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Publisher: Routledge

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## Review of International Political Economy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrip20>

### The global political economy of social crisis: Towards a critique of the 'failed state' ideology

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Version of record first published: 16 Apr 2008

To cite this article: Branwen Gruffydd Jones (2008): The global political economy of social crisis: Towards a critique of the 'failed state' ideology, *Review of International Political Economy*, 15:2, 180-205

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09692290701869688>

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# The global political economy of social crisis: Towards a critique of the 'failed state' ideology

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## ABSTRACT

The notion of 'failed states' has gained widespread currency in political and academic discourse. This article contributes to a critique of the 'failed states' discourse. It identifies methodological flaws in the 'failed states' discourse which undermine its explanatory power, and proposes an alternative framework for analysing conditions of social crisis in neocolonial states, rooted in global political economy. This paper focuses on conditions of crisis in Africa. The discourse of 'state failure' characterises conditions of crisis as local in origin, the product of culture or poor leadership. The current condition of structural crisis in so many of Africa's neocolonial states must be situated in the imperial history of global capitalism. This requires examining the legacy of colonial transformation; the specific form of the postcolonial state, society and economy after independence, which tended in many cases to give rise to factional struggles and authoritarian rule; and the ways in which such 'internal' social tensions and contradictions have been reinforced by the global political economy, both the geo-politics of the Cold War and the contradictions of global capitalism. The argument is developed through examination of the specific case of Somalia.

## KEYWORDS

'Failed state'; ideology; neocolonialism; imperialism; Africa; Somalia.

Over the past decade considerable attention has focused on the problem of the 'failed state'.<sup>1</sup> According to this discourse, a 'failed state' is one which is unable to perform a set of functions taken to be characteristic and definitive of what constitutes a properly functioning state: to maintain secure boundaries, ensure the protection and security of all of the population, provide public goods and effective governance, maintain law and order throughout the territory. 'Failed states', it is said, are often riven with ethnic and/or religious conflict, civil unrest, corruption, violent

crime, state repression, high levels of poverty, inequality and disease; the majority of the population often has no respect for the government; forces of law and order often do not extend throughout the entire territory.

The terminology of the 'failed state' discourse has come to be accepted and routinely reproduced by journalists, politicians and academics alike. The related notions of weak, fragile, failed and collapsed states have acquired a position of centrality in the foreign policy discourse of the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia and the EU.<sup>2</sup> The notion of state failure was employed in the 1990s by Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State in the Clinton administration, and appeared in the US National Security Strategy Report submitted to Congress by Clinton in May 1997, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, and again in subsequent strategy reports. Before Australia's intervention in the Solomon Islands in 2003, Prime Minister John Howard said:

We know that a failed state in our region, on our own doorstep, will jeopardise our own security. The best thing we can do is to take remedial action and to take it now. ...I recognise that the action we are proposing represents a very significant change in the way we address our regional responsibilities and relationships (ABC Online, 2003)

The academic literature on 'failed states' has grown rapidly;<sup>3</sup> articles on 'failed states' have appeared in newspapers such as the *Independent*, *Financial Times*, *Economist*, *Washington Times*, *Washington Quarterly*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Business Times*, *Business Standard*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Time*, *Newsweek*; think-tank literature on 'failed states' proliferates.<sup>4</sup>

The category of the 'failed state' and associated terminology is thus widely used in the characterization of specific conditions of crisis in the Third World. Yet the analytical and explanatory basis of the concept is profoundly flawed. The use of such a category by politicians is not surprising; what is remarkable is the way this notion has been so readily absorbed in academic analysis with little concern or critical reflection. The discourse has been embraced by scholars of International Relations, Political Science and Development Studies. The majority of academic works about 'failed states' take a general acceptance of the category as their point of departure, and proceed to offer explanations of state failure, or discuss appropriate forms of policy towards fragile or failing states (e.g. François and Sud, 2006; Milliken and Krause, 2002). The manner in which the notion has been unquestioningly accepted is illustrated not only by the many specific studies of 'state failure' but by the incorporation of the term in general works (e.g. Art and Jervis, 2004; Nicholson, 2002; Wendt, 1999). There is, however, a small but growing literature which criticizes the very notion of 'failed state' and the underlying assumptions. There are several steps in the development of an adequate critique of the 'failed state' discourse. One

step is to focus on the ideological character of the discourse. This requires locating the notion of 'failed state' in a longer history of imperial ideology, and emphasizing its current role in legitimizing intervention. Initial contributions have been made in different ways by Adam Morton and Pinar Bilgin (2002), who locate the discourse in a broader set of concepts and approaches rooted distinctly in the logics of the Cold War; and Jonathan Hill (2005), who draws on postcolonial studies to expose the Orientalist qualities of the 'failed state' discourse.

