

real infrastructural challenges facing the agricultural sector and how civil society groups evaluate global power structures and the diminishing policy space of the state. It would have been of added value for readers unfamiliar with the Ghanaian civil society space had the book provided a good contextual understanding of the existing membership, base and traction of the Food Sovereignty Ghana (FSG) and related farmer-based organisations and coalitions. Rock does not question or explore this in her book, and we do not see much about the differentiated interests of other farmer-based organisations. In other words, even outside of the GMO debate, what was FSG's membership strength, interests and visibility? By spearheading the GMO debate, and especially with the legal actions, FSG's popularity rose, but like many others, they continue to struggle to establish strong support for their activism. In the introduction, I expected the narrative of the history of food sovereignty to extend to FSG and Ghana's Food Sovereignty Platform and how their constitution shapes their specific demands on GMOs. This would have provided a more convincing explanation for the platform's collapse than a corruption cover story at the leadership level.

The book concludes with an attempt at a theoretical explanation of the complicated interests and different visions of GMOs, Plant Breeders' law and the new Green Revolution for Africa. Although oversimplified in its definition and appearing as an afterthought, Rock introduces the theory of disidentification citing the work of Muñoz (1999) and Pêcheux (1982) to illustrate some of the nuances of the local debates – that which transcends simplistic notions of pro- or anti-GMO, and the globally driven hunger discourse, to deliberations on innovation, epistemic justice, food security, financial and technical independence, and strategies to address recipient fatigue.

Rock's almost ten years of engagement in the GMO discourse in Ghana is reflected in the rich insider accounts of the messy politics driving the biotechnology debate and policies in Ghana. I like it for the balanced portrayal of both corporate power and grassroots agency. However, occasionally, I questioned the representativeness of the statements of the individuals who, through the methodology adopted, had become mouthpieces for their civil society organisations in the book's narrative. Nonetheless, *We Are Not Starving* is a must-read for political economists and scholar activists looking to validate their suspicions about GMO promotion in Africa and strengthen their activism. It will, undoubtedly, be a source of deep reflective insights for agri-nutrition professionals and scientists, some of whom may be so neck-deep in biotechnological experiments that they lose track of the socio-political contexts within which they operate.

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Legitimation as Political Practice: Crafting Every Authority in Tanzania by KATHY DODWORTH Cambridge University Press, 2022.

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Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Africa increasingly take on state-like tasks, becoming part of the infrastructure of local governance. Yet despite their ties to the state, the same NGOs at times also attempt to act as representatives of society, advocating for communities against the state.

In a rich ethnographic account of NGOs in Tanzania, Dodworth investigates how NGOs legitimate themselves to both state and society. She explores the daily ‘sayings and doings’ (40) of NGO staff, documenting six different ‘legitimation strategies’ that NGOs deploy, with varying success, in efforts to operate effectively. At the heart of her inquiry is the observation of the hybrid position NGOs find themselves in, straddling a blurry boundary between state and society. She terms this the ‘*non/state*’, documenting how NGOs simultaneously cooperate with state agencies, co-producing policies and goods and even sharing personnel, while at other times positioning themselves as distinct and oppositional to it.

While Dodworth’s ethnographic analysis is careful, thoughtful and well-executed, many of her theoretical claims could be better situated relative to existing literature. Existing work already similarly details how Africa’s state–society boundaries are fuzzy (Mitchell 1999; Lund 2006; Haggmann & Peclard 2010; Cammett & Maclean 2014), how state and society engage in co-production (Cammett & Maclean 2014; Baldwin 2015) and, importantly, contra a core claim in Dodworth’s framing, that developing legitimacy is a central task for NGOs, not solely for states (Risse & Stollenwerk 2018). Although it is briefly cited, Brass (2016) stands out as an especially ripe target for greater engagement, as it addresses very similar empirical terrain (in Kenya) and already theorises – to a more systematic degree – how NGOs navigate the same tensions created by their precarious position at the state–society boundary.

Yet Dodworth sidesteps some of these opportunities for synthesis with other research by engaging in a broad-brush dismissal of the legitimacy of other social scientific approaches. She laments repeatedly that research rooted in ‘positivist-leaning epistemologies’ (1) and ‘Eurocentric approaches’ (3) has failed to ‘explain and predict’ (4) NGO legitimacy and behaviour (without providing evidence for this claimed failure). The manuscript turns instead to critical and post-colonial theory, criticising existing research for attempting to distil the study of legitimacy and non-state actors down to ‘variables’ (1), false binaries and ‘flowcharts, tables, or causal inferences’ (4) and, in doing so, discounting ‘most of the world...as illegitimate and excluded from *de facto* theorizing’ (4).

Not only is this an unfair criticism of the positivist-leaning studies on similar topics, exemplified by Brass (2016) and Cammett & Maclean (2014), that do not force state and society into false binaries or exclude Africa from their theorising,¹ but the manuscript’s extended attempt to stake out its epistemological stance becomes a burden that weighs down, and begins to drown, its empirics.

If the self-professed goal is to make one’s research less Eurocentric, extractive and rooted in the siloed Western academy, it is not clear that eschewing attempts at simplifying complexity into more interpretable theoretical claims – of the sort to which a table or flowchart might yet prove amenable – or embedding one’s argument so deeply in the jargon of critical and postcolonial theory – to the point that parsing much of the book requires PhD-level training in these fields – makes the resulting product any less siloed or Eurocentric. We’re left with a book still ensconced within an elite academic (mostly Western) silo, just a different silo than positivists inhabit. Setting aside the ideological and epistemological feuding to focus more on substantive points of agreement and disagreement with empirical findings across approaches would have provided a more promising means to advance knowledge on the role of non-state actors in local governance.

NOTE

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

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

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

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

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

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