

Conceptualizing the ‘Failed State’: The Construction of the Failed State Discourse

Beth Thiessen*

Abstract

The concept of the ‘failed state’ emerged in the 1990s to describe and explain why states residing outside the Western world do not function as advanced states. The failed state narrative has inherent conceptual limitations and is based on flawed assumptions that obscure its utility. These so-called failed states are held against a Western-centric norm and a universalized spectrum of state development. The concept is now widely used in the context of global security, peacekeeping, poverty reduction, humanitarian assistance and good governance. The application of the narrative within the realm of policy means Western actors use the concept to promote their own security and development interests. This translates into an inability to formulate effective policy responses to society-wide challenges. This essay examines the failed state narrative by exploring how the state is theorized in the context of failed states, and how the narrative is plagued with neocolonial underpinnings, definitional ambiguity, western centrism and analytical reductionism.

Keywords: failed states; narrative construction; policy approaches; Africa; discourse

The term ‘failed states’ emerged as an ad hoc conceptual response to new types of armed conflicts and problems in the wake of the Cold War. One of the first instances of its use was in 1992 when Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner published *Saving Failed States*.¹ In the article they argue: “a disturbing new phenomenon is emerging: the

failed nation-state, utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community.”² The article was written only a year after the fall of Siad Barre’s government in Somalia and was written largely in response to the lack of government stability in the Horn of Africa. However, as Aman Sium points out, it was written as a call to “reformulate American foreign policy in relation to formerly

¹ Aman Sium, “From Starving Child to Rebel-Pirate: The West’s New Imagery of a ‘Failed’ Somalia,” *Borderlands* 11, no. 3 (2012): 6.

² Gerald B. Helman, and Steven R. Ratner, “Saving Failed States,” *Foreign Policy* no. 89 (Winter 1992-1993): 3.

Soviet-aligned states following the Cold War. Helman and Ratner were asking a more imperial question obfuscated by the humanitarian pretensions of their article, which is, 'if the Soviets have left the Third World then how can we take it back?'"³ Although the rhetorical and policy adoption of 'failed states' is more recent, intellectually speaking the concept has been around for a long time. Morten Boas and Kathleen M. Jennings describe failed states as the most recent in a long list of modifiers that have been used to describe or attempt to explain why states residing outside of the geographical core of the Western world do not function as we think they are supposed to.⁴ Other qualifiers such as "neopatrimonial, lame, weak, quasi and premodern" – share the common assumption that "every state can be evaluated on the basis of a prototype of an advanced state."⁵ This advanced state is essentially what exists in the Western core: it is a normative goal that represents the ultimate achievement at the end of a single and universalized spectrum of proper state functioning.⁶

Within the 'failed state' discourse many other qualifiers are used: states are described as "weak, vulnerable, unstable, insecure, in crisis, collapsed, fragmented, suspended, broken, shadow, and as quasi- and warlord-states."⁷ Each concept refers to a specific situation, and the list could go on. Nevertheless, the concept of failed state is overarching and ambiguous in nature. The concepts of 'fragile' and 'failed states' have inherent conceptual limitations and flawed assumptions that obscure their utility. They can be shallow, confusing and imprecise policy-oriented labels based on state-centric, ahistorical and decontextualized perspectives. At the same time, they lend themselves to various meanings and interpretations. They are prescriptive, as Western actors have developed them to

promote their own security and development strategies; this makes them useless in the realm of policy, given their inability to formulate effective policy responses to society-wide challenges. Policies flowing from the dominant narrative on failed states have often been narrow and generic prescriptions, in particular, one-size-fits-all state-building policies. This paper will take a critical look at the ways in which the notion of failed states is framed and emphasized by Western governments and international development actors, and how this narrative is problematic in that it is state-centric and ignores history and context.