It is equally important, however, to confront the substantive challenge of explanation. The problem with the 'failed state' discourse is not with the empirical identification of social, economic and political crisis as such, but in the manner of characterizing and, above all, explaining the nature and production of such conditions. The notion of 'state failure' has been so easily adopted precisely because it holds a self-evident appeal. The challenge, therefore, is to develop alternative analytical frameworks and substantive accounts of conditions of crisis in the Third World. An important example of this second, explanatory dimension of critique is the work of Siba Grovogui (2002), who exposes the shallowness of the 'state failure' tradition through a deeply historical account of the inter-related but differentiated production of state forms and regimes of sovereignty in Europe and Africa. This article aims to contribute to the challenge of explanatory critique. It first identifies the methodological flaws at the heart of the 'failed state' discourse, and then offers an alternative framework for analysis of conditions of social crisis in neocolonial states, rooted in global political economy.

One of the most important methodological flaws of the 'failed state' discourse is its inability to identify historically specific social forms and conditions, and their global relations. A critique of the discourse which demonstrates its failings with respect to particular substantive histories is therefore crucial. This article focuses specifically on conditions of crisis in Africa, located within the structural and historical framework of neocolonial capitalism. African societies are most frequently subjected to the abuses of the 'failed states' discourse. Indeed, Africa has been referred to as a 'failed continent' (Short, 2002). The think-tank Fund for Peace has produced a Failed States Index, according to which 'weak states are most prevalent in Africa': seven of the ten most 'at-risk' countries are in Africa (Fund for Peace, 2005). This article is not informed by the spurious logic of such indexes, but by the need to prioritize historical specificity over unhelpful generalization. While specific combinations of local, regional and international forces and conditions have led to devastating social crises in Africa, none of these outcomes can be *explained* through the prism of 'state failure'. By offering a beguilingly simple, richly descriptive, pseudo-analytical approach, the 'failed state' discourse obfuscates the historical social relations of crisis while legitimizing the reproduction of imperial social relations.

The current condition of structural crisis in so many of Africa's neocolonial states must be situated historically in the imperial history of global capitalism. An approach informed by global political economy directs attention to the interaction between local and global social forces and processes, understood in their historical specificity. This requires careful attention, first, to the political economy of the colonial social order in the context of colonial capitalism; second, to characteristic patterns of the postcolonial state, society and economy after independence, which tended in many cases to give rise to factional struggles and authoritarian rule; and third, to the ways in which such 'internal' social tensions and contradictions in the postcolonial state – the specific historical legacy of colonialism – have been reinforced by the global political economy, both the geopolitics of the Cold War and the contradictions of global capitalism.

Colonialism was both an 'internal' and international order of capitalist development, entailing related processes of political and economic transformation. The *political* decolonization of the twentieth century was in many cases followed by attempts to further change the inherited structure of 'internal' social relations, *and* by the collective struggle of the Third World Coalition to reform the structuring and regulation of the international economy. Struggles for both national and international reform were firmly resisted by the neocolonial powers. Neocolonial counter-revolution was manifest at the national level in often brutal forms of military or covert intervention and economic manipulation, in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. The US-led defeat of the campaign for a New International Economic Order (Mortimer, 1984) has been followed by the imposition of internationally regulated neo-liberal reforms over three decades which have had devastating effects for the peasants, working and, in many cases, middle classes of the Third World, especially in Africa (Ghai, 1991).

