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Book Review

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Book Review

Empire in Denial: The Politics of State Building

David Chandler

London, Pluto Press, 2006, 221 pp., ISBN 0-745-3 428-2

Empire in Denial, the latest work by David Chandler, builds on his previous work in the field of democratization by introducing the concept of “empire in denial” in relation to the role of the international community in contemporary state building. In response to what is characterized as the administrative, or problem-solving, approach taken to the debate around state building, Chandler attempts to articulate the theoretical arguments that have thus far been excluded from consideration. Central to these arguments is the denial of power inherent in modern state building discourse, which casts international intervention as neutral assistance to nation states, who voluntarily enter into such cooperation, but who must ultimately take responsibility for the success or failure of the policies implemented.

The defining characteristic of empire in denial is that the “new forms of external regulation are driven less by the desire to extend and enforce Western power than they are by the desire to deny it” (p. 18). With more overtly coercive methods of intervention, such as armed humanitarian intervention or policies of conditionality for aid, the exercise of power had been clear, with the result that political responsibility for the success or failure of a policy attached firmly to the intervening power. The shift towards local partnership evident in state building policies is seen by Chandler as a means of disguising the true nature of power relations at play and allowing intervening powers to distance themselves from accountability for the consequences of their intervention. Traditional models of statehood have been replaced with a hazy model of legal sovereignty which places the responsibility for implementing and legitimating external policies with the national government, yet which denies states the protective rights of sovereignty. Indeed, the language of sovereignty is used as a means of representing external intervention as a partnership in a voluntary contract among equal partners (p. 33). The idea of local ownership is essential to the concept of empire in denial. The characterization of reform as a question of internal policy to be implemented domestically with international support conceals the relationship of power in operation, making national governments accountable to the international community rather than requiring international administrators to be accountable to host populations. If policies fail, it is as a result of an internal failure to deliver rather than because of any inherent problem with the approach being taken. Obligations are held to have been undertaken voluntarily, the original bargaining power of the parties is not considered.

This dynamic has been facilitated by a shift in international relations from foreign policy based explicitly on self-interest to policy based on responsibility towards the

“Other” (p. 23) and a driving concept of human security. Beyond simply arguing that failing states present a threat to international order, under this conception of foreign policy, ethics are indistinguishable from politics. This coincidence is exemplified by the increased attention being paid to needs-based constituencies and programmes of action, focusing on general social issues such as poverty and exclusion, or the status of women, which can be articulated through the voices of civil society. Highlighting “abstract and non-political” (p. 93) areas of need and responsibility to the “Other” serves to legitimate intervention while deflecting attention from the actions or motives of the Western powers. Indeed, intervention can be cast as being against the interests of Western powers concerned.

While state building is commonly understood to refer to processes of post-conflict reconstruction, Chandler illustrates these dynamics with reference to the role of a number of key international institutions active in promoting policies of good governance elsewhere. Of particular interest in this book are the poverty reduction strategies for Africa, and the stabilization and accession processes of the EU in relation to its Eastern neighbours. Such policies assume that there is a right and a wrong approach to governance and that international assistance may be necessary to guide states through the decision-making process. This technocratic approach to governance allows for even more intrusive intervention into the domestic policies of the state, expanding the scope of permissible intervention. Chandler demonstrates this point using the example of anti-corruption; “[I]t legitimises increased regulatory intervention and at the same time portrays this regulative control as merely the imposition or upholding of technical standards or universal practices undertaken to ‘empower’ the citizens or to uphold or strengthen democratic institutions” (p. 145). Thus the imposition of such regulatory standards is represented as the act of a powerless and disinterested international actor for the benefit of the passive political subject—the citizen.

The consequence of such policies, and a key component of Chandler’s argument, is that despite seeking to distance themselves from the internal running of such states, it is international experts and administrators who are devising and imposing the law, often with little sensitivity to local needs or concerns, and bypassing the domestic channels of consultation and consensus building. Power is being transferred further and further away from elected representatives. The result of this, Chandler argues, is that the measures appear external to the populations, and that the bypassing of political process “hinders attempts to cohere post-conflict societies and overcome social and political divisions” (p. 43).

What Chandler does not specifically address is whether, in his opinion, there may be situations where pure democratic preferences should be tempered by law. There may, therefore, be some who ultimately disagree with his assessment. That said, with this book Chandler presents an insightful and compelling critique of modern state building practices. Important questions are raised about the underlying dynamics of the relationship between the state and the international community, as well as the impact that state building practices have on their beneficiaries, making it a must read for all those with an interest in democracy and human rights, practitioner and academic alike.

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