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In with the Old, Out with the New

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In with the Old, Out with the New

Abstract

Michael Cohen, Maria Figueroa Küpçü and Parag Khanna make some compelling arguments about the inherent drawbacks regarding the role diverse networks of NGOs play in keeping at-risk populations alive throughout the world. We are informed that these groups are “the new colonialists,” agencies much like the old European empires. These new colonialists are apparently enforcing a cycle of dependency which prevents the development of state structures, structures that apparently sustain these populations more effectively. The problem with this thesis is that the authors do not seem to entertain the possibility that the nation-state is itself an (old) colonial construct, and that even the longing for the “strong” structures of the nation-state in these at-risk areas represents, at least implicitly, a somewhat outdated way of thinking.

Keywords

Human rights, Humanitarian aid, Colonialism, Development

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In with the Old, out with the New

by Brent J. Steele

Michael Cohen, Maria Figueroa Küpçü and Parag Khanna make some compelling arguments about the inherent drawbacks regarding the role diverse networks of NGOs play in keeping at-risk populations alive throughout the world. We are informed that these groups are “the new colonialists,” agencies much like the old European empires. These new colonialists are apparently enforcing a cycle of dependency which prevents the development of state structures, structures that apparently sustain these populations more effectively. The problem with this thesis is that the authors do not seem to entertain the possibility that the nation-state is itself an (old) colonial construct, and that even the longing for the “strong” structures of the nation-state in these at-risk areas represents, at least implicitly, a somewhat outdated way of thinking.

While NGOs can indeed, as they note, help rebuild houses and vaccinate children, they threaten the “authority of an already weak government” in the areas they operate. Another way to put this argument is that we should value the structure of the [Westphalian nation-state](#) over the needs of individuals, presumably because over the long term the former ultimately ensures the latter. But as they also admit, the reason that the “new colonialists” are here in the first place is because the governments of these states are ineffective. Perhaps they were ineffective precisely because the nation-state itself was doomed from the start in those areas—areas that were arbitrarily carved up by European colonial empires. Take the Afghanistan example—are we really to believe that Karzai’s government would be any better at delivering aid to some of these at-risk populations in remote areas than the “new colonialists”? And if not, then why are we to consider Karzai’s opinion forceful?

Another problem identified by the authors with the new colonialists is that they “bleed the country” in which they are aiding of “local talent.” Again, however, this is talent that could presumably be better used towards building up the national government, the state. But if we understand that the nation-state system itself is useful and effective in *only certain contexts* (temporal and spatial), if we free our mind of the idea of a Westphalian system as the default form of international order, if we are willing, moreover, to admit that a system where a multitude of specialized actors (states, NGOs, IOs, etc.) perform different *functions*, then the authors main beef with the “new colonialists” is a rather narrow one indeed.

Throughout the essay, the authors admit that the “new colonialists” are effective—they “get results,” they are “reliable.” Yet for them, two further problems remain. First, according to the authors, the “new colonialists need weak states as much as weak states need them.” That may be true, but they provide very little evidence that this cycle of dependence is *intentionally perpetuated* by the aid groups. They give the example of Georgia, asserting that the writing of grant applications for the Georgian government by NGOs “result[s in] a vicious cycle of dependency as new colonialists vie for the contracts that will keep them in business.” But how this extends into dependency is not entirely clear. A second issue for the authors is that NGOs are “unaccountable.” But how accountable are nation-states? If we assume that nation-states are

more accountable than NGOs (and depending upon which state we are talking about, that's not entirely true), we must also assume that those who fund NGOs (their members) do not hold their organizations to account. In fact, that is precisely what they can do if they threaten to withdraw their memberships and financial support.

I, and indeed most individuals of my generation, first “experienced” the idea of international politics by viewing the globes on display in a grade school classroom. In those depictions, the surface area of the seven continents was distinguished by nation-states—each coded by different colors. This was a quick and easy way to conceptualize the world at that time, but it was not always accurate. It is even less accurate today—in a fluid age where the nation-state exists in both complementary and contentious form alongside many other political organizations. The proliferation of these organizations, including what these authors have termed the “new colonialists,” has come about in part because the old order of nation-states, far from being an absolutist solution to “global order,” instead worked only in particular contexts. In others, where acute intra-state competition occurs, groups vied to capture their state institutions in order to have a “legitimate” basis for authority to do what they wished to do within their own sovereign borders (think the [Hutus who spoke for Rwanda at the U.N. Security Council during the 1994 genocide](#)). That there are problems with the practices of non-state actors is a valid point brought forth by these authors—that these problems would be ameliorated by a return to the “one size fits all” nation-state model found on the globes of my youth is, however, an argument whose time has passed.

Brent J. Steele is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Kansas. His primary research interests cover a wide array of international relations topics, including international ethics, international political theory, United States foreign policy, Just War theory, ontological security theory and international security. In addition to his first book, Ontological Security in International Relations, he has published articles in journals such as International Relations, International Studies Review, International Studies Quarterly, Journal of International Relations and Development, Millennium and, Review of International Studies. Please visit Dr. Steele's website: http://www2.ku.edu/~kups/people/Faculty/Steele_Brent.shtml.