These twin logics of political and economic counter-revolution have played out in myriad ways in different cases, mediated by local and regional conditions and conjunctural circumstances. In Africa, many 'internal' postcolonial struggles were subject to forms of international intervention which produced or prolonged crises of conflict or authoritarian rule. In most of Africa the effects of economic counter-revolution in the form of structural adjustment have been devastating for the majority of society. The article seeks to develop this argument through examination of the specific case of Somalia. Somalia, identified as a 'failed state' by Madeleine Albright in 1993, has recently returned to the forefront of international concern over the dangers of 'failed states' (Agence France Presse, 2006; Menkhaus, 2006), above all because of their perceived tendency to host terrorist groups:

Somalia, roughly the size of Texas with a population of about 9 million people, is only a part of the vast swaths of stateless areas, failed states

and weak states that are attractive to terrorists and transnational criminal groups. Most of these regions are in Africa. (Farah, 2006)

Although Somalia's current condition indeed seems to demand some notion of 'state failure', this article argues that the accompanying 'failed state' discourse is unable to explain the production of conditions of crisis except through tautology and caricature, and offers an alternative account of the global political economy of social crisis in Somalia.

### THE 'FAILED STATE' DISCOURSE: FAILURES OF THEORY, METHOD AND HISTORY

Three defining features of the 'failed states' discourse determine its ahistorical nature and inadequate explanatory power. First is the enormous proliferation of descriptive terminology. States are characterized as weak, fragile, failing, imploding, disintegrating, failed or collapsed – and the list continues. This rich array of descriptors functions in a manner which appears self-evident, acting by way of tautology to form a substitute for historically informed social analysis and explanation. Borrowing the incisive phrase of Cedric Robinson (1986: 38), the 'failed states' discourse is characterized by a tendency to 'relegate history to adjectival explicatives'. Second, 'state failure' is characterized as being primarily of *local* origin. This rests on a linear conception of processes of social change, assuming an atomistic ontology of externally related like units (states). The generic form of explanation locates the causes of 'failure' in terms of internal agency – 'Destructive decisions by individual leaders have almost always paved the way to state failure' (Rotberg, 2002: 1; see also Zartman, 1995, Chapter 1) – with little serious regard to history, structure and the international. Third, the analytical/descriptive approach operates through a logic of comparison with an ideal and ahistorical notion of what 'the state' is or should be (Ayers, 2004; Grovogui, 2002; Mamdani, 1996). Some of the more nuanced analyses do recognize international 'failures', for example, of development policy (Cliffe and Luckham, 1999), but there is insufficient attention to the deeply historical and structural causes of contemporary societal conditions within neocolonial states. By absencing the history of imperial structures and practices in the very creation of conditions attributed to internal 'state failure', the reproduction and entrenchment of imperial structures and interventions is legitimized and normalized.

The representation of Somalia in academic, policy and media discourse of the past decade epitomizes the defining characteristics of this discourse. Somalia is seen to constitute the classic case of 'state failure'. In June 2006 the US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazer, observed of Somalia that 'it's the classic failed state. It may be even the only failed state, real failed state' (Frazer, 2006). This echoes other pronouncements

by journalists and academics: 'After fifteen years of recurring violence and absent leadership, Somalia is the very definition of a failed state' (Kaplan, 2006); 'Somalia appears to be the very definition of what we call a failed state' (Cockburn, 2002). In an article examining 'the toughest cases: states that have lost control over most of their territory and stopped providing even the most basic services to their people', the *Economist* (2005a) observed that 'Only Somalia unambiguously fits this definition. A larger group of countries, mostly in Africa, are close to failure'; while Rageh Omaar (2006) referred to Somalia as a 'textbook failed state'. Somalia is seen to lie at the 'extreme' end of a continuum from fragility to collapse (Gros, 1996).

Identification of Somalia as a 'failed state' arose in the wake of the overthrow of Siyaad Barre in 1991 and the development of intense and prolonged conflict between a proliferating number of armed factions. Conditions of instability and widespread violence produced severe problems of hunger and displacement; hundreds of thousands lost their lives, hundreds of thousands were forced to flee to neighboring countries or further afield. Social and political order gave way to a seemingly intractable condition of violent chaos, which was hard to make sense of – it was not easy to understand who was fighting who, or why. The notion of 'state failure' has persisted as the predominant way of perceiving Somalia's condition: it seems to capture perfectly the condition of Somalia; while events in Somalia seem to require such a term.

