects. It’s something that one cannot touch with one’s finger, or treat as the agent coming out of the Marxist tradition that says, ‘the State does this,’ or ‘the State does that.’ I can cite kilometers of texts with the word State as subject of action, propositions. It’s a fiction that is entirely dangerous, which prevents us from thinking about the State. As a preamble, I thus mean: watch out, all the phrases that have for subject the State are theological phrases – which is not to say that they are false to the extent that the State is a theological entity, meaning an entity that exists through belief. (Editors’ translation, p. 25)

This approach thus pushes us to think of the state as a cultural force, one that distills the dominant values and beliefs of a society while also helping to produce them.

Yet, the state as ideational or cultural construct also cannot stand on its own. When agents of the state show up at your doorstep to tax, conscript, detain, interrogate, incarcerate, or kill you, they are not operating solely in the realm of myth. Contemporary states command scholarly attention because they represent a concentration of coercive power and control that is startling, awe-inspiring, and not infrequently horrible – facets of state power absent from some rather bloodless constructivist accounts. Ultimately, states can be conceptualized as interlinked or mutually constitutive forms of material and cultural power, as many contextualizing social science scholars have done. Some examine how states maintain their grip through varying

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combinations of brute force and the internalization of their normative orientations by the citizenry. Others, such as Sewell, take a more thoroughly culturalist stance, and start from the premise that structures such as states are “composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and resources, which are actual”; culture is constitutive of all action, for we cannot act without cultural schema, and structures both constrain and enable agency but are also the products of agency.48

*States, Empires and the Transnational/Global Turn.* States emerged out of international and global dynamics and they continue to both shape and be shaped by them. Initial work emphasized the Janus-faced nature of states vis-à-vis the international arena and domestic sphere;49 the rationalist version of this understood state actors as playing two-level games, at home and abroad.50 One benefit of this early literature was to push international relations scholars to peer inside the black box of the state, which often had been conceptualized as a person.51 Similarly, those studying domestic political processes turned to the international, supranational, and global spheres, and the forces of diffusion, interdependence, reaction, and isomorphism.52 And states necessarily had to be situated within larger divisions of power, including imperial relationships and global divisions of labor. Globalization and the growing international and supranational organizational architecture have only intensified the need to cast

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our visions both below and beyond the nation-state. In so doing, one needs to strike a balance between highlighting the global forces that have altered or undermined states to varying degrees and emphasizing the resilience of states as dominant actors in the global sphere. The early rush to proclaim the death of the state in the face of globalization was subsequently turned back. Yet, viewing states as isolated and fully independent units is not tenable.

“Returning to empire” is one prominent strand of work taking up the challenges presented by globalization and by the complexity of relations between the “West and the rest” over the centuries of their contact, conflict and exchanges. This research has developed the initial second-wave insights that states were embedded in global contexts – the world system of states in the Hintzean-Weberian approach or the world system in Wallerstein’s influential but economically-determinist version – while also examining politics from the point of view of the oppressed. Extensive work on revolutions and national liberation struggles against colonial and imperial powers and on the resistance of people of color against white racial supremacy in both global north and south revealed relations of domination between global-north states – formerly colonial and imperial powers – and states of the global south – formerly colonies and dependencies. Currently, analysts are debating how to conceptualize different forms of empires’ domination. Steinmetz, for example, suggests a key distinction between territorial (colonial) and non-territorial (imperial) forms of empire, with significant repercussions for the shape of individual metropolitan and peripheral states.

56 The influential formulations emerging from the Birmingham School also put forward a culturalist approach to these issues.  
57 Steinmetz, “Return to Empire.”
We also see deeper conceptual linkages between states and empires, such that the study of one can and should enrich the other. Definitions of empire – “a centralized, hierarchical system of rule acquired and maintained by coercion through which a core territory dominates peripheral territories,”⁵⁸ for instance, or “relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies”⁵⁹ – bear more than a passing resemblance to many definitions of states. State building often required a projection of power over hostile hinterlands inhabited by supposedly backward or even barbarian people judged to be in need of civilization.⁶⁰ In writing of imperialism, Weber noted that there was a continental (e.g. state-building) version of it, found in Russia and America, and “overseas” versions, such as that practiced by England and other European states,⁶¹ while Adams and Pincus emphasize that “European state formation – in all cases – was a thoroughly imperial project in the early modern period.” There are differences in the degree of imperial control – whether ideological modes of power follow material ones, to use Mann’s terminology – that render certain forms of imperialism more akin to state-building than others.⁶² But the literature on imperialism has much to say about power, domination, and racialization that carries over into the study of states (and vice versa).⁶³ Moreover, colonialism’s profound, complicated, and enduring legacies on states around the globe, and the extent of inequalities of power and resources

