

modalities does religion matter across different sociopolitical micro and macro contexts” (pp. 23–24). The editors conclude that the answer to that question is that “religion matters, and it matters increasingly, not decreasingly, to politics” (p. 24). Based on the many fine case studies in the book, it is hard to argue with this conclusion.

The book chapters successfully illuminate the remarkable diversity inherent on the subject of religion and politics. They cover topics as varied as the religious–secular divide in Israel, the politics of Islam in the Sahel, the link between religion and populism in Europe, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, state regulation of syncretic religions in China, and the role of Buddhism in initiating violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, to name a few. The editors rightly note that the value and the utility of the individual chapters “will primarily accrue to readers with an interest in the particular religion” (p. 37): readers will likely gravitate toward topics most relevant to their own interests.

A clear strength of the book is its comprehensiveness: there are few edited volumes on religion and politics that are as wide ranging as this one. A potential weakness, however, is that it does not systematically establish common theories to illuminate the various topics covered in the chapters. This is often the case for edited books like this one that tackle large and complex issues. Yet, except for the editors’ nontrivial observation that religion still matters in politics, it is mostly left to the reader to consider how, why, and under what conditions religion remains socially and politically salient. Let me offer just a few general observations.

The chapters on Africa, the Middle East, and Asia are a helpful reminder that secularization theory was never a particularly good fit outside the global West. In many parts of the Islamic world, religious communities, instead of retreating from the world of politics, provided meaningful “alternative models to secular policies, governments, and state actions” (p. 153). The dominant religious traditions in Asia (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism) defy easy categorization in the secularist paradigm because they blur the lines between the sacred and the profane and are among the world’s least politically and religiously organized traditions. The picture is more complex in Western Europe and Israel where secularization has clearly had a social and political impact. In these regions it appears that the political mobilization of religion is a response to secular trends.

These three books highlight the importance of moving beyond the tired secular–religious debate in the social sciences. Instead, each contributes to an emerging literature that recognizes a more complex world where secular and religious perspectives somewhat uncomfortably coexist.

The Scarce State: Inequality and Political Power in the Hinterland. By Noah L. Nathan. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 310p. \$120.00 cloth, \$39.99 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592724000112

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Noah Nathan’s new book rectifies the conflation of low state presence with low state impact, demonstrating how influential the state can be, even when it is characterized as having limited state capacity. The author uses a rich case study of northern Ghana to illustrate how the state has affected inequality and social institutions in the region, contributing to political violence, electoral dynasties, and clientelism. Nathan draws on an impressive methodological toolkit and deep case knowledge to advance his argument. *The Scarce State* makes a major contribution to the literature on the state and should also be read with great interest by scholars of traditional leadership, social institutions, and local politics.

The book advances a new theory to explain why state actions may have even greater effects on society when the state is scarce. This theory builds on a key conceptual innovation that should become part of the basic language of the literature on the state: *resource advantage*. The state’s resource advantage is the degree to which it is the main provider of local public goods and private goods, relative to society. It determines the value of engaging with the state, such that the state’s actions should be less transformative where there are alternative opportunities for individuals to access economic resources and local public goods, such as employment or education. This concept has clear applications to a range of other big questions in political science and political economy related to incumbency politics, rent-seeking, natural resource wealth, and conflict.

Nathan combines the high/low resource advantage variable with state presence/absence to introduce four types of subnational regions. The book’s focus is on the state scarcity category in which state absence is combined with high state resource advantage: many rural hinterland regions fall into this category. The model anticipates that any given distributional action taken by the state should have a greater impact on society where the state has taken fewer other actions historically (state absence) and where populations are more dependent on the state for economic goods (relative advantage). A concluding chapter with shadow cases of southern Ghana, Philippines, and Peru draws out the implications of the theory in the three other types of subnational settings.

Chapters 4–8 of *The Scarce State* draw on the northern Ghana case to show how state actions transformed society and social institutions. Three types of state interventions are highlighted: the invention and recognition of chiefs, investments in schools, and new land tenure provisions in the 1979 constitution. A key set of comparisons

throughout the book are among state-recognized chiefs from historical kingdoms (“always chiefs”), state-recognized chiefs whose positions were invented by the state (“invented chiefs”), and communities where traditional leaders within the community were never recognized by the state (“never recognized”). These comparisons draw on archival research and a natural experiment leveraging the colonial Anglo-German border to assign the “invented” and “never recognized” categories among groups with acephalous institutions, in contrast to the centralized or hierarchical institutions of the “always chiefs” groups (rooted in kingdoms).