The notion of 'failed state' is more than just a label, however; it is rooted in a broader approach which provides particular forms of understanding socio-political conditions. The discursive portrayal and explanation of Somalia's condition illustrates key features of the broader discourse. It is widely accepted that the 'failure' and 'collapse' of the Somali state rests on two key factors: a history of bad leadership, with a particular focus on the individual figure of Siyaad Barre; and the Somali culture characterized by clanism. Somalia is seen to share with many other African countries a lack of good leadership. Asking how Somalia, a society with a shared culture, language, religion and sense of nationalism, could have 'failed' and 'collapsed', Rotberg (2004: 11) concludes that there are 'many possible explanations, but destructive leadership predominates' (see also Clarke and Gosende, 2003). The many-sided, violent and prolonged conflict in Somalia and the enduring absence of centralized state institutions following Barre's overthrow are explained as the result of a defining aspect of Somali society and culture: clanism. According to the received wisdom of much academic literature and most media commentary, Somali society consists of a number of clans and sub-clans, and there is an inherent tendency to animosity and rivalry between clans. Individuals feel loyalty to their clan above all – the clan is a 'primordial' identity. This makes it difficult to establish normal institutions and norms of state and governance. Somalia has been torn apart by fighting between warlords representing rival clans

and sub-clans. Clanism in Somalia is seen as a particular form of the more general African phenomenon of tribalism or ethnicity, which is central to so many of Africa's political problems: 'the Somali version of the generic problem of ethnicity or tribalism: it represents primordial cleavages and cultural fragmentation within Somali society' (Adam, 1995: 70). This basic understanding of Somalia's contemporary condition is found in much academic literature (Coyne, 2006; Lewis, 1994; Laitin and Samatar, S. S., 1987; Samatar, S. S., 1991; Simons, 1998) and, through routine deployment in media commentary, has acquired the status of commonsense:

Somalia remains Africa's most utterly failed state, as it has been since 1991, when it fell to pieces after tribal militias toppled a dictator, Mohamed Siyaad Barre, then turned on each other. Since then, the place has been torn apart by rival warlords, leaving at least 300,000 dead. (*Economist*, 2005b)

The perceived centrality of clanism to Somali culture provides an obvious explanation for such a prolonged conflict: a society 'imbued with warrior traditions' has been devastated by 'primordial conflicts' (Adam, 1995: 85, 86).

The descriptive, ahistorical and atheoretical nature of the category of 'failed state' helps in the easy acceptance of this account of the nature and causes of social and political crisis in Somalia. The untheorized notion of the state assumed by the 'failed state' discourse is abstracted from the historical development of particular forms of state, and isolated from the economy and the social relations which constitute society. This reifies the surface appearances of formal political institutions and functions, and falsely assumes the universality of distinct political forms specific to capitalist society; it also obliterates the historically specific character of imperial, colonial and neocolonial states.

In confronting the challenge of explanatory critique, the very category of 'failed state' must be rejected. It is inseparable from underlying methodological flaws which assume that which has to be explained – the historically specific form of state–society relations. This is not to contest the existence of profound social, political and economic crises in Africa and other regions, to which the term is so readily applied, but to challenge their characterization and, above all, their explanation, in terms of 'state failure'. This point is illustrated clearly in the case of Somalia's condition. The general account reproduced via the discourse of 'state failure' focuses on questions of individual leadership and pathology, and the inherent tendency towards clan-based division and conflict as a defining feature of Somali culture. Because what a state is meant to look like is assumed, the characterization of Somalia's condition as 'state failure' does not actually address the historical specificity of Somalia's state–society relations, but focuses instead on the behavior of abhorrent individuals, and aspects of Somali culture which are

assumed to be inherent. In order to produce a more adequate understanding and explanation of the Somali crisis of the 1990s it is necessary to examine the historical legacy of colonial rule on Somalia's modern social formation; the specific character of Somalia's postcolonial political economy and its structured insertion into the regional and global capitalist system; and the overwhelming significance of international intervention in Somalia and the region of the Horn of Africa over the four decades since independence.

