H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

Roundtable Review 15-15


24 November 2023 | PDF: [https://issforum.org/to/jrt15-15](https://issforum.org/to/jrt15-15) | Website: [rjissf.org](http://rjissf.org) | Twitter: [@HDiplo](https://twitter.com/H_Diplo)

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Introduction by Desh Girod, Georgetown University

Following the Cold War, the United States led the West in a normative global push for liberal democracy, becoming deeply invested in the project. The narrative held that the West had arrived at the “End of History,” the conclusion of institutionalizing Enlightenment ideals and witnessing their triumph over communism, leaving liberal democracy as the unrivaled paradigm.¹ This self-congratulatory myth has been dying a slow death, most notably in the state-building projects in Iraq and Afghanistan. It may take years to understand why Western efforts ended in ignominy and empowered Western adversaries. Central to the current understanding is that Iran worked to undermine the US-backed government in Iraq, and that Pakistan did the same in Afghanistan.²

Melissa Lee’s groundbreaking book, *Crippling Leviathan*, urges scholars and policymakers to recognize that such undermining is actually common: a foreign power will sometimes subvert and thus fragment another’s national territory. Lee shows that when one state significantly disagrees with another, it may subvert governance to coerce a concession. The key question is whether the target contains a group that shares a fundamental political viewpoint with the outside power and can thus act as its proxy. Subversion is appealing to the outside power because the practice is relatively cheap, easy to deny, and sufficiently threatening to coerce the target government into making concessions. Lee’s insight challenges a prevalent notion among scholars in comparative politics that authority in contemporary states depends almost exclusively on domestic variables.³

The reviewers, Alexandra Chinchilla, Benjamin Mueser, and Michael Poznansky, commend Lee for shifting our attention away from domestic factors and toward external actors, for focusing on state consolidation (and distinguishing it from institutionalization), and for testing her theory with innovative quantitative and qualitative methods, a research design that the reviewers praise for its rigor. Collectively, the reviews suggest three main areas for future research.

First, while acknowledging that Lee’s design required her to limit the sample size, the reviewers wonder how adding cases from different locations and times would complicate the argument. Lee agrees that future research should broaden the sample to examine additional factors, such as the relative power of the target and sponsor (Poznansky), the local proxy’s characteristics (Chinchilla), and colonial history (Mueser). Nevertheless, Lee speculates that including at least some of the high-profile out-of-sample cases that the reviewers mention would have strengthened the book’s findings.

Second, the reviewers propose that future research examine the role of violence in strengthening and weakening state consolidation. Poznansky and Chinchilla ask what motivates sponsors to support violent subversion (by, for example, funding a rebel group) as opposed to less violent methods (such as establishing parallel authority structures). Chinchilla also asks whether subversion encourages the target government to improve governance in other regions in order to protect those regions, citing Ukraine’s response to Russia’s

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2014 invasion as an example. Mueser wonders whether scholars should apply the bellicist state-building model outside of Europe.

In her response, Lee supports Poznansky’s and Chinchilla’s ideas for future research and she readily agrees with Mueser that applying the model outside of Europe brings new questions to light. Citing Chinchilla’s example of concurrent state strengthening and weakening in Ukraine, Lee considers whether states under subversion are undergoing some processes that are consistent with the bellicist model and other processes that are not. According to Lee, future research could analyze specific aspects of a state (such as its public finances or bureaucracy) to map state authority so as to avoid conflating the processes.

Finally, the three reviewers grapple with the implications of Crippling Leviathan in different ways. Chinchilla and Poznansky focus on policy implications, especially the potential of other parties to end the subversion. Mueser focuses on the use of the term “ungoverned” to demarcate official state structure. He argues that by disciplinarily choosing this term, we are reifying what constitutes valid governance. Lee explains in her response that she used the term “ungoverned” as a reference point because it is a common term in the literature on state-building (I, too, have used similar terms). She goes on to say that she does not assume the validity or invalidity of the state in her work, that she has long been concerned that the emphasis on “state-building” does not speak to the character of the state being built, and that her pursuit of analytical clarity compelled her to separate the state from the regime.

On the one hand, Lee’s approach to studying the state reflects neo-positivism’s gold standard. In addition, the current global paradigm operates on the model of the nation state, suggesting that, if we want an effective nation state, we need to pay attention to the capacity and limitations of the model. On the other hand, the conversation between Lee and Mueser highlights that the conventional framing of the state omits essential aspects (e.g., domestic repression); that the neo-positivist values of parsimony and rigor leave out the complexity and context of how targeted states, proxies, sponsors, and third parties attach meaning to sovereignty and how that meaning shapes their incentives; and that in Western foreign policy there is still strong allegiance to the normative liberal state. Their conversation can help us rethink how we view state-building and the nature of the state itself.

In sum, Crippling Leviathan reframes the literature on state-building by embedding contemporary state formation in international relations. If the reviews are any indication, the book will spark deep reflection on the past and future of contemporary states.

Contributors:

**Melissa M. Lee** is the Klein Family Presidential Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. She studies the international and domestic politics of state-building and state development. Lee is the author of *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State* (Cornell University Press, 2020). Her work has received the American Political Science Association’s 2016 Helen Dwight Reid (now Merze Tate) award, APSA’s European Politics and Society Section 2020 Best Article Prize, and Perry World House’s

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inaugural Emerging Scholar Global Policy Prize. She received her PhD in Political Science from Stanford University. Prior to joining the faculty at Penn, Lee was Assistant Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University.

**Desh Girod** is an Associate Professor of Government at Georgetown University. He researches how racism functions internationally and in the United States as a political and economic project. He is the author of *Explaining Post-Conflict Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and is writing a book entitled *Jim Crow Foreign Policy*.

**Alexandra Chinchilla** is an Assistant Professor at the Bush School of Government & Public Service at Texas A&M University and a core faculty member of the Albritton Center for Grand Strategy. Previously, she was a Rosenwald Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy and International Security and a Niehaus Postdoctoral Fellow at The John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College. She received her PhD in Political Science from the University of Chicago in 2021. Chinchilla researches international relations with a focus on security cooperation, alliance politics, and proxy war. In her book project and related articles, she examines how powerful states use security cooperation tools, like military training and advising, and when these tools succeed in influencing other militaries. Another area of her research focuses on international security issues in the context of NATO, Ukraine, and Russia. Her dissertation won an honorable mention for Best Dissertation from the American Political Science Association’s International Collaboration section. Chinchilla’s research has been published in the *Journal of Peace Research, International Politics, the International Studies Review, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, and several edited volumes.