Representing the Narrative

The failed state narrative attracted increasing attention during the 2000s after the concept began circulating among Western public administrations, international organizations, influential think tanks, and the media. The concept is now widely used by international actors in the context of global security, peacekeeping, poverty reduction, humanitarian assistance and even international trade agreements. Specifically, Western government actors and policy analysts have adopted the notion of failed states to label and rank a number of developing countries facing violence and conflict, political instability, severe poverty, and other threats to security and development.⁸ Models used to represent failed state narratives are articulated in the form of tables, rankings, and indexes, as well as through the use of language, imagery, and analogies.⁹ The calculation of differential capacities to govern among the states of the world today is rendered seemingly objective and ahistorical by the empirical measurement of aspects of government capacity and function.¹⁰

The *Failed State Index*, produced annually by the journal *Foreign Policy* and the think tank Fund for Peace, is the most well known. In the 2012 Index, Somalia, Congo, Sudan, Chad, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Haiti were

³ Sium, 6.

⁴ Morten Boas, and Kathleen M. Jennings, "Insecurity and Development: The Rhetoric of the 'Failed State,'" *The European Journal of Development Research* 17, no. 3 (2005): 387.

⁵ Boas and Jennings, 2005, 387.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁷ Nay, Olivier. "Fragile and failed states: Critical perspectives on conceptual hybrids." *International Political Science Review* 34, no. 3 (2013): 327

⁸ Nay, 327.

⁹ Jonathan Hill, "Beyond the Other? A postcolonial critique of the failed state thesis," *African Identities* 3, no. 2 (2005): 148.

¹⁰ Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "'Good governance' and 'state failure': genealogies of imperial discourse," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2013): 63.

among the top 7.¹¹ In such countries, it is assumed that enduring political tensions, lack of security and the inability of governments to provide political goods to citizens will impede self-reliant development and, thereby, pose a potential threat to regional or global security. The use of indexes and rankings constitutes a mode of representing an apparently-neutral comparative analysis of the capacity to govern and risk of failure. Jones argues "indexes of governance and state failure reproduce hierarchies of international judgment which continue to position the European at the top and the African at the bottom."¹² They appear as empirical facts, which provides the "discursive basis for legitimizing Western intervention in African and other states."¹³

Theorizing the State: The 'Successful' versus the 'Failed'

Underpinning the whole discourse is a European or Western universalism. The identification of failed states is achieved through the construction of a state/failed state dichotomy built on a fixed, universal standard of what constitutes a successful state. The state failure literature's promotion of African states as the deviant 'Other' stems from how it identifies failed states. The successful state standard constructed by this literature is based on the concept of positive sovereignty, which is in turn based on Max Weber's ideal state.¹⁴ The Weberian model is based on the classical European state, which has become the model for all other modern states. Given this, "African states, failed and non-failed alike, are compared with a model of statehood that is based upon strictly European values, customs, practices,

organizations and structures."¹⁵ Bear in mind that the European model of state development was able to evolve and consolidate in the nearly four hundred years following the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Thus, it is believed the inability of certain African states to replicate the political, economic, social and cultural conditions of the Western norm has resulted in their failure, without considering the historical context of decolonization and the process of drawing 'national' boundaries in Africa. Failed state analysts constitute the identities of 'failed' African societies in relation to Western societies, attributing negative characteristics to the former and positive to the latter. The differences between these two categories of states are not simply portrayed as different, but failed states are presented as abnormal in the pejorative sense.

Within the narrative, one of the determining criteria of a successful state is the possession of positive sovereignty. The concept of positive sovereignty is most closely associated with Robert Jackson but is based on Weber's ideal state.¹⁶ According to Jackson, positive sovereignty

presupposes capabilities which enable governments to be their own masters: it is a substantive rather than a formal condition. A positively sovereign government is one which not only enjoys rights of non-intervention and other international immunities but also possesses the wherewithal to provide political goods for its citizens. It is also a government that can collaborate with other governments in defense alliances and similar international arrangements and reciprocate in international commerce and finance.¹⁷

Given this, a successful state not only has international legal or *de jure* recognition of its statehood, but the government of that state also possesses "the capabilities to project and protect their authority throughout the entirety of their sovereign territory and enter into collaborative agreements

¹¹ Daron Acemoglu, and James A. Robinson, "The 2012 Index," *Foreign Policy* 194, (2012): accessed November 9, 2013.