⁵⁸ Michael Mann, Sources of Social Power vol. 3, p. 17.
⁶⁰ Scott, Art of Not Being Governed, chp. 1.
⁶² As Mann puts it, “…the empire may do a disappearing act when the conquered people’s acquire a Roman or Han Chinese identity themselves, and political power becomes less despotic and more infrastructural,” Sources of Social Power, volume 3, p. 18.
between global North and global South, underline how strongly international and global forces have impinged upon states.64

*States and Representative Institutions.* A fundamental ambiguity of the second-wave historical sociological and political science literature was how to relate the state apparatus to the representative institutions of democratic polities. Are legislative branches, ruling parties, and democratically elected executives part of the state? Initially, many scholars seemed to say no, as the states judged as having greater capabilities (e.g. France, Sweden, Japan) were those whose civil servants are relatively insulated from rough-and-tumble democratic politics.65 Moreover, the very problem of state building in the U.S. was interpreted by scholars as that of forging bureaucratic autonomy in a porous and fragmented polity subject to the whims of electoral politics.66 With political liberalization occurring prior to bureaucratization, patronage politics precluded effective public administration, a state of affairs bemoaned by Progressives determined to emulate ideals of rational and autonomous public action.67 To this day, some scholars would indict the institutional structure of Congress, and the electoral politics that exacerbate this, for preventing the development of coherent public policy.68 Meanwhile, in other

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66 Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*; Dan Carpenter, *Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*.


parts of the world, rational, insulated, well-functioning bureaucracies of the developmental states seemed better able to mobilize resources and manage global economic pressures.69

Although many of these studies brought important insights about state-society relationships, this literature helped produce some conceptual confusion over state “strength” and “autonomy” and the relationship of states to electoral politics. In part, the confusion stems from a misreading of both the European state-building experience and the social theorizing that accompanied it. In focusing on political centralization and bureaucratic coherence as key features of an effective state, some scholars exaggerated these qualities in the case of Prussia or France, and neglected crucial counter-examples, such as Britain, in which the fiscal-military state was furthered, not hampered, by representative institutions serving as sites for mediating social and political conflict.70 Moreover, early social science theorizing about states assumed representative politics could be important, if not central, to what states are about. In Weber’s depiction of what states do, the first function he notes is legislative – the crafting of laws – followed by those we typically call Weberian: maintenance of public order, upholding of laws, public administration, and defense of the territory. For Durkheim, the essence of the state is the legislative function, as it is in Parliament, and not within the bureaucracies, that the most vital work of states occurs, that of fashioning “collective representations and acts of volition” that will guide the polity. And Dewey’s writing on the democratic state was in part directed against Hegel and his intellectual descendants who sharply demarcated state from society.71 These

scholars did not understand states to be autonomously hovering above society, but were writing against economic determinist accounts that would subordinate states to powerful social classes.

U.S. state building affords further insights into the linkages between civil society, representative institutions, and state building. An important vein of historical research on U.S. state building has shifted attention from grand state-building projects from the center that succeeded or failed, and instead focuses on how actors in the periphery fashioned discrete, disjointed, and highly variable administrative and legal approaches to governing a vast, decentralization nation. Democratic politics – the decentralization and fragmentation of political power and concomitant flourishing of civil society as a preexisting site of governance – is the backdrop here, shaping the many hybrid forms of public-private action and heavy reliance upon law.72 As Novak describes it, U.S. governing arrangements that emerged in the 19th century represented