**Benjamin Mueser** is a Core Lecturer in Contemporary Civilization in the Department of Political Science at Columbia University. Formerly he was a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, where he contributed to the International Relations Theory Working Group. He received his PhD in Political Science from Columbia University in 2021. He is a political theorist and international relations scholar working on the historical and normative foundations of territorial states, with interests in the history of international political thought, state formation, and territorial rights. His book project (under contract with Oxford University Press), *The Territorial Revolution in Political Thought: Building Bordered States in Early International Law*, examines the transformation of European theories of territory from patrimonial lands to national collective property. His writing has been published in *Global Intellectual History, History of Political Thought,* and *The Cambridge Review of International Affairs*.

**Michael Poznansky** is an Associate Professor in the Strategic and Operational Research Department at the US Naval War College and a core faculty member in the Cyber & Innovation Policy Institute. He is the author of *In the Shadow of International Law: Secrecy and Regime Change in the Postwar World* (Oxford University Press, 2020). The ideas expressed herein are his alone and do not represent those of the US Naval War College, the Department of Navy, or the Department of Defense.
The current war in Ukraine has its roots in active Russian subversion that began in 2014. Russian subversion successfully sparked a war in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine and led to the creation of two unrecognized separatist republics—the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR). Since then, life has been very different for Ukrainians who live in the separatist republics and those living under the authority of the Ukrainian state. Ukrainians living in places where Kyiv can govern have better economic prospects, better services like healthcare and education, and live longer. The costs of subversion, then, cannot be measured simply in terms of lives lost from active conflict, or even in the political concessions that the target of subversion may have to make to a rival. Subversion degrades governance and thus has real costs to people who live in undergoverned spaces.

This is the central point in Melissa Lee’s excellent book, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State*. While much of the literature has focused on why states undermine a neighbor by supporting proxies, or the consequences for outcomes more proximate to the conflict, like civilian victimization or conflict duration, Lee draws our attention to a broader outcome: how subversion affects the governance of its target states. *Crippling Leviathan* revises our understanding of why states fail to govern, using a creative empirical strategy drawing on impressive quantitative analysis and careful case study research. It should be read widely by scholars interested in international relations, comparative politics, and research design.

Lee begins by explaining why states resort to subversion, which is “the empowerment of nonstate actors as proxy groups with the intent of thwarting state administration and control over territory” (48). A serious policy incompatibility with another neighboring state provides the motive to engage in subversion. States engage in subversion against a rival as a form of bargaining leverage, since they can offer to end support for a proxy if the target state agrees to political concessions. Subversion can also tie down or weaken a rival by keeping it from accessing its territory or extracting resources from it. A state which is interested in subversion must also have an available proxy, perhaps an ethnic group whose territorial boundaries extend beyond the borders of the target state. Lee’s theory about when states resort to subversion is consistent with the existing literature on proxy war, which finds that international rivalry prompts states to support non-state actors and that sponsors seek out proxies with ideological or cultural similarities.

The book’s most important contribution is its creative, mixed-method research design that clearly shows the effects of subversion on state weakness. Lee evaluates the effects of subversion first using quantitative analysis of cross-national and sub-national data, creatively measuring the dependent variable (state weakness) using a proxy measure from demography, the Myers Index, which measures imprecision in ages reported on a census. In provinces where the state is weaker, it will struggle to record births, provide identification, and accurately administer a census, all of which are needed to accurately record the age of census respondents.

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Lee measures the motive for subversion using data on international rivalry, and measures the availability of a proxy using data on transnational ethnic groups.

While Lee’s empirical approach does not directly measure subversion, it has three main advantages. First, in conjunction with other empirical strategies, it helps address potential concerns about reverse causality. While state weakness may cause subversion, it likely does not cause rivalry or the presence of a transnational ethnic group. Second, it avoids undercounting potential instances of subversion, many of which are covert. Finally, it allows for a more expansive definition of subversion than that captured by existing datasets. In Lee’s conceptualization, subversion extends beyond support for an insurgency during periods of conflict, to include active political support for a separatist movement. Russia’s support for South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the 2000s is one example. The book could benefit, however, from robustness checks using existing datasets on subversion with a similar temporal scope, such as the Nonstate Armed Groups (NAGs) Dataset or Uppsala Conflict Data Program External Support Dataset, to directly measure the independent variable. These data could also be used descriptively to show the temporal and regional variation in subversion and how often it is used.

Using a variety of quantitative tests of the theory, Lee finds strong support for the argument that foreign subversion weakens the state. That subversion succeeds so often is surprising. While other studies have focused on the ways that proxies often “go rogue” or thwart their sponsors, Lee finds comprehensive evidence that supporting proxies is, in fact, an effective way to seriously weaken a neighboring state. While sponsor states often do not get the coercive bargaining outcomes they desire, and may have to escalate their involvement or face embarrassing human rights violations from their proxies, they still are remarkably successful in preventing their rivals from governing territory where subversion takes place. This is an important explanation of why states continually resort to proxy war despite its drawbacks. It also highlights the need for future research to differentiate between a proxy war that is waged offensively to undermine a rival, and one that is waged defensively to support a besieged government, which may lead to very different outcomes. US support for the mujahideen who were fighting against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, for instance, was far more successful than US efforts to defend regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan from subversion by proxies supported by Iran and Pakistan.

Lee further tests the theory using both medium-n qualitative analysis of Russian foreign policy toward members of the former Soviet Union and in-depth case studies of Thailand’s subversion in Cambodia (1979-89) and Malaysia’s subversion in the Philippines (1970s). The case studies add additional nuance to the argument and are full of rich detail about how states wage subversion. Thailand’s subversion of Cambodia using the Khmer Rouge shows how subversion can succeed despite little compatibility between the sponsor and proxy, suggesting that “either the threshold for agent suitability is small or that a lack of alternatives forces greater pragmatism between the sponsor and proxy” (168). This suggests that sponsors may often be able to find willing proxies to undermine a rival if they overlook conflicts of interests with these proxies. As a result, more states may be at risk from future subversion than we would expect. On the other hand, the

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Russian experience in its near abroad shows that the availability of proxies can limit the use of subversion. Lee describes how Russian efforts to foment organized discontent among Russian speakers in Estonia in response to NATO expansion failed, since the sponsors struggle to construct proxies where no organized movements exist. Efforts by states to accommodate disaffected populations can therefore help inoculate them against subversion, as Lee points out.