<http://web.ebscohost.com.cyber.usask.ca/ehost/detail?sid=2843741f-beb7-4217-9f89-5d506b7f1168%40sessionmgr15&vid=2&hid=28&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=7721357>. See Appendix Figure 1.

¹² Jones, 2013, 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ Hill, 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁷ Robert Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 29.

with other governments."¹⁸ This is what Jackson refers to as *de facto* statehood that distinguishes positively sovereign states from negatively sovereign states.¹⁹ Thus, the sovereignty of a positively sovereign state is both *de facto* and *de jure*, whereas the sovereignty of a negatively sovereign state is solely *de jure*. According to this model, negatively sovereign states do not control their territory, may be faced with armed insurgents that render them unable to uphold its monopoly of violence and have very little ability to implement policies or promote economic development.²⁰ However, Jonathan Hill notes the positive/negative sovereignty binary does not precisely mirror the state/failed state binary: "while all successful states are positively sovereign and all failed states negatively so, not all negatively sovereign states are failed."²¹ This has aided in the proliferation of various categories of states – from quasi, weak, collapsed and failed – that represents an important ambiguity within the failed state narrative.

In addition to the positive/negative sovereignty binary, failed states are also examined through their inability to provide political goods to their citizens. This approach, as represented by authors such as William Zartman and Robert Rotberg, sees the state first and foremost as a service provider.²² Both authors distinguish between a variety of services that states may provide, ranging from "security to rule of law, the protection of property, the right to political participation, provision of infrastructure and social services such as health and education."²³ These services constitute a hierarchy where security is a condition for the provision of all other services. Hill outlines two common elements of this approach. First, the failed state is identified as "being either 'unable' and/or 'unwilling' to

perform the functions they should. The second is a definition of what these functions are, namely, the provision of welfare, law and order, and security."²⁴ Underpinning the descriptions of failed states is therefore a predetermined definition of what constitutes a non-failed state or successful state. Stein Sundstol Eriksen adds that this approach can be problematic in that viewing the state as essentially a service provider can lead to the promotion of normative prescriptions under the guise of positivism science: "Instead of developing concepts which are better suited to analyze existing states, the gap between ideals and empirical reality is treated as justification for intervention which aims to close this gap, and make empirical reality conform to the model."²⁵ The lack of congruency between the ideal and reality is taken to indicate a lack, not in the concept, but in the object to which it refers. According to this approach, the absence of certain features associated with statehood constitutes an argument for changing the world to make it fit the concept of statehood. Hence, the policy manifestations of the failed state narrative are ahistorical, decontextualized, and based on a one-size-fits-all model. Eriksen warns that with this move, one moves away from the domain of theory as a tool of understanding and moves towards the realm of normative theory.²⁶

Branwen Gruffyd Jones identifies three characteristics of the discourse that determine its ahistorical nature and, thus, its inadequate explanatory power:

First is the enormous proliferation of descriptive terminology... This rich array of descriptors functions in a manner which appears self-evident, acting by way of tautology to form a substitute for historically informed social analysis and explanation... Second, 'state failure' is characterized as being primarily of *local* origin... The generic form of explanation locates the causes of 'failure' in terms of internal agency...with little serious regard to history, structure and the international. Third, the analytical/descriptive approach operates through

¹⁸ Hill, 146.

¹⁹ Jackson, 27.

²⁰ Stein Sundstol Eriksen, "'State Failure' in theory and practice: the idea of the state and the contradictions of state formation," *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 1 (2011): 232.

²¹ Hill, 146.

²² Eriksen, 230.

²³ *Ibid.*, 231.

²⁴ Hill, 145.