> a distinctly new kind of coercive power emerging within popular sovereignties, democratic societies, and modern economies—a power more diffuse, less visible, less clearly identified with a single individual (i.e. the king) or institution (i.e., the church), sometimes private as well as public, woven into the everyday substructure of modern social and economic organization.73

If there is a risk here, it may be of over-emphasizing the strength of civil society and power of self-rule while neglecting that which was also “baked into” the American system of governance from the start – subnational authoritarianisms that, in the slaveholding and later Jim Crow states were part of a larger political bargain for securing territorial control.74 And although

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the notion of state autonomy as developed in the earlier state-centered literature was in many ways oversimplified and unrealistic, too much disaggregation could render the distinction between public and private authority meaningless, for example, or move us back to an era of discrete institutional analyses (of bureaucracy A or agency B, for example) that lose sight of the larger collectivity that gives those institutions force, legitimacy, and power.75

Implementing States. One way to move away from an overly abstract categorization of the state is to look at the concrete ways in which states actually do the work of governing. These seeming details, usually relegated to administrative law or public administration, turn out to be essential for understanding the object that interests us. It is only in examining the real-world practices of governance – the mix of public and private (non-profit or proprietary) actors charged with implementing policies, and the nature of their relationship; the role of national versus subnational layers of government in program delivery; the importance of law in achieving various objectives; and the lived experience of state policies on the ground by those subject to them – that we understand how the state works in practice and thus gain insight into what “it” is.76 Such an approach not only helps us make sense of the U.S., in all its complexity, but also complicates the European ideal-type: a number “successful” European states (e.g. Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands) rely heavily on non-state actors and lower levels of government to administer programs and deliver services, and they always have. Non-state actors also dominate in many other parts of the world, where non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and

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75 Mayrl and Quinn.
76 Clemens, “Rube Goldberg State”; Morgan and Campbell, Delegated Welfare State; Lynne Haney, Offending Women.
familial networks play an essential role in social welfare, for example. In a number of countries, neoliberal ideas have furthered the turn to private over public provision, or injected market principles into traditional relationships between state and non-state entities. One perhaps paradoxical result of this development has been more intervention by public or publicly empowered private actors in the lives of economically disadvantaged or otherwise marginalized people.

The pervasiveness, and at times viciousness, of private forms of power have led some scholars to turn their attention away from traditional forms of government to a focus on “governance” or “governmentality.” Moreover, there is a growing literature on “street-level bureaucracy” – the sites at which individuals and public authority meet, and where varying degrees of discretion allow street-level bureaucrats, public officials and, increasingly, the private organizations to which the state has contracted out some of its functions, to implement policies in ways which often diverge considerably from formal policy goals. An exciting development in ethnographic sociology, long preoccupied with micro-level social processes, is a turn to examinations of institutions such as prisons as places where we can examine how policies are put into concrete practice. For example, Haney’s ethnographic explorations of juvenile homes and facilities for incarcerated mothers – run on a contractual basis for the state but not by the state – show how well-intentioned feminist policy goals have resulted in greater surveillance and control of both mothers and children, as women’s social vulnerabilities were transformed in the course of therapeutic interventions and discourses of front-line institutional authorities into personal

77 Cammett and MacLean, eds., Politics of Non-State Social Provision.
pathologies. The new, therapeutic style of governance is linked to emergent patterns of state hybridity and government from a distance, also components of neoliberal prescription.\textsuperscript{80}

Although it is important to analyze the blurred lines between public and private, there is some risk of conceptual blurring as well – that all forms of power will be viewed as equivalent, and that we will no longer draw any conceptual boundaries between the state and non-state realms.\textsuperscript{81} As Durkheim once wrote, “the state is nothing if it is not an organ distinct from the rest of society. If the state is everywhere, it is nowhere.”\textsuperscript{82} Whether justified or not, states are often encrusted in layers of legitimacy and forms of power that help distinguish them from non-state entities. The latter can be potent, and all the more so to the extent they are financed and supported by states, but the former remains, in most societies, the source from which much legitimate power radiates. If we entirely lose sight of these distinctions we risk losing the state as a theoretically or empirically meaningful category of analysis.