While motive and opportunity provide the broad reasons why states might choose subversion, the Russia case study shows that sudden changes in either policy incompatibilities or local appetite for subversion explain when states actually resort to it. In Ukraine, for instance, Moscow did not choose subversion in response to earlier policy incompatibilities after events like the 2004 Orange Revolution that pushed Ukraine further away from Moscow. Moscow attempted subversion only when previous efforts at controlling Kyiv had failed, and the deposition of Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych in February 2014 had left Moscow without a friendly regime. The case study further highlights how the local environment and the characteristics of the local proxy influence when subversion succeeds, a topic which is outside the scope of Crippling Leviathan. In 2014, subversion in Ukraine failed to succeed on the scale Moscow might have hoped for; many Russian-speaking communities, in fact, took up arms in support of Kyiv. Future research could examine when states pass up opportunities to carry out subversion and when subversion fails to reach its goals.

Future research could also examine the broader effects of foreign subversion on governance within targeted states. While subversion impedes governance in certain territories, it could, in some cases, have positive effects on governance in provinces where subversion does not take place. For instance, Russian subversion in Ukraine, which involved supporting an active insurgency, prevented Kyiv from governing the full extent of its territories. But overall, it led to significant state-building elsewhere in Ukraine prior to the recent Russian invasion. Kyiv implemented important defense reforms (though obstacles from elite patronage networks limited the scope of reform) and was able to bring volunteer militias under the formal authority of the military. Economic growth increased as a result of Ukraine signing an Association Agreement with the European Union in 2014.

While subversion may have some unintended positive effects, is it possible for states to avoid its negative effects on governance? The case of Ukraine suggests that subversion can be hard to escape. As mentioned, Lee explains how states might fend off subversion by making genuine political compromises to disaffected local populations that would otherwise serve as a proxy for a foreign state. But once subversion has already begun, the domestic compromises that are necessary to resolve the situation might become ever more elusive. Nationalism and domestic politics can make key interest groups in the state less willing to compromise, while foreign support allows proxies to bargain harder, raising the cost of compromise. And foreign states that sponsor subversion have little incentive to walk away from a successful strategy. In Ukraine, these factors arguably made it difficult to implement the 2015 diplomatic solution to the crisis, the Minsk II agreements.

Therefore, challenges to state-building caused by subversion may be likely to persist.

The international community could, however, play an important role in helping break the cycle of subversion and state weakness. Recognizing the problem is the first step. As Lee puts it: "Once we recognize the role of

subversion in undermining the state, we can no longer treat state weakness as a solely technical or solely domestic problem" (171). This is sage advice. To remedy state weakness, external interveners often focus on strengthening local governments so that they can fight proxies and regain control of their territory. Lee’s findings call into question whether this strategy can be successful. While external support for governments can raise the costs of subversion, rival states may be willing to pay substantial costs to keep supporting proxies. Instead of viewing government defeat of foreign-supported proxies as the path to conflict resolution, the international community might be better off trying to resolve the root cause of the conflict by brokering diplomacy between states and their rivals. Future research could examine when international actors are able to broker such conflict-ending compromises with a state’s neighbors and how these settlements might affect the persistence of state weakness after conflict.

11 Proxy war is chosen not because it is cheap, but because it is less costly than other options. See Tyrone L. Groh, Proxy War: The Least Bad Option (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).
Political maps tell us that the world is composed of mutually distinct territorial units. Within each color gradient on the map lies a different sovereign law, spread equally and homogenously across its territory. The law of the state is supposed to be as effective at its central hub as at its borders and remote regions. Like all maps, however, this is a lie.¹ Not all states can effectively claim authority over their whole territory, and many states are riddled with persistent ‘ungoverned spaces.’ In her stimulating and original study, Melissa Lee provides the first in-depth account of how such spaces are produced by foreign subversion, and the conditions under which subversion is frequently deployed as a strategy against rivals. Ungoverned, and even ungovernable, spaces within states are produced not by state weakness alone, as existing scholarship suggests, but by international competition.² Specifically, states often strategically use subversion to undermine rival states’ rule in border regions, costing the state resources and legitimacy, while preventing it from fully consolidating its territory. Subversion as “war by other means” (174) is most likely to occur, Lee argues, where there is both motive and means available, which are often pre-existing rebel groups who are opposed to the central state’s authority. With methodological rigor Lee therefore looks anew at the role of international politics, not just domestic politics, in state formation and particularly the extent of the state’s territorial penetration.

One of the contributions of the book is how Lee brings nuance to old assumptions of the literature, particularly how international competition drives state formation. To do this, she makes the helpful distinction between two different processes: state consolidation and state institutionalization. Scholars have often mistaken the development of state apparatuses as the core characteristic of state formation writ large, which has obscured the process of how a state comes to assert its will evenly across a defined geographic space. In this vein, many accounts have focused on the growth of bureaucratic institutions and consistent rule of law, but have had less to say about the details of how those systems are integrated across a large tract of land, contending with resistance, local diversity, and geographic obstacles. In distinguishing these two processes, Lee brings attention especially to the spatial aspect of state formation, which is often taken as a mere byproduct of effective sovereignty. The modern state system is notable not for the existence of sovereignty alone, as many non-state units have been comparatively sovereign in global history,³ but for the unique way that it has claimed sole hegemony over the entirety of the earth’s surface.

Lee’s methodology is also particularly well-suited to the goal of examining spatial variations in state consolidation and territorial extent. One of the contributions is her original measure of state authority derived from the accuracy of census data. She estimates this through predictable preferences for certain digits and avoidance of others (like zeroes and fives) when agents in charge of gathering census information fabricate data. Paired with her subnational analysis, which allows comparisons between border regions with different levels of state authority, she brings fresh insights into why some areas lose effective state governance (and rarely gain it back), while others do not. Moreover, her large-n analysis, which demonstrates the applicability

of her thesis to a wide range of states, is complemented by well-constructed case studies in Cambodia and Philippines, which add depth to the findings.