²⁵ Eriksen, 231.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

a logic of comparison with an ideal and ahistorical notion of what 'the state' is or should be.²⁷

This comparative approach makes it extremely difficult to adequately explain the development of individual states. The implication of both perspectives is that any deviations from their definitions of statehood can only appear as a deficiency.²⁸ Jones draws a linkage between the identification of some lack or inferiority and the legitimation of imperial intervention.²⁹ In the colonial era, distinguishing between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states legitimized formal occupation. The current discourse of state failure, with its hierarchical categories of weak, fragile, failed and collapsed, aids in legitimizing intervention by identifying lack, inferiority and incapacity.³⁰ Rather than explaining why the socio-political problems of an individual state have developed, this comparative approach merely highlights that African states are different and are ahistorical and decontextualized in their analysis. Through this approach, "states are merely identified not by what they are, but what they are not, namely, successful in comparison to Western states."³¹ This raises questions as to how useful it is to start with such a conception of statehood.

The failed state narrative conveys "Western conceptions of the polity; it reactivates a developmentalist approach that considers the model of the Weberian state as the appropriate institutional solution to restoring order and stability in fragile contexts."³² Pinar Bilgin and Adam David Morton observe:

[there is a tendency to] abstract the post-colonial state from its socio-historical context, leading to an inability to account for historically specific

ideologies and practices or the social bases of state power that may constitute or sustain social order... [There is] no account of how a post-colonial state comes into being in the first place, how it is constituted or reproduced. There is also a further tendency to reify the post-colonial state by abstracting it from the international sphere.³³

Thus, for Bilgin and Morton, the overall result of analysis of the post-colonial 'failed' state ends up overlooking the historically contingent processes of state formation and more complex patterns of state-civil society relations.³⁴ The conceptual language of the failed state discourse "meshes easily with a broader and deeply entrenched Western imagination of chaos and anarchy in Africa: a general lack of capacity to develop, to rule or to be peaceful."³⁵ Furthermore, Jones argues, "underpinning the apparent empirical precision and objectivity of analyses of state failure in Africa are a set of features that betray the position of this approach in a longer genealogy of imperial discourse."³⁶ Although the explicit language of race in its modern colonial form disappeared from legitimate international discourse with the demise of formal colonial rule, the "position of this new hierarchy of state capacity to govern...are now specified with reference to a general notion of the functional capacity of states, often combined with some sense of ultimate threat."³⁷ This has been made possible by the language of 'good governance' that resonates with already existing features of common sense about Africa. However, Jones notes that the failed state discourse emerged not directly from the colonial ideology of racial civilization but is the immediate predecessor of the sanitized language of development and modernization.³⁸ The development and modernization discourse was born out of the processes of decolonization. Jones argues that it served to "legitimize the practices of Western governments

²⁷ Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "The global political economy of social crisis: Towards a critique of the 'failed state' ideology," *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 2 (2008): 184.

²⁸ Eriksen, 234.

²⁹ Jones, 2008, 197.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

³¹ Hill, 148.

³² Nay, 328.

³³ Bilgin and Morton, 63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁵ Jones, 2013, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

and international organization in providing 'policy advice' and 'technical assistance' in a range of matters of political, economic and social concern to newly independent countries, the new vocabulary helping to disguise essential continuities with colonial relationships."³⁹

Neocolonial Underpinnings

By ignoring historical and contextual aspects, the dominant approach to failed states presents state failure as a consequence of domestic weakness. This view of state failure as a predominantly internal or domestic problem is reinforced by the various solutions to state failure offered by different development actors and analysts. Under neoliberal globalization, formal democratization has been represented as the political corollary of economic liberalization. This has been reflected in the adoption of aid conditionally and structural adjustment programmes by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in favour of democracy promotion.⁴⁰ In this way, external actors are presented as benevolent, restorative forces while the domestic sphere of failed states are perceived as compromised, lacking in agency and, therefore, incapable of looking after themselves. Furthermore, Hill argues, "external actors are in no way implicated in contributing to or exacerbating a state's so-called failure."⁴¹ The privileging of internal factors over external ones not only leads the failed state discourse to ignore the interplay between domestic and international contexts, it also means that the influence of external actors on socio-political crises are ignored.

