

NOTE

1. It is also not the case that positivist work on legitimacy does not already theorise from African cases to some degree (Levi *et al.* 2009; Risse & Stollenwerk 2018).

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The Scare State: Inequality and Political Power in the Hinterland by NOAH L. NATHAN
 Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xv + 313 pp. \$145.00 (hardback) \$34.95 (ebook). ISBN 978 1 009 26110 4 (hardback) 978 1 009 26112 8 (paperback).

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Noah Nathan's compelling new book explores ingrained, intergenerational inequalities within the rural periphery in Africa and beyond. Focusing on the 'hinterland' of northern Ghana, he sets out how low state presence during the colonial period led to disproportionate, what he terms 'outsized', effects (p. 5) from its select interventions, which compound over time.

In doing so, Nathan calls into question default assumptions regarding 'weak states' and, therefore, earlier reference points by scholars such as Herbst, Englebert and Migdal. Rather than absence, spiralling into dysfunction, the scare state produces a multiplier effect when materially advantaged compared to all other actors. In northern Ghana, the creation (or affirmation) of chiefs along with their early access to education proved decisive, leading to significant 'downstream' effects that shape the dynastic who and how of politics today.

The book expands the argument in the latter stages to compare with southern Ghana, where state presence was much higher but also competing sources of wealth and influence operated, leaving the state's actions less determinate. He then examines other 'hinterlands' in Peru and the Philippines, where differing levels of state presence and state advantage were at play.

Nathan's work is multi-method, combining extensive quantitative analyses of archival data with qualitative fieldwork, gleaned from oral/life histories in particular. The depth and breadth of material is impressive, as are the efforts to isolate,

triangulate and/or eliminate other variables that might explain how inequalities have compounded over time.

At times, this process starts to feel laboured for the non-historian. Indeed, the space allocated to build such a watertight case in northern Ghana brings the lack of depth in the supplementary case studies into relief. In the case of Peru, for example, while the scarce state's growing interventionism is made clear, its initial material advantage is not (see p. 293). Overall, this case leaves the impression of a rapacious and capricious state, making and remaking society from afar, with much less space afforded to local agency in that making.

This is not, however, to fault the quality of the scholarship. One small point I did note related to the selection of interviewees. While Nathan claims oral histories allows him to anchor his analysis 'in community members' own narratives and collective memories' (p. 28), these were the testimonies of MPs, chiefs, local leaders and the occasional teacher. It made me ponder what the less privileged 'layperson' thought of the conflicts he details or the recent cynical soliciting of their votes, beyond what Afrobarometer infers.

Relatedly, gender is not addressed in the methodology but, given northern Ghana's 'conservative gender norms' (p. 175), one expects the interview cohort to have been almost entirely male. Given the book's core thesis, this made me muse *more* on the outsized effects of the scarce state on gender relations and other norms, rather than the implication that such norms were timeless and immutable, allowing Nathan to place them to one side (p. 175).

These very minor points feed into the sole broader concern I had regarding how, not dissimilar to the scholars that Nathan is in dialogue with, African governance remains determined by material interests and distributional politics. This is a story of how local elites enrich themselves first and then work to the exclusion of all other groups. Such interests explain local conflict, party politics and why groups on the margins solicit state intervention and recognition (the last puzzle I grappled with in my own work).

And yet, as Mkandawire wrote, ideas also matter (2015). By way of example, Nathan discusses how local people contested the adequacy of representational claims of 'outsider' parliamentary candidates based solely on ancestry, plus the party selection of long-excluded non-elite candidates following electoral reforms (pp. 190–193). Again, clientelism trumps all but this discussion left me wondering if there were not still need for a larger consideration of the importance of ideas and indeed of 'publics' in African politics.

None of these points detracts from the strength and significance of this book, from which I benefited greatly. This is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of Ghana but also, more profoundly, the contemporary politics of the periphery in many postcolonial contexts.

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