Lee’s theses suggest new possibilities in state formation literature beyond the sample of cases from which she draws, which sometimes trade comprehensiveness for rigor. Lee’s sample excludes all developed countries, island nations, failed states, and those without shared contiguous borders (71-73, 188-89). There is good reason for these exclusions. She focuses on those states with incomplete, but not entirely lacking, state consolidation in order to show the varieties of state authority on the subnational level. It therefore makes sense to look only at developing states with potentially contentious borders. But this also means that the analysis cannot include important cases of frequent sponsors of proxy wars of subversion, like the US, Russia, and Iran. The sample also excludes Israel/Palestine, which would be a particularly interesting case of split ethnic groups (which is her proxy for the availability of agents of subversion). The sample also includes China and South Korea, which are highly developed states in the degree of their state authority, but it excludes the Philippines, which is one of her in-depth case studies. The reviewer is aware of the necessary scope conditions for a study like this, and Lee’s account manages to be both methodologically rigorous and broadly applicable. These observations are therefore not intended to be criticisms, but rather suggestions for how her parsimonious framework might include a wider range of cases, which would perhaps complicate the account. She already points toward this work in her conclusion, offering observations on the longstanding use of subversion and its role in state making (177-8).

_Crippling Leviathan_ draws upon and makes use of several key concepts in political science, including state formation, territorialization, and the defense of the sovereign state. While each of these receives treatment in Lee’s study, they would also benefit from engagement with the related scholarship. In the following I discuss three important literatures and historiography, which would enhance the relevance and complexity of the study.

In her gloss on state formation literature, Lee draws on the well-known ‘bellicist’ argument that states make war and war makes states, as embodied in Charles Tilly’s influential 1992 thesis. She notes that while there have been more recent contributions, they have not altered the general framework. But this framing does not consider a much wider literature in the last three decades that has challenged the uncritical usage of both the bellicist model and the standard narrative of state formation. Since the early 1990s, scholars, including Tilly himself, have emphasized the wide variety of political forms which made up the background conditions against which modern states evolved in Europe. Moreover, both bellicist and econocentric explanations of European state formation did not actually lead to sovereign territorial states unidirectionally, but rather to dynastic-imperial conglomerates. Territorial states, when they did emerge, had more to do with inter-regional religious coalitions, the end of dynastic unions, the rise of capitalism, and the spread of cartographic

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7 Nexon, _The Struggle for Power._
technologies that were originally deployed in the colonies. In short, while useful for much scholarship in institutional sociology, Tilly’s thesis has given way to a more multifaceted literature that has taken account of the complex conditions under which states have actually developed.

The notion that the European model of bellicist state formation is generalizable to a universal phenomenon of ‘state formation’ is also highly suspect and does not easily map onto waves of new states entering the international system, such as South American states in the early nineteenth century, successor states to Habsburg and Ottoman imperial breakdown after the First World War, or the wide range of newly independent states with decolonization after the Second World War. Lee mentions 1945 as a relevant historical divider in state formation, but does not comment on the role of decolonization in that division, focusing mainly on the diminished value of conquering territory after the institutionalization of the territorial integrity norm (6-7). Considering that the vast majority of the 79 states that are included in her sample experienced colonialism in some form, it would enrich Lee’s account to engage further with what makes these cases distinct and whether the bellicist model applies equally well.

Scholarship on the history of the international system has recently also moved away from the territorial state model, pointing instead to the longstanding place of empire, hierarchy, and unequal integration in the global order. In her recent study of statelessness, Mira Siegelberg argues that it was not until after the Second World War that the sovereign state stabilized as the “sole postimperial claimant to international legitimacy.” The problem is not that there is a larger and more complex state formation literature to address, as all studies must be selective in where they make their contribution. Rather, it is that research has focused especially on the difficulties of universalizing the narrower Tilly thesis as a general account of how ‘states’ emerge, rather than how some states did emerge in early modern Europe. The generalizability of Tilly’s thesis poses additional problems considering that Lee’s sample is composed almost entirely of non-European states.

Lee’s account of state consolidation also offers a productive dialogue with the scholarship on territorialization. One of the many strengths of this book is that Lee brings attention to state consolidation as an independent aspect of state formation. She understands state consolidation as “the spatial extent of state power,” which is precisely the process known as ‘territorialization’ which political scientists, historians, and geographers have studied for some time. Engaging this literature would allow the book to speak to a wider audience both in political science and beyond. Most pertinent is Lauren Benton’s pioneering The Search for Sovereignty, which argues that the sovereignty depicted on imperial maps was not exercised as an evenly


11 Lee mentions that decolonization “altered the rules of the game” but does not comment on the applicability of the bellicist model to these cases specifically.


distributed authority over territorial space, but rather was a variegated and lumpy phenomenon that was highly dependent on geography and delegated authority. Importantly for Lee’s thesis, Benton suggests that “political space everywhere generates irregularities.” While much of this literature challenges the assumption that states always aim to rationalize space, there are also accounts that focus on how and why states aim to construct territories both internally and externally as a fundamental aspect of state formation, which would lend support to Lee’s thesis. Given this scholarship, which goes unacknowledged in Lee’s portrayal of territorialization and state consolidation, it is perhaps more of a puzzle why and how states succeed in expressing power throughout their territory in a truly even manner than why and when they fail.

*Crippling Leviathan* also offers a potentially fruitful engagement with the territorial rights literature in political theory, which has been booming in the last decade. A descriptive account of the strategy of subversion in international competition need not draw on normative literature, but Lee appears to make a point about the desirability of the state’s effective governance, as she focuses on the deleterious effects of ‘ungoverned space’ the effects of which she repeatedly refers to as ‘insidious’ or ‘pernicious’ on human welfare. This speaks to a longstanding question of the territorial rights literature, which is perhaps best represented by Anna Stilz’s *Territorial Sovereignty* (2019). Specifically, the question of territorial rights concerns not just the moral foundations of entitlements to territory, but also includes an explanation of why those rights ought to be attached to the institution of a sovereign state, with comprehensive internal sovereignty over competitors. Lee’s book offers a functionalist and utilitarian answer to this question, and would have been enriched by directly engaging with this ongoing literature. While Lee does not advocate a state-building policy for the US, she makes clear that it is critical to understand the causes of incomplete state consolidation because persistence of ungoverned space produces violence and lower welfare compared to effective state governance. This account could offer a defense of state governance compared to alternative forms, which would be a valuable contribution to the literature.