In chapter 4, Nathan shows how colonial state interventions created new elites by inventing chieftaincies and providing differential access to education, thereby transforming social hierarchies and determining the nature of inequality. Chapter 5 describes how constitutional provisions recognizing historical landowners induced northern chiefs to seek official chieftaincy status and alter their leadership structures. In doing so, they transformed their own institutions in response to the state’s actions.

Chapters 6 to 8 then shift to the long-term effects of the early state interventions. Chapter 6 reveals how the state-created patterns of inequality facilitated elite capture of political institutions by way of dynastic electoral politics. Nathan shows that the family lineages of chiefs recognized by the colonial state (“always” and “invented” chiefs) dominate electoral office in contemporary northern Ghana. Chapter 7 examines the effects of state actions on clientelism and distributional politics. The evidence that “invented chiefs” increase bloc voting *and* decrease access to state-provided goods suggests that, by inventing chiefs, the state also invented the strongest vote brokers. In addition, Nathan extends the argument to the effects of state interventions on violence (chapter 8). He shows that disputes over who gains the benefits of state recognition as a chief are the dominant reason for both inter- and intraethnic conflicts in a dataset covering 1960–2020. In the context of state scarcity, chiefly succession and group recognition have extremely high stakes.

Although the theory applies to different types of local elites and social hierarchies, the book’s focus on traditional institutions has significant implications for research on traditional leadership and historical legacies. Scholarship on traditional leadership in Africa can generally be situated along a spectrum of the degree to which the author emphasizes continuity or change. Although continuity approaches do not refute the transformations that accompanied the colonial state, they focus on the differences among precolonial institutions and their continued impacts on electoral brokerage, state building, and economic development (e.g., see Pierre Englebert, *State Legitimacy and Development in Africa*, 2000). On the

other end of the spectrum are approaches that emphasize how the state fundamentally altered traditional institutions, regardless of their differences (e.g., see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 1996). Thus, the basic facts that the political institutions in Africa differed before colonial conquest and that the creation of the modern state changed these institutions are not in dispute. *The Scarce State* contributes new evidence to the “change” end of the spectrum by highlighting how the colonial state’s policies had long-term impacts on traditional institutions in society. Readers should also take note of the conclusion that a state’s policies can have unintended consequences that weaken it relative to society. Elite capture (by chiefs’ lineages) of state institutions exemplifies this point.

Another key contribution of *the Scarce State* is its warning that using measures of state presence in cross-national and subnational analyses to approximate state capacity may not accurately capture what researchers hope to measure. The book’s findings suggest that the concept of state capacity itself must be disentangled or thrown away as too problematic to measure; the capacity of the state to have an impact on society may be very high in the same places where its capacity to provide services to citizens is very low. Thus, the prominent measures of state presence or capacity, such as the densities of roads, state service providers (schools and health clinics), and administrative buildings, must be looked at more critically.

In particular, the book highlights the need for further attention to the mechanisms by which the state affects society. Nathan’s theory centers on the state’s one-time provision of targeted benefits or club goods (e.g., where the state builds a school or electricity network). This raises these questions: Are the patterns of state presence and resource advantage for this mechanism exceptional? How does this framework apply to the societal impacts of extractive (as opposed to distributive) state actions? What is the role of scarcity in explaining the effects of state actions designed to change social institutions’ rules or that involve repeated interactions and information provision, for example?

In leaving these questions unanswered, *The Scarce State* opens up a research agenda that examines the various channels or mechanisms by which the state’s presence/absence and resource advantages affect social institutions. It highlights the need to unbundle the concept of state capacity and rethink terminology such as state weakness, because the state may be simultaneously weak in some ways but very powerful in others. *The Scarce State* very effectively reveals why the impacts of the state can be quite large even in contexts of low state presence. Nathan’s book will leave readers convinced that low capacity and scarcity can no longer be associated with the state’s inability to have an impact on society.