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Six Theses on Phantom States and Empire in Denial

Introduction: State-Building and 'Empire in Denial'

State-building, despite its centrality to international relations, is an under theorised issue. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that, for many commentators, questions of state-building are narrow technical and administrative concerns; merely a matter of 'learning the lessons' of previous experiences in international administrative assistance and external support in order to build the governance capacity of 'fragile' states. The material is mostly policy-led, designed to problem-solve - focused around empirical case-studies and deriving fairly generic and idealistic sets of policy

recommendations - rather than taking a step back to consider state-building in the broader context of international politics today.

In my work in this area, the central point that has struck me is the often problematic nature of the justifications for state-building projects. Underneath the expressed concerns of democracy, human rights, security and development in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East and elsewhere, there appears to be a deeper concern of self-interest. Yet, this self-interest is not the one popularly imagined in security terms: the dark and dangerous threats from the 'black holes' that failed states could become (ICB, 2005: 38). The idea of failed states as a security threat is, I believe, an exaggerated one; the 9/11 bombers were educated and worked in the US and Europe, not Afghanistan. Terrorists, criminal masterminds and political extremists are not drawn to the parts of the world where law and order and public services are non-existent; money and ideas are made in urban centres not peripheries. It is the stuff of fiction to believe that the problems of drugs, crime, terrorism etc are manufactured in some strange exotic location and then exported to the West (see, for example, Dalby, 1997: 14-15).

The self-interest of Western state-builders is a much more complex and ambiguous one, that of the denial of power: the desire to avoid any investigation of their interests, of *their* capacities. State-building is the practice of denying empire. The problem with non-Western states from the Balkans to Africa is their subordination and weakness in relation to the Western powers. It is this subordination which raises awkward questions of policy responses and of political responsibilities and above all the question of Western political purpose: What does the West have to offer? This

question is an unsettling one for Western governments and international institutions which acutely feel the lack of a sense of political purpose today and fear their inability to act in a way that openly projects their power.

Empire is drawn by the weakness of non-Western states, in the same way that nature abhors a vacuum, and empire is happy to make grand rhetorical statements of Western mission and sometimes to intervene coercively in the search for a sense of political purpose (see Laïdi, 1998; Chandler, 2003). Yet, as soon as policy action or intervention is undertaken, and costs have to be justified by justifications of political ends, denial becomes a central concern and policy practices attempt to shift responsibility and accountability on to the non-Western state itself. This process of the assertion of power and its denial sets up the contradictory dynamic of state-building, which is both highly interventionist and highly evasive. This paper seeks to draw out the largely neglected elements of denial and evasion and seeks to highlight, in six short theses, how these aspects influence policy practices and to understand the effects of these practices.

The first three theses relate to Empire in Denial: the difficulties which Western states and international institutions have in openly projecting their power in the international sphere. The second three theses relate to phantom states: the problematic effects of international state-building practices.

Empire in Denial

1. Empire?

New practices and forms of international regulation reflect Western economic and social power but it would be wrong to see these practices as a continuation of past forms of empire or of new forms of Foucauldian governmentality. In fact, the drive to extend these forms of regulation stems from the evasiveness brought about by the problems of legitimising power rather than the desire to exercise power more effectively. Empire in Denial is therefore neither a product of traditional material self-interests nor is it a reflection of changing state or international institutional identities as these concepts would be understood by either realist or social constructivist international relations theorists.

2. Foreign Policy?

Foreign policy practices, manifested in the therapeutic state-building discourses of empowerment and capacity-building, are problematic not because they reflect power inequalities – this would be more of a tautology than a critique. They are problematic because they are not driven by the foreign subject of policy but the desire to deny the power of empire. It is the self-orientated, one could say - with Ignatieff (1998: 95) - narcissistic, motivation behind state-building policy-making that leads its practitioners into generic ‘codes of practice’ and ‘guidelines for action’ for capacity-building. The concern is less with the problems of regulation, or even the needs and interests, of ‘failed’ states than it is with the more central question of the evasion of political responsibility. This more inward-looking dynamic to policy formulation has made traditional foreign office staff increasingly marginal to policy concerns.

3. The Ideology of Power?

For traditional critics of empire the ideological discourses of empowerment and state capacity-building merely hide the interests of power. The interests of power stay fairly much the same while the ideological justifications and the nature of the division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the ‘friend/enemy’ distinction, may be presented in a variety of keys. However, the rise of the discursive importance of the Other and the therapeutic practices of empowerment and capacity-building while being ideological denials of Western power on the one hand, on the other, also appear as necessary and real reflections of political changes at the level of Western Self’s capacity for projecting power internationally.