The defense of the state presented in *Crippling Leviathan* offers good reason to support effective governance measures, but at times at the cost of simplifying the story. If violence produced by the absence of the state is deplorable, then it is also necessary to defend the presence of the state despite its violence. In *Crippling Leviathan*, the presence of state governance correlates with higher levels of human welfare, and for that reason is preferable to its absence. However, this approach easily passes over a diversity of regime types. In one example, Lee uses Indonesian census data from 1971 to 2010 to show that states can overcome massive geographic challenges to effective governance (33). While she does not mention, however, is that this period aligns with the 31-year authoritarian military dictatorship of Suharto, who overthrew the previous government in a 1968 military coup, and whose consolidation relied upon internal colonialism (in West Papua) and frequent human rights violations. Acknowledging James Scott’s work on governmentality, Lee notes that for much of history people had good reason to flee state governance, when states were “less interested in

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providing and more interested in taking.” The world today, she writes, “could not be more different,” in which there is a more extensive social contract that makes “being governed attractive,” (44). While in many places this is no doubt true, it does not follow that the extension of state authority is always preferable to its absence, nor that people do not have rational reasons to resist it.

That Lee does not consider the inherent violence of state consolidation is unusual, considering that it is a core feature of Tilly’s bellicist account which she builds on and challenges. In her telling of this model, warfare led to state consolidation in part to allow rulers to fund militaries: “European rulers centralized power and built administrative apparatuses for taxation.” Tilly’s consistent metaphor to explain that process, however, was the protection racket of organized crime. According to Tilly, “war making and state making—quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy—qualify as our largest examples of organized crime.”21 In his later book-length statement, he adds: “rulers resembled racketeers: at a price, they offered protection against evils that they themselves would otherwise inflict, or at least allow to be inflicted.”22 This protection racket model, which has been consistently reaffirmed by recent historiography,23 is a central feature of the logic of state formation. Disregarding this dynamic presents the state as the default institution, against which any contestation is inherently destructive.

The violence of state formation would also be a valuable tool for thinking about another one of Lee’s fundamental concepts, which is the idea of ‘under-governed’ or ‘ungoverned space.’ This term, which Lee uses to describe areas outside the control of the internationally recognized state, is misleading. As she acknowledges, these spaces are not entirely ungoverned, but rather are “not governed by the central state” (19). This contradiction is important, considering the availability of other terms that might more accurately describe the spatial phenomena Lee examines: state absence; stateless areas; unrecognized state areas (acknowledging how many breakaway groups actively seek statehood); spaces of alternative governance. In fact, the idea that these spaces are genuinely ungoverned is something that they usually are not. While Lee references the variety of recognized governing arrangements (196n6), she argues that “when pretenders and competitors to the state govern in lieu of the state… [they] violate longstanding norms about sovereignty and the monopoly of force that scholars consider integral to our understanding of statehood,” (4). While this may be true in the abstract, does it follow that Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan would be better off to give up their quite functioning state in favor of Syrian authority? Should scholars applaud the October 2019 Turkish invasion of the autonomous region of northern Syria known as Rojava, in which residents experienced more religious toleration, gender equality, and sustainably-focused governance than in any surrounding state?

Finally, the notion of ‘ungoverned’ space which is in fact not ungoverned at all has a particular association with imperialism and colonialism that should be acknowledged and engaged with. One of the oldest and most effective tools for legitimating colonial expropriation of land has been to portray it as vacant—known as the doctrine of terra nullius. In North America, this meant claiming the land of many Indigenous peoples as unoccupied because they did not practice sedentary agriculture (which, while not true, was rhetorically effective). In the nineteenth century, European imperialists considering the as-yet uncolonized parts of Africa argued that any land subject to personal sovereignty, like the authority of a chieftain or tribal community, rather than the territorial sovereignty of the state, was effectively vacant or empty of any governance. Portraying the land as “ungoverned” in this way, and discrediting the authority of existing governing structures, allowed imperialists to justify their occupation of lands on the claim that no such authority existed

22 Tilly, Coercion, Capital, and European States, 75.
to begin with and that their domination was for the benefit of inhabitants. This was one of the legal logics deployed at the 1885 conference of Berlin, which formalized the so-called “scramble for Africa,” wherein existing African autonomy and self-governance was divided among European claimants. In effect, describing non-state spaces as ungoverned has been a longstanding approach to undermining alternatives and justifying imperialism.

It may at first seem easy to dismiss these historical examples as applicable only to empires and a bygone era, whereas what is at issue in *Crippling Leviathan* are contemporary states. However, the process of state formation involves would-be sovereigns acting as what we now call empires within their own territories. States only appear as distinct from empires if observers take their territorial boundaries as a given and assume that they have a legitimate claim to assert their governance across those lands. The extension of central state authority may look quite different from the perspective of those who object and challenge it. If we accept the thesis that human welfare is best served by a global division of mutually exclusive sovereign states, we should at least acknowledge the implied violence against those who resist it.

These objections, however, speak to the ambition and scope of Lee’s book, and the importance of the fundamental concepts she makes use of as well as the copious evidence she brings to bear. As the first comprehensive account of the strategy and consequences of foreign subversion, the book greatly advances our knowledge of how international relations both supports and undermines state formation. I hope that research that builds on this book will acknowledge and engage both with critiques of state governance as well as scholarship on the staggered processes of territorialization.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin’s foray into the 2016 US presidential elections was many things: electoral interference, active measures, and a disinformation campaign. At its core, though, it was fundamentally a subversive act, “an attempt to weaken or undermine an established institution,” namely American democracy. Subversion between states is nothing new. Despite its substantive significance, though, this phenomenon has not received the scholarly attention it deserves.