While failed states are framed as the result of domestic factors, simultaneously, foreign governments and international development agencies and organizations are portrayed as the only forces capable of rectifying these problems. Labeling state failures is not just a rhetorical exercise; it is used to delineate the acceptable range of policy options that can then be exercised against those

states.⁴² As such, Western caretaker states see little relevance in the internationally recognized sovereignty or local capacities of African nation-states. What results is a "paternalistic defense of Western imperialism in both its historical and contemporary forms."⁴³ As Michael Ignatieff argued months before the 2003 invasion of Iraq,

Imperialism used to be the white man's burden. This gave it a bad reputation. But imperialism doesn't stop being necessary just because it becomes politically incorrect. Nations sometimes fail, and when they do, only outside help – imperial power – can get them back on their feet. Nation-building is the kind of imperialism you get in a human rights era, a time when great powers believe simultaneously in the right of small nations to govern themselves and in their own right to rule the world.⁴⁴

Explicit in Ignatieff's argument is the 'fact' or need of imperialism as a set of benevolent policies and practices oriented towards the South's development of national security and human rights. He frames Western intervention in the optimistic language of 'nation-building' as opposed to recognizing the violent and disempowering nature of their intervention. Sium adds that Ignatieff leaves strategic moral and military space for the West's intervention in the South as an exercise of its 'right to rule the world.'⁴⁵ Through this self-appointed right, "the West awards itself narrative control over which the world's geographies require imperialism and which are permitted to participate in acting it out."⁴⁶

⁴²Morten Boas, and Kathleen M. Jennings, "Failed states and state failure: Threats or opportunities?" *Globalization* 4, no. 4 (2007): 478.

² Sium, 3.

⁴⁴ Michael Ignatieff, "Nation-Building Lite," *New York Times*, last modified July 28, 2002, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/28/magazine/nation-building-lite.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

⁴⁵ Sium, 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁰ Hill, 149.

⁴¹ Ibid., 149.

The categories of fragility and failed states cannot be isolated from the conditions under which they emerged and entered the Western political lexicon on issues like security and development. They were a product of the post-Cold War period, created by Western actors based on an attempt to advance new strategic options in security, defense, humanitarianism and international cooperation. It was also a key feature of the George Bush administration's policy discourse on the 'war on terror' by connecting the American foreign policy agenda with the new national security strategy launched after 9/11.⁴⁷ Additionally, the relationship established between state fragility, underdevelopment and security reflected the new development aid strategies pursued by major multilateral organizations. It helped those institutions representing Western countries' interests, especially the World Bank, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED) and IMF, to develop a new agenda towards non-performing countries after Western donors shifted towards performance-based allocation mechanisms for distributing development assistance.⁴⁸ Oliver Nay argues it is for these reasons that "the rhetoric on failed and fragile states cannot be dissociated from the Western powers' military doctrines, diplomatic options and economic choices."⁴⁹ It provides grounds for policy interventions to resolve regional conflicts, counter transnational terrorism and combat international organized crime, or for interference in the internal affairs of war-torn or poor countries.⁵⁰ The discourse on failed states becomes a policy narrative that serves to justify peace-building and state-building interventions which has contributed to the development of neocolonialism that involves

international domination that no longer relies on the military conquest of territory, but instead results from the establishment, by the great powers and for a limited time, of governance systems that bring together international organizations, Western bilateral agencies and domestic authorities in countries rebuilding after

conflict or disaster – such as Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and South Sudan.⁵¹

The emergence of the failed state narrative has not primarily served the needs of populations suffering from war situations and poor governance. Instead, it mainly reflects strategic and financial concerns shared by a limited number of Western governments. It is a policy label "that fuels 'operational doctrines' on international security and development... and has been instrumental in the production of legitimate discourse in international relations."⁵²