\textit{States and Social Stratification}. The study of states as stratifying forces has been a particularly rich area of research. It is well known that state actors often seek to define, classify, standardize, and measure the world around them so as to better master and remake it.\textsuperscript{83} In so doing, states often shape existing lines of social difference or create new ones, stratifying people along the lines of race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, nationality, age, and sexual orientation, to name

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{81} Or, as Mayrl and Quinn point out, that scholars might proclaim states to be “hidden” when in fact they are a weighty presence in people’s lives (e.g. the carceral or penal state).
  \item \textsuperscript{82} Quoted in Anthony Giddens, \textit{Durkheim on Politics and the State}, p. 6.
\end{itemize}
some of the most prominent. An important common thread linking this area of research and the work on empires is the rule of difference which divided rulers from the ruled, colonial and racialized subjects, and structured imperial forms of rule.\textsuperscript{84} We see the legacies of this rule in the racializing institutions of the descendants of metropolitan states, contemporary states of the global North, including the US state. The power of states to authoritatively name, define, and rank order people raises the stakes of political struggle: capturing some of the varied organs of the state is one important avenue for groups to name themselves, define the content of their identity, and craft policies that promote their interests.\textsuperscript{85} States can more forcefully remake societies through their power to target and incarcerate members of society, as the growing literature on the carceral state has shown, or to draft men to fight in wars, as the literature on war-making has long insisted.\textsuperscript{86}

Attaching a label to states – the patriarchal state, the straight state, the racial state – is an important way to signal how public actions order political and social relationships. Yet, here we should be careful of overly-aggregated analyses: does the term “patriarchal state,” for example, encompass all governing entities, including national and subnational forms of government, all agencies, courts, and the legislative branch? The answer may be yes, but the precise ways in which states stratify – which actors, which institutions, which processes – need to be fully spelled out. In addition, scholars of stratifying states also have uncovered the ways in which actors and institutions within states can become agents of reform, remaking lines of division and

\textsuperscript{84} Nicholas Wilson, “From Reflection to Refraction: State Administration in British India, ca. 1770-1855” American Journal of Sociology 116, 5 (2011): 1437-77; Steinmetz The Devil’s Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa (Chicago 2007).
\textsuperscript{86} Wacquant, “Neoliberal State”; Wacquant, Punishing the Poor; Lerman and Weaver, “Carceral State”; Dorit Geva, Conscription, Family, and the Modern State: A Comparative Study of France and the United States (Cambridge 2013).
inequality.\textsuperscript{87} Here, research on states as differently configured set of access points that reformers can penetrate has been especially fruitful and can direct our attention processes that transform the operation of states.\textsuperscript{88}

**Theoretical Observations about States**

Drawing upon our analysis above of the rich and proliferating literature on states and empires, we offer a set of theoretical observations that we hope will engender productive debate among scholars working on states. We do this in lieu of providing one tidy definition of the state, in part because such a task has been made more complicated by all that we have learned these past few decades about the varied working of states around the globe. We also do not see the time as ripe for a grand synthesis drawing upon one master theorist, be it Foucault, Durkheim, Dewey, Weber, Bourdieu, or Butler. At one time, Skocpol and Tilly, leaning on Weber and Hintze, served as the key reference points for states being brought back in, and while their influence surely is still discerned, their legacies have proved to be generative rather than determinative. The theoretical diversity of the analysts whose work is here collected in this volume reflects the “pagan” approach of the editors – that the intellectual “gods” provide different resources and inspirations for us scholars as we ponder the earthly plane of states and empires. With this in mind, we offer several general observations about states and how we should conceptualize them.

First, we reaffirm the state as a foundational concept in the social sciences, one that cannot be replaced with “governmentality” or “governance” or “institution,” because states are


\textsuperscript{88} Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*; Koven and Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World*. 
more than mere institutions and signify forms of power that differ from those found in other arenas. The distillation and concentration of power in states, while taking varying forms in different places and time periods, generates a distinctive and often potent organizational form. States are more than bundles of governing institutions, because of their claim to speak on behalf of a collectivity, whether this occurs through democratic channels or not; the legitimacy in which officials try to encase their actions; and their claims to recognition in the international arena.