Melissa Lee’s fabulous new book, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State*, joins a growing body of work dedicated to rectifying this issue. With a specific focus on territorial subversion, which Lee defines “as the empowerment of third-party proxies—local nonstate groups—with the aim of degrading the target state’s authority over its territory” (8), *Crippling Leviathan* brings to bear an impressive combination of theoretical and empirical rigor that sheds light on its causes and consequences. This is a must-read book for anyone interested in gray-zone conflict, secret statecraft, proxy warfare, and the deep and sometimes surprising connections between geopolitics and domestic politics. It is also a far-too-rare example of a project that draws on comparative politics and international relations.

*Crippling Leviathan* begins with a compelling puzzle: States that fail to fully exercise governance across their entire territories face a raft of challenges. And yet, many states still cannot seem to effectively consolidate their power. Why? Lee’s answer is foreign subversion. Unwanted meddling from without—that is, foreign states empowering local actors to cause problems on the territory of their rivals—often prevents targets from fully consolidating despite their best efforts. This explanation, Lee posits, stands in contrast to existing arguments that emphasize changes to the international system over time or various domestic political factors such as colonial legacies, inhospitable geography, and inequality.

The first part of the book develops an explanation for why states would be attracted to subversion as well as the consequence for those unlucky victims on the receiving end. Lee argues that subversion requires motive and means. The former is relatively straightforward. States are more likely to want to engage in subversion when there are deep and irreconcilable differences with another state. In other words, there must be a rivalry of some kind. Subversion promises to provide bargaining leverage to the initiator, can force the target to expend finite resources on a problem they would not otherwise have, and may reduce their ability to extract resources from areas beyond their control. Moreover, subversion is relatively cheap and provides the initiator with some semblance of plausible deniability. It is little wonder rivals find it so appealing.

But motive is not enough on its own. States must also have the means to engage in territorial subversion. And for this, they need a proxy that is willing to contest their host state’s authority in one or more parts of the country. This can come in the form of a group that shares ideological or ethnic ties with the sponsor. It may also come in the form of a group that has grievances against the host government and is therefore willing to accept support from an external patron in order to contest the state.

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1 These are the author’s views alone, and do not reflect those of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, or the US Naval War College.
For states that fall prey to foreign subversion, the consequences can be devastating. Externally backed proxies can destroy infrastructure and go after agents of the state, thereby impeding the capacity of the central government to effectively provide resources and enforce order. They can also set up their own systems of governance and undermine confidence in the capabilities of the central government.

Lee tests these claims with an impressive research design that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis, presented in chapter 3, shows that policy incompatibility with another state and the existence of an ethnic group that crosses state lines—which proxy for motive and means, respectively—are associated with greater levels of state weakness. Chapter 4 examines Russia's relationship with Soviet successor states. Lee argues that the presence of motive and means enabled subversion in Georgia, that motive and a lack of means prevented subversion in Estonia, and that means but a lack of motive rendered subversion irrelevant in Ukraine in the 1990s. The chapter also includes a medium-N analysis of all Soviet successor states, demonstrating that the general pattern holds across many cases. The final two empirical chapters demonstrate the impact of subversion on targets. One case entails Malaysia’s targeting of the Philippines. The other involves Thailand’s targeting of Cambodia.

The combination of its impressive theorizing and rigorous empirical analysis makes Crippling Leviathan an exemplary book. As with all terrific books, there are also a number of areas to refine and build on in future work for scholars who are interested in subversion. One of these pertains to the quantitative study of subversion. Lee’s two independent variables, the presence of a rivalry and a split ethnic group, are somewhat indirect measures of the core concept. That is, they capture the factors which are thought to make subversion more likely, but do not actually measure the existence of subversion itself. As Lee points out, this results from the fact that “the features of subversion that make it an attractive instrument of statecraft are precisely those that make it hard to detect and attribute to an external sponsor” (64).

While this makes good sense as a first cut, there are inherent limitations worth noting. For one, there may be cases in which there is a rivalry and an available agent but no subversion. Similarly, there may be instances of subversion where one or both variables are absent. To be sure, Lee addresses this to some extent by comparing state weakness across different combinations of these variables, which goes a long way toward addressing this concern. Nevertheless, having a direct measure of subversion would not only increase confidence in the findings of the book, but would also open a new set of questions that could be answered with large-N analysis. Some possibilities include: What are the determinants of subversion onset? Is there variation in efficacy across different forms of subversion? Do states use subversion as a substitute for alternative policies or as a complement?5

A data collection scheme of this magnitude is daunting. But identifying instances of foreign subversion, even for a circumscribed time period or set of actors, would still represent a significant contribution. One initial step could be to code public or even semi-covert forms of subversion which should in theory be easier to identify than its covert forms.6 As Lee notes, while subversion is often meant to provide the sponsor plausible deniability, that is not always the case (52). While coding covert acts is far more challenging, several recent datasets involving different types of secret statecraft such as covert regime change and cyber

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operations, provide proof of concept that such an exercise, when properly scoped temporally, spatially, and substantively, is theoretically possible.\(^7\)

Another area for future work would be to treat the main independent variables of interest as falling along a continuum. In its current form, *Crippling Leviathan* tends to conceive of things like irreconcilable policy differences and the availability of agents in binary terms. But there are several instances throughout the book which suggest that a more fine-grained conceptualization could bear fruit. This is particularly relevant for policy differences between a potential sponsor and a target, i.e. the motive component of the territorial subversion equation.

Consider Russia and Ukraine in the 1992 to 1995 period. According to Lee, one of the reasons Russia refrained from engaging in subversion despite the existence of an available proxy was the lack of policy incompatibility. But as is pointed out in the book, the reality was a bit more complicated. According to Lee, “In the early and mid-1990s, Ukraine charted a middle course.” While its leaders often pursued policies that were favorable towards Russia, they also did things like join “NATO's Partnership for Peace” and “signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union” (101). This is far from the more full-throated embrace of the West that we later see in Ukraine, but it is also not a clean-cut case of being totally *simpatico* with Russian preferences. We see a similar dynamic with Azerbaijan. While the country is coded as not having a policy incompatibility with Russia, Azerbaijan also “tried to strike a balance between Russia and the West” at various points (121). Perhaps in each of these cases the behavior in question was far enough from being adversarial that it did not warrant subversion on Russia’s part. It would be interesting to know, however, whether states in similar situations engage in more moderate forms of subversion in response to middling levels of policy incompatibility or whether it really is something that states only do in response to extreme incompatibility.