Phantom States

4. The State-Building Paradox?

The new regulative practices of state-building result in the weak and artificial state institutions of the phantom state. This may appear to be a paradox as the justifications for these practices is the need for external support to enhance the legitimacy and capacity of these institutions. However, this is not a genuine paradox as the contradiction between the stated aims of state-building practices and their outcome merely reflects the contradiction between the external rule of empire and its denial. State-building seeks to capacity-build states but states without the genuine capacity for self-government.

5. Sovereignty?

In states subject to state-building practices, sovereignty no longer operates to demarcate the distinction between the inside and the outside of distinct political communities. Analysis of the core state institutions of southeast European accession and candidate states or those of poor or indebted states, which have been through the Highly Indebted Poor Country initiative and the process of World Bank poverty reduction strategies, reveals that these institutions have been internationalised. Non-Western states increasingly lack even the formal capacity to formulate public policy independently of the requirements of international institutions. In effect, these states have been reduced to the administrative bodies of external power.

6. Governance without Politics

In phantom states the political process which does exist is a hollow one, either subordinate to decisions made elsewhere or bypassing representative institutions and feeding directly into internationally managed policy processes through participatory consultative civil society forums. The dynamic of Empire in Denial is continually to undermine centres where social power exists in order to create artificial subjects to be empowered or capacity-built. This process can be seen in the participatory forms of legitimising 'country owned' poverty reduction strategies, which have tended to exclude socially organised groups and to favour the creation of ascriptive needs-based constituencies of individuals. It can also be seen in the regulatory frameworks of good governance, anti-corruption and the 'rule of law' where group interests are often problematised as being sectional rather than those of the country 'as a whole'.

Conclusion

Why should we be concerned about Empire in Denial? In engaging with this question I have been surprised by how many colleagues involved in this sphere of research have supported the framework of therapeutic and empowering forms of exercising power which project administrative power over the domestic political process. For some of them this does not mean the end of politics merely its reconstitution in new forms of local or needs-based participatory processes and public consultations. They argue that the larger policy questions are better off being considered at a higher institutional level, where policy decisions are likely to be better informed, and that in functional terms it is better for non-Western states to play a largely administrative role than have the poor management that seems to come with self-government. But does it matter if representational politics and self-government are sacrificed for enlightened 'good governance', even if it is on behalf of Empire in Denial? It could be argued that the policy mechanisms may not be perfect, but that this is therefore more of a reason to provide problem-solving policy advice rather than to engage in the marginalising preoccupation of critique.

The answer to this question, I believe, depends on whether the answer is 'yes' or 'no' to a prior question: 'Is this it?' Why engage in a political understanding and critique of current practices of power and its denial if the political sphere has no better solutions for society than the administrative one does? My forthcoming book on the subject has not focused on an administrative or problem-solving critique of the state-building practices of Empire in Denial. But a political one: that the denial of power is

a dishonest, reactionary, and elitist perspective which seeks to argue that power is not important and that there is not much that power can do.

Progressive political movements have historically been based on an appreciation of political power and the possibilities this provides for marshalling the social power of society. For those with a social project the location of political sovereignty is important, for it is only by politically marshalling the social power of society that its resources can be directed towards consciously designed ends. Only those without a progressive social project would seek to deny their power and to obfuscate the location of sovereign power. In this regard, *Empire in Denial* is more reactionary and backward looking than empire at its formal zenith in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both forms of empire might deny the capacity of subject populations to change things for themselves, only *Empire in Denial* seeks to deny the capacity for change and social progress entirely.

Empire in Denial promotes its practices of evasion as the solution to all things to all people and revels in its rhetorical claims to lack power and purpose beyond empowering the Other. It is surely necessary to challenge the consensus that asserts that power and self-interest are concepts to be shunned and avoided and that the best the majority of the people of the world can hope for is a good administration and gradual reductions in social exclusion and numbers in extreme poverty. *Empire in Denial* seeks to deny its own power and with it the possibility of social transformation and of a world where whole societies can be dragged out of relative poverty and underdevelopment and even societies in the West vastly improved.

This denial of power is not based on what is scientifically and socially possible today given even the application of existing levels of technological advance, but Western elites' subjective lack of a political project capable of mobilising their societies. But this denial is a guilty and dishonest one; it is driven by the awareness that the only point of government is to advance society. If governments have no political project for social change then there is no point in the struggle for representation as the job would be purely one of administration. Government officials would then be chosen on the basis of technical proficiency rather than by popular vote.

To have the power of empire but not to have a social project makes the position of holding political power even more problematic. Empire in Denial seeks to take the easy way out, hiding behind the therapeutic codes of empowerment and the depoliticised regulations of law and administrative etiquette. The exhaustion of the Western political elite threatens to condemn the majority of the world to a future that is little different from the present and to pass the buck to others. In their lack of vision to mobilise the social and technical wealth at their command they reveal a historically unique lack of subjectivity. It is little wonder that they are in denial.