Second, scholars should be mindful of the ways in which states concentrate and use both material and symbolic powers. Weber was right to emphasize states’ control of the means of coercion in specified geographic territories, but states more commonly operate through the pull they have on the public consciousness. The subjective element of state power is of vital importance, as states are not mere arenas in which utility-maximizing individuals satisfy their goals. At the very least, states help define those goals, and some would see states operating at a deeper level in constituting subjects and shaping the forms of knowledge out of which public and private action develop.

Third, states work through varied and often complex modes of governance, and are perhaps today returning to a level of complexity of forms of rule not seen since the middle ages, when basic questions of political, economic and religious authority and capacities for extraction, coercion, and classifying belonged to churches, feudal lords, and states in contexts of overlapping authority.89 States work through varied and often complex modes of governance: they often delegate to non-state and subnational actors; they indirectly subsidize private agents to do their work; and they may be subject to strong pressures from external agents, including international organizations, non-governmental actors, and foreign governments. Although it is

89 Tilly, Formation of National States.
important to analyze the blurred lines between public and private, we must avoid a concomitant conceptual blurring such that all forms of power are viewed as equivalent. Whether justified or not, states are often encrusted in layers of legitimacy and forms of power that help distinguish them from non-state entities. Rather than dissolve the two spheres into conceptual murk, we are better off charting the linkages and flow of resources and power between these spheres, or investigating where boundaries blur and why that might be the case.

Fourth, our metaphor of the many hands of the state highlights the complexity and multiplicity of actors and institutions within the state, pushing us to get beyond reifying simplifications that would view the state as a uniform, cohesive entity. Doing so can draw attention to contradictory or incoherent forms of state action, but also helps us think about processes of state transformation. Such an approach also pushes scholars to think more about the relationship between states and representative institutions (or the lack thereof), which in turn shapes how we think about state power and the relationship of states to social actors. Our challenge, once we have given up on simplistic concepts of states as unified actors, is to disaggregate and re-aggregate, dissect and reassemble, in ways that take into consideration the multiplicity of state forms and functions while trying to understand what in some instances binds those parts together, and in others, subjects them to varied centrifugal forces.

Finally, we find it important to continue situating states vis-à-vis the international and transnational arenas. No doubt there are many challenges to states posed by the forces of internationally mobile capital, transnational political and social movements, international and supranational organizations, or simply states with more power than others (for instance, as reflected in longstanding power struggles between what we now call global North and global South, or between the metropole and colonies in earlier times). Yet formal legal sovereignty
remains a defining feature of what it is to be a state.⁹⁰ States are not being eclipsed, but they are enmeshed in forces operating both below and beyond state boundaries. The study of empires can help us think about how states have been and continue to be situated in global contexts, including how international power relations enduringly shape states in varying locations on the globe.

**The Chapters in this Book**

For this volume, we sought out work that embodies some of the dominant trends in contemporary research, yet that pushes scholarship in new and exciting directions. Although we cannot provide a comprehensive accounting of the vast literature on states, our book covers four major areas of scholarly interest and activity.

First, much recent research has sought to develop a new understanding of the boundaries between state and non-state organizations and institutions, showing that such boundaries are often unclear and always historically contingent. Our contributors build on this insight to scrutinize the politics that accompany the creation, preservation or reshaping of these boundaries. Clemens examines debates in the early 20th-century United States over the roles of the state and the voluntary sector in tending to social needs, when the extension of state authority often occurred through delegations of power to voluntary sector actors. Yet, these grants of power intensified disputes over where the proper boundaries between state and civil society lie – debates that were not definitively resolved but that left the state-society boundary subject to continuous political maneuvering. Mayrl and Quinn question the now widespread claim that the U.S. state is “hidden” or “submerged,” owing to its reliance on tax breaks, regulations, and the delegation of responsibilities to private agents. Their chapter argues that the U.S. state is not

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⁹⁰ Phantom states, which lack such recognition by powerful states, often bitterly resent their diminished status and suffer the consequences of their formal isolation from the international state system. Daniel L. Byman and Charles King, “The Mystery of Phantom States,” *Washington Quarterly* (Summer 2012).
hidden but often misrecognized, either as the result of political campaigns that obfuscate or highlight the role of the state, or through habituation processes that desensitize Americans to the government's reach over time. And Lara-Millán’s research looks at contestation over boundaries within states between different governing agencies with joint responsibilities for dis-empowered populations – in his case, inmates in Los Angeles county that are shifted between health care and carceral institutions. Faced with overcrowding and budget austerity, county officials battled with each other to shift some of the incarcerated population out of jails and into hospitals. Through an analysis of these disputes, Lara-Millán examines the power of state agencies to move and control human populations.