In that vein, another issue that would benefit from further exploration is why states choose certain forms of foreign subversion. What factors push states toward adopting violent forms of subversion versus non-violent forms? The fact that there is variation in the book is noteworthy. In the case of Russia supporting Georgian separatists, for instance, subversion was manifested as “efforts that treated the breakaway provinces as political entities distinct from Georgia proper, and efforts to build administrative structures in Abhkazia and South Ossetia” (109). In Malaysia and the Philippines in the 1970s, the former supported an armed insurgency that was actively engaged in violence against the state. What accounts for these differences? One possibility is that it is simply a function of opportunity, driven by the kind of proxy that is available to the sponsor; when they are violent, the subversion is violent, and vice-versa. Another possibility is that sponsors make decisions about what form of subversion to engage in, or whether to engage in subversion at all, for reasons yet to be specified. This could be disentangled with great effect.

A third area for future research is to investigate different combinations of states engaging in subversion against one another beyond what is presented in the book. Lee compellingly demonstrates that subversion is something that can be done by powerful states against weaker ones (e.g. Russia subverting former successor states) as well as weaker states against one another (e.g. Thailand against Cambodia). There are, however, several other possibilities that would be interesting to look at.

One is weaker states engaging in subversion against more powerful states. To take just one example, Lee’s theory would seem to predict that states like Georgia and Estonia should have themselves engaged in

competitive subversion against Russia; or at the very least thought seriously about it. For starters, they clearly had deep and irreconcilable policy differences. Moreover, it would appear as though there was agent availability in the form of various secessionist actors in places like Chechnya. Figuring out whether these countries did indeed engage in subversion, which would expand the scope of the theory, or why they refrained, which might impose scope conditions on it, would be useful.

It would also be interesting to include failed states in the analysis of territorial subversion to see if they behave similarly as others. One of the most obvious and important recent examples is Afghanistan. Lee mentions in passing several times Pakistan’s subversion of its neighbor, but a more systematic analysis of whether situations involving failed states follow the same or different patterns as others in the book would be informative. This is particularly important as we look to draw lessons about some of the key aspects of the US war in Afghanistan over the last couple of decades.

It is a testament to the richness and importance of *Crippling Leviathan* that there are so many areas for future scholars to explore in the realm of foreign subversion. Those presented here barely scratch the surface. As the United States and its allies continue to grapple with the threat of terrorism and ungoverned spaces, combined with the resurgence of great power competition which will undoubtedly feature elements of gray-zone and proxy warfare, the debates contained in this book are more important than ever.

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Response by Melissa Lee, University of Pennsylvania

My favorite books advance new arguments on important questions while also opening up new avenues for scholarly inquiry. I am therefore humbled to see that the three reviewers agree that *Crippling Leviathan* has succeeded on both fronts. I thank Desh Girod for introducing the book, Alexandra Chinchilla, Benjamin Mueser, and Mike Poznansky for their thought-provoking commentary, and Andrew Szarejko and the H-Diplo team for organizing the roundtable.

*Crippling Leviathan* sets out to understand a simple but important question: why do some states not exercise effective authority over their territories? In essence, why are some places less governed than others?

Understanding the unevenness of state presence struck me as an urgent task. At the time I began the project, the United States and its partners had been mired in Afghanistan for a decade. Ostensibly and initially a narrowly-scoped operation to expel al-Qaeda and topple the Taliban, the US-led intervention morphed into an expansive state-building mission with the goal of eliminating Afghanistan’s so-called ungoverned spaces and strengthening the state. Although the mission was unprecedented in its ambition (and, ultimately, duration and cost) for a post-Cold War intervention, smaller-scale missions throughout the 1990s also sought to “fix” problems of state weakness. I wanted to understand the causes of one particular form of state weakness: the absence of the state in pockets of its territory.

This kind of state weakness is more common than one might think. It is not a problem limited to “failed” states, such as Afghanistan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Crippling Leviathan* shows uneven state authority exists in many countries, from Turkey to the Philippines to Georgia. The pervasiveness of this phenomenon suggests that uneven state authority is not the exception but in fact the norm around the world.

Similarly, it turns out that one important but previously underappreciated cause of uneven statehood—foreign subversion—is also more common than one might think. Again, prominent examples come to mind easily. These are undertaken by the serial sponsors of subversion, such as the United States, the Soviet Union, Iran, and Libya.

As Mueser and Poznansky both point out, these high-profile cases of state absence and serial subversion do not appear in the analysis in *Crippling Leviathan*. Yet in many ways, their exclusion is a feature rather than a bug. *Crippling Leviathan* takes important steps forward in documenting and explaining the prevalence of uneven statehood and subversion’s role in undermining governance. It shows that subversion is a tool that is not confined to the arsenals of the world’s most powerful states, not a relic of Cold War geopolitics, and not a problem limited to a handful of failed or failing states. Had these cases been included in my analysis, the magnitude of subversion’s deleterious effects on the state would have likely been even stronger.

Yet their omission is also limiting. Mueser suggests that the inclusion of serial subverters might complicate the story, while Poznansky identifies variation in sponsors (and sponsor-target dyads) as a particularly interesting dimension for exploration. I agree. In addition to these excellent suggestions, future research could consider how the dynamics differ in cases where sponsors have global or regional interests and the ability to project power far beyond their immediate borders—characteristics common to the four aforementioned serial subverters. Given the distances involved, targets states have fewer options available for responding to subversion. For example, countersubversion is typically much more difficult for a weak state confronting a more powerful state when those states do not border one another. Similarly, it will be more challenging for a target state to shut down subversion without offering concessions to the sponsor. My hunch is that the powerful serial subverters are more likely to achieve their policy aims in these cases, but this should be put to the test.
More precise data on external support will greatly aid in the exploration of these ideas. Chinchilla suggested two possibilities, the updated Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) External Support Dataset and the Nonstate Armed Groups dataset. Poznansky outlines several avenues for new data collection efforts that build on insights from the literature on secrecy and covert (and semi-covert) support in international relations. The fact that subversion can take different forms, to which scholars have attached different labels in different literatures, points to the prevalence and importance of this kind of statecraft.

