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Book Review

Chesterton, Simon, Michael Ignatieff, and Ramesh Thakur (eds.). 2005. *Making States Work. State Failure and the Crisis of Governance*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press. 350 pp. ISBN: 92-808-1107-X (paperback). Price: \$45.00.

by Bjørn Møller (29 November 2006)

The work covers most aspects of post-conflict peace-building with a special emphasis on state-building or reconstruction. In contrast to most existing works on this fashionable topic which adopt a narrow “problem-solving” approach, the present work addresses some of the underlying questions and dilemmas.

In an introductory chapter, Sebastian von Einsiedel surveys the literature. The author questions whether states should simply be reconstructed, considering that the concept of a “state” may be a European export commodity which is ill-suited to the needs of Third World countries and that in some cases the state has been more of a problem than a solution to societies’ problems. This argument is pursued by John Mayall. He places some of the blame for state failure on states’ colonial heritage, including the *uti possidetis* principle according to which borders are accepted as inviolable. He argues that in some cases this principle may have to be abandoned in favor of partitioning of existing states. Michael Ignatieff challenges prevailing notions of “good governance,” frequently portrayed as a neutral, technocratic set of criteria for assessing state performance. In this view, “there are no value-neutral or politically neutral definitions of ‘working’ government” (p. 68). Interventions are sometimes justified, even in the absence of a United Nations mandate, but in most cases they are not – and the human rights concerns (ab)used to legitimate them are often simply a smoke-screen for the pursuit of national interests on the part of the interveners, e.g., by the United States.

William Zartman provides a pessimistic analysis of opportunities for preventing state collapse, pointing out that such collapses follow different trajectories, *inter alia* depending on whether the state belongs to the “weak/soft” or the “hard/brittle” categories. To expect early preventative efforts by the international community to succeed is dismissed as illusory, not so much because of a lack of warning signs as due to failure to understand them and to take them seriously. “Surprise in this business is rare, but deafness widespread,” he writes (p. 280). The best one may realistically hope for is what he calls “early late prevention,” i.e., rescuing failing states from complete collapse.

Thomas Weiss and Peter Hoffman offer a sympathetic, but skeptical analysis of the work of humanitarians in situations of impending or actual state collapse, highlighting the need to work with the wide variety of irregular non-state actors, including “spoilers.” The humanitarians thereby run the risk of inadvertently fueling war since aid is fungible and may be exchanged for arms. Not only are the warring parties driven, at least partly, by greed motives, but the humanitarians themselves have to operate under market-like conditions forcing them to concentrate on visible, high-profile activities which may in some cases do more harm than good: “Utilitarian logic always operates on a slippery slope; at some point the good an agency is doing

may be offset or overwhelmed by the damage wrought by Faustian tactical bargains” (p. 310).

In addition to these general and thematically ordered chapters, in which category one also finds chapters on transitional justice and transitional administration, the work also includes a number of country and regional case studies. Rather than offering yet another analysis of already thoroughly researched cases of state-building such as Bosnia or East Timor, most of these case studies are devoted to less obvious but still relevant cases such as Colombia, Pakistan, North Korea, Costa Rica, and Singapore, even though more familiar cases such as Afghanistan and Mozambique are also included along with an interesting comparison of the Great Lakes Region with Central Asia.

The findings from these case studies are summarized in the concluding chapter by the three editors. They have done a marvelous job in ensuring that the various chapters refer to each other. The whole book constitutes a cohesive, well-structured, and very comprehensive analysis of state-building and post-conflict peace-building.

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