Definitional Ambiguity

Another salient limitation of the failed state narrative lies in the inability of actors to agree on consistent criteria to define state fragility. These concepts are subject to a wide variety of uses and refer to diverse elements, depending on whether one is dealing with the efficiency of public administration, the legitimacy of government institutions, international and national security, or the well-being of local populations. Nay outlines several of the areas where these concepts are utilized to describe

the incapacities and dysfunctions of state institutions; the domestic contexts marked by political instability, insecurity and violence; examining economic hardship and extreme poverty; problems of border security and uncontrolled transnational transfers (refugee flows, economic migration, terrorists networks, drug and arms trafficking); and lastly, they may refer to health risks and environmental threats.⁵³

Many scholars recognize the inherent vagueness of these concepts, but this has led to the proliferation of definitions each with an accumulation of diverse indicators. As a result, there are limitations in the analytical utility of the concept. Nay suggests that the use of the single term 'failed state' leads to "super-aggregation of very diverse sorts of states

⁴⁷ Nay, 330.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 329.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁰ Boas and Jennings, 388.

⁵¹ Nay, 330.

⁵² Ibid., 330.

⁵³ Ibid., 331.

and their problems. The term is used in various indexes, each proposing specific institutional and social indicators to define 'state fragility' – such as in the 160 sub-indicators reported in the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index.⁵⁴ This approach allows for an infinite number of criteria, making the notion of a 'failed state' even more obscure. Additionally, the notion of a 'failed state' has become a catchall phrase. For example, according to the OECD, "States are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and human rights of their populations."⁵⁵ Nay points out this definition can be applied to a majority of developing countries.⁵⁶ Thus, further conceptual clarity remains elusive. Nay also notes, "this may be one reason that it gained such importance in the international policy discourse: the more extensive, porous and malleable the idea of state fragility, the more it could be appropriated and manipulated by policy actors and analysts with conflicting views and policy priorities."⁵⁷

Western-centrism

As discussed earlier, the failed state narrative is grounded in a Western-centric approach to social order and political stability. Priority is given to political institutions, internal security and legal order, state control over territory, the provision of public services and the regulation of social and economic life. States are also perceived as functioning entities and legitimate actors once they are able to function according to Western donor assistance standards or conditions. The notion that states can be divided into worthy and failed stems from the assumption that "all states can and should function in essentially the same way, and can therefore be located on a spectrum from good to

bad."⁵⁸ Furthermore, the corollary of the assumption that states can and should function the same way ignores the issue of why these states function as they do. The narrative prescribes that failed states can be fixed using technocratic solutions, such as good governance programmes or institutional reforms. Boas and Jennings argue that these types of reform agendas are predicated on "the self-referential notion that modern, Western, 'liberal market democracies' are the normative goal, and that mimicking their structures is the only viable option to overcome the decrepitude that enables criminality, terrorism, and poverty to flourish."⁵⁹ These flawed assumptions about state uniformity have produced narrow and generic policy prescriptions, in particular, and one-size-fits-all state-building policies.

Conclusion

The failed state discourse is ambiguous, one-dimensional and self-serving. This leads to a dissonance between the analysis of failed states and local realities. In a globalized world, it would be wrong to assume the factors causing political instability and extreme poverty in so-called failed states are confined to their national boundaries. The failed state discourse as it currently stands disregards the fact that many different pathways to failure exist: socio-cultural build up, colonial legacies and regional dynamics, among other factors all matter to varying degrees. Western leaders are keen to point at internal dynamics while refusing to recognize how international political economy and global power asymmetries shape states' abilities to deal with crises. The discourse is highly subjective and creates flexible labels that are loosely applied to different contexts. Actors such as development agencies, international financial institutions, think tanks, and states have produced a large number of case studies, typologies and highly sophisticated indexes to measure the fragility or failure of states.

There is a need for a more nuanced, more contextualized and dynamic approach to engagement with 'failed states.' International responses to such policy challenges should improve the state's institutional capacity and political will to perform functions necessary to meet citizens' basic needs. However, simplistic notions and catchall phrases that blur the understanding of multifaceted

⁵⁴ Nay, 332.