A related avenue for investigation could combine insights from *Crippling Leviathan* with the literature on proxy wars to examine cases of competitive intervention. Unlike the cases of subversion that I examine in *Crippling Leviathan*, the competitive intervention cases involving global and regional powers involve two “targets”: the immediate victim of subversion and the external state that supports the victim’s government. Examples include US subversion of Cold War-era Angola (whose government enjoyed support from the Soviet Union and Cuba) and the Yemeni Civil War that began in 2014 (pitting the Iranian-backed Houthi forces against the Saudi- and American-backed Alimi forces). In the extreme, the policy disputes and incompatibilities between the external sponsors eclipsed the disagreements between the sponsor and victim state. Subversion is war by other means, but war that is directed at a third party and playing out in the victim state’s territory. The complex political dynamics of competitive intervention cases raise fascinating questions about the efficacy of subversion as a policy tool and its ultimate effects on the governance in the target—all of which is worthy of exploration in future research.

What about the implications of the analysis of included cases for the broader literature on state formation and state-building? The vast majority of countries that appear in the analysis in *Crippling Leviathan* are former colonies. Mueser rightly points out that generalizing the bellicist account of European experience of state formation to non-European states is highly suspect. One challenge with thinking about whether and to what extent we should expect the predictions of bellicist theory to hold outside of early and late modern Europe is the question of timing. State development is a macro-historical process. While we can certainly look for evidence of the smaller mechanisms at play, one can reasonably ask how much time in a state’s development must pass before we can declare the failure of bellicist theory outside Europe.

Complicating this problem is the fact that state weakening processes may be at work simultaneously with state strengthening processes. Chinchilla points out that Ukraine was able to implement reforms in the security sector (a kind of state-building) even as Russian subversion dislodged the state from its eastern periphery. By trying to disentangle different facets of state-building—the distinction between “institutionalization” and spatial


“consolidation” that Mueser finds helpful—*_Crippling Leviathan_* allows for these processes to move independently, and therefore to respond differently to external threats.\(^3\)

The upshot for state-building research is threefold. First, it could be that former colonies are too young, and not enough time has passed for state strengthening processes to prevail over state weakening processes. Whereas some scholars examine state development over decades or centuries, *Crippling Leviathan* focuses on the short-term effects of subversion on the state, a research design choice that was informed by theory.

Second, it could be that the net effect of externally-induced state strengthening and state weakening processes is negative (ultimately weakening) in former colonial states. Much of the existing scholarship suggests weaker or absent state strengthening processes, with explanations falling in one of three categories: different international context,\(^4\) wrong kind or absence of war,\(^5\) and wrong kind of finance.\(^6\) Fortcoming work co-authored with Gabriel Koehler-Derrick suggests a fourth possibility, which is that the weaker bargaining power of colonial subject populations freed the state from having to build institutions to deliver rewards for military service.\(^7\) A fifth possibility is that the bellicist model does not accurately describe the European cases.\(^8\) And if the state strengthening side of the ledger is empty for the former colonial states, *Crippling Leviathan* suggests that this is not the case for the state weakening side.

Third, given these complexities, rather than debate whether bellicist theory holds outside of Europe, it may be more productive to study state development and state decay through the lens of specific domains of statehood. In recent years, scholars have generated new insights for the state-building literature by studying the development of the state’s information capacity,\(^9\) the expansion of the fiscal apparatus,\(^10\) and the capacity and effectiveness of the bureaucracy.\(^11\) *Crippling Leviathan* contributes to this body of scholarship by studying

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\(^3\) An alternative conceptual move is to distinguish between the emergence of statebuilding efforts and their success or failure. See Hillel Soifer, *State Building in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).


the unevenness of the state’s authority over its territory and the places where that authority is contested or absent.

To describe those places, Crippling Leviathan uses the term “ungoverned space.” As I acknowledge in the book and discuss more forcefully elsewhere, few places are truly without any authority, so I use the label to refer to the absence of state authority. This is a statist perspective because the state is the reference point, and because the term is a negation of state authority rather than an acknowledgement of alternative authorities. As a scholar of the state who was writing a book about the unevenness of the state, state authority is a natural reference point for me.

However, Mueser criticizes the choice of the term because imperialists have used it to obscure and even erase the existence of the alternative authorities and governance structures in such spaces. My use of this term is not intended to legitimize colonialism. In fact, though Crippling Leviathan largely focuses on state actors—the sponsor state and the target state rather than the nonstate proxies—alternative authorities play an important role in the book. After all, many of the proxies aspire to be sovereigns themselves, and they cooperate with external sponsors in an effort to pursue this goal.

Mueser is also correct when he points out that state authority might “look quite different from the perspective of those who object and challenge it.” In fact, his reminder about the violence of the state offers a more general critique about the value of states as a form of political organization, one that is not limited to Crippling Leviathan. State consolidation requires subordinating, and sometimes eliminating, competitors to state authority. For the alternative authorities, state consolidation can mean the loss of considerable autonomy, power, privileges, and status. Moreover, transitioning from indirect forms of rule, in which alternative authorities or local notables serve as local intermediaries between state and society, to direct rule, in which the state itself governs, is itself a violent, destructive process. States that standardize, centralize, nationalize, and marginalize as part of their efforts to expand their reach are especially likely to provoke resistance from the would-be governed. Crippling Leviathan treats these issues together as part of the “agent availability” condition for subversion to occur, but I agree that a richer account would consider more directly the benefits and drawbacks of state authority from the perspective of both alternative authorities and local communities.

The normative issue that Mueser raises about the value of states more generally is one that I have long grappled with. In a nod to that problem, I wrote in the introduction to Crippling Leviathan that “states that are strong enough to govern, protect, and provide are also strong enough to abuse, oppress, and exploit” (5). Whether one regards the extension of state authority as desirable depends very much on the balance between provision and predation. Perhaps for this reason, the Western-led post-conflict interventions that inspired my interest in state weakness have nearly always pursued a second objective beyond state-building, which is the promotion of liberal democracy. As a scholar of the state, I try to treat the regime as analytically separate from the state. But the fact that state authority may be used for good or for ill reminds us that questions about access to and constraints on power are never far in the background.