Another important area of work has been on the ways in which states classify and stratify their populations according to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other forms of power, difference and inequality. One chapter in the volume by Htun and Weldon examines this for gender equality, as they develop a typology that captures the multi-dimensional nature of state action vis-à-vis in this domain and present examples from around the world of policies to combat violence against women and reform women’s status in family law. Several of our chapters emphasize the ways in which political action can transform systems of state stratification. Thus, Orloff investigates the transformation, albeit incomplete, of Sweden and the U.S. from male-breadwinner supporting states to ones that encourage, or compel, women’s paid work. King and Lieberman tackle the puzzle in the U.S. of how a state that once supported white supremacy was transformed into a civil rights-promoting state in the 1960s. Paschel examines Brazil's radical shift from colorblind to race-conscious state policies aimed at ameliorating racial equality, fundamentally changing the nature of Brazil’s citizenship regime. Finally, Fourcade offers a fresh take on classification schemes by looking at how states themselves can be classified, as was
the case with some European states during the recent financial crisis whose credit worthiness was scrutinized and graded. Today, there are many ranking and classification schemes applied to states, and she argues that these schema place states and their populations in different categories of moral worth – with the label of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China) versus the PIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Greece, Spain), demonstrating the point.

A third area of scholarship continues to be the study of state-building – how the governmental apparatus gets built and why it takes different forms. Yet, while much of the literature on state-building focuses on the material processes of policing borders and taxing populations, our authors also investigate questions of symbolic and moral power. Thus, in Novak, Sawyer, and Sparrow’s chapter on what they call the “democratic state,” they examine how representative institutions can enable states to harness and organize social energies by joining some amount of public consent to the use of force. That sense of legitimacy proves particularly important in enabling what Davenport calls, in his chapter, the “joint production of coercion” – that given the costliness of repression, rulers engage in a public performance of order and control, legitimating their own existence while downplaying or undermining challengers to the status quo. Mehrotra’s contribution shows how public sphere debates over the meaning and targets of taxation helped construct political agreement over progressive income taxes, thereby enabling state actors to reach deep into the wallets of the citizenry. However, the aim here was not only to generate needed public resources, but also to forge a new set of ties between the state and the public. Finally, Kestnbaum’s study of the 19th century revolution in mass warfare examines how states mobilized citizens behind war-making projects through emotional appeals. The growing identification of the population with state power had some unexpected
consequences in the rise of partisans – individuals who voluntarily fight on the state’s behalf – and the targeting of civilians as “fair game” in mass warfare.

Finally, we have a cluster of chapters that reorients the study of states in the international arena by focusing on empires. The study of imperialism has been curiously truncated in the social sciences, and was largely absent from the state-centered literature that developed in the 1980s. Yet, our authors reveal multiple linkages between states and imperial forms of rule. Steinmetz makes a theoretical intervention with respect to state theory and empires, suggesting several revisions of Bourdieu’s influential theory of bureaucratic or state fields. He questions the scale of fields, arguing that they cannot be assumed to be coextensive with the nation-state but often extend beyond those boundaries, as was the case with empires. Adams and Pincus draw intriguing parallels between empire-building processes and state-building across many contexts – the projection of power over hostile hinterlands inhabited by supposedly backward or even barbarian people judged to be in need of civilization. In the functioning of colonial administrations, Wilson examines how bureaucratic actors sought to legitimate their rule through claims of their objectivity, disinterestedness, and superior ethnographic expertise when it came to ruling over alien peoples. Moreover, colonial rule shaped the types of governing institutions that would endure around the globe, leaving a deep imprint, as Hussin shows in her study of the legacies of the colonial state in Southeast Asia.