⁵⁵ OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), "Principles for Good International Engagement with Fragile States and Situations," *OECD*, last modified April 2007, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/38368714.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Nay, 331.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁵⁸ Boas and Jennings, 477.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 477.

historical situations in so-called failed states need to be abandoned. In cases where countries are affected by conflict, crises and poverty, the study of central government institutions should not be neglected as "corruption, clan divisions within the political system, political violence, lack of free elections, bad governance, weak capacity of public administrations and public debt..."⁶⁰ However, the analytical focus on state institutions creates an artificial division between political structures and society that tends to overlook specific socio-cultural contexts. Alternatives that consider the question of state fragility as interdependent with questions of social vulnerabilities require the rejection of the analytical frameworks as they currently stand. It implies moving away from the construction of a policy narrative to meet policy demands and financial incentives of Western actors and moving towards a perspective grounded in social and political theory. This would involve exploring the factors contributing to the challenges faced by so-called failed states on a country-by-country basis that adopts context-based and historically grounded approaches. This entails moving away from the comparative approach that contrasts developing states to a static, ahistorical definition of the state based on Western values.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Professor Kalowatie Deonandan for her encouragement, as well as the faculty reviewers.

⁶⁰ Nay, 337.

References

- Acemonglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. "The 2012 Index." *Foreign Policy* 194, (2012): 85-91. Accessed November 9, 2013.
<http://web.ebscohost.com.cyber.usask.ca/ehost/detail?sid=2843741f-beb7-4217-9f89-5d506b7f1168%4osessionmgr15&vid=2&hid=28&data=JnNpdGU9ZWlhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=ag&AN=77721357>.
- Bilgin, Pinar, and Adam David Morton. "Historicizing representation of 'failed states': Beyond the cold-war annexation of the social sciences?" *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2002): 55-80.
- Boas, Morten, and Kathleen M. Jennings. "Insecurity and Development: The Rhetoric of the 'Failed State'." *The European Journal of Development Research* 17, no. 3 (2005): 385-395.
- . "Failed states and state failure: Threats or opportunities?" *Globalization* 4, no. 4 (2007): 475-485.
- Brooks, Rosa Ehrenreich. "Failed States or the State as Failure?" *The University of Chicago Law Review* 72, no. 4 (2005): 1159-1196.
- Eriksen, Stein Sundstol. "'State Failure' in theory and practice: the idea of the state and the contradictions of state formation." *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 1 (2011): 229-247.
- Helman, Gerald B., and Steven R. Ratner. "Saving Failed States." *Foreign Policy* no. 89 (Winter 1992-1993): 3-20.
- Hill, Jonathan. "Beyond the Other? A postcolonial critique of the failed state thesis." *African Identities* 3, no. 2 (2005): 139-154.
- Ignatieff, Michael. "Nation-Building Lite." *New York Times*. Last modified July 28, 2002. Accessed November 10, 2013.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/28/magazine/nation-building-lite.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.
- Jackson, Robert. *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990..
- Jones, Branwen Gruffydd. "The global political economy of social crisis: Towards a critique of the 'failed state' ideology." *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 2 (2008): 180-205.
- . "'Good governance' and 'state failure': genealogies of imperial discourse." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2013): 49-70.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. *Citizen and Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Nay, Olivier. "Fragile and failed states: Critical perspectives on conceptual hybrids." *International Political Science Review* 34, no. 3 (2013): 326-341.
- OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). "Principles for Good International Engagement with Fragile States and Situations." *OECD*. Last modified April 2007.
<http://www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/38368714.pdf>.
- Sium, Aman. "From Starving Child to Revel-Pirate: The West's New Imagery of a 'Failed' Somalia." *Borderlands* 11, no. 3 (2012): 1-26.
- Verhoeven, Harry. "The self-fulfilling prophecy of failed states: Somalia, state collapse and the Global War on Terror." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, no. 3 (2009): 405-425..