### COLONIALISM IN THE MAKING OF SOMALIA'S MODERN CONDITION

The roots of Somalia's current condition are to be found not in traditional Somali culture but in the historically specific social relations of Somalia's political economy as it was forged through the colonial and neocolonial orders of global capitalism. In understanding the significance of the colonial legacy on Somalia's postcolonial history,<sup>5</sup> it is necessary to examine the nature of the precolonial and colonial political economy, and processes of accumulation and class formation; the relationship between colonial rule in Somaliland and the broader strategic logics of colonial imperialism; and the manner in which the Somali peoples came to be split into lands occupied by neighboring imperial powers.

The decentralized segmentary society of precolonial Somalia was rooted in the pastoral economy (Lewis, 1961; Samatar, 1989). The basic unit of production and herd ownership was the household, while common shared access to and control of grazing lands and resources were managed at the level of the clan. Various tasks which required organization and cooperation beyond the household, such as digging wells, were coordinated at the level of the *reer* – a group of families living in close proximity. All members of society were involved in direct production for subsistence – there were no centralized state institutions or bureaucratic structures, and no class hierarchy of non-productive social groups living on the surplus extracted from the direct producers (Samatar, 1989). The management of the pastoral economy was directed towards meeting the needs of society and securing societal reproduction. The pastoral economy was not entirely self-sufficient; certain consumption needs were met through trade. Various pastoral products – small animals, leather, skins, milk, meat, ghee, ivory – were taken to the coast and exchanged for goods such as cotton, grain, beads, glass, iron and dates. Thus Somali pastoral society was linked to regional and long distance networks of trade, but there was no significant development of markets within Somali society (Samatar, 1989). Activities of agricultural cultivation developed alongside or within the pastoral economy to varying degrees and for different reasons, being much more widespread in the south than the north (Besteman and Cassanelli, 1996; Mukhtar, 1996; Samatar, 1989).

The fact that precolonial Somali society was not characterized by centralized state institutions should not be seen in terms of an inherent *lack* (Amadiume, 1997; Ayers, 2006). Specific institutions and values of social and political order were integrally related to securing the societal reproduction of a decentralized social order based on a pastoral economy. A number of political institutions or units existed at various levels, from the *Jilib* to the highest level of the clan, composed of a number of different lineages. The significance of these various units at different levels varied according to the circumstances. The most stable political unit was the *Jilib*, which was composed of a number of families (from a few hundred to more than a thousand) connected on the basis of their security needs, maintained through a pledge of mutual support and cooperation, the *heer*. The decision-making body of the *Jilib* was the *Shir*, which consisted of all adult males, with lineage heads and other respected and skilled elders serving as spokesmen. This institution was a flexible forum for discussion, decision-making and dispute resolution, meeting as needs arose and dispersing thereafter, with no permanent office-holders, chiefs or committees (Samatar, 1989). Clan membership was not necessarily ascribed at birth; movement between clans was possible under various circumstances (Besteman, 1996). In addition, the values and norms of Islam constituted a supra-clan locus of order and leadership.

Somali society underwent qualitative changes as a result of colonial occupation and the incorporation of Somali society into the global capitalist economy and world market. The colonial occupation of Africa by European powers at the end of the nineteenth century was informed by both economic and strategic imperatives. The basic expansionary dynamics of industrial capital in Europe were mediated through the geo-strategic logics of empire:

the struggle between rival powers for control over territory, natural resources, vital geographic features (harbors, rivers, oases), and other sources of economic and military advantage. Such competition governed the international behaviour of the European powers from the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries and fuelled the creation of their overseas empires. (Klare, 2004: 147)

During the second half of the nineteenth century the lands inhabited by Somali peoples were occupied by four imperial powers: Britain, Italy, France and Ethiopia. The coastal regions of Somalia became important to Britain with the establishment of a military post in Aden in 1839, whose significance, in turn, was related to the trade route to India (Samatar and Samatar, A.I., 1987). Control of Somalia's coastal towns gave access to supplies of meat, from the pastoral societies of the interior, with which to supply the military establishment in Aden. The construction of the Suez Canal in 1869

gave Aden heightened importance as a key hub in imperial trade routes to India; the British were therefore anxious to maintain control of the northern Somali coast and interior, on which Aden depended for supplies (Samatar, 1989; Sheik-Abdi, 1977). The importance of maintaining control was further enhanced by the imperative to prevent French expansion in the region.

Italian colonial expansion began some years after the major powers of Britain and France, and Italy established its occupation of southern Somali lands through an agreement with the Sultan of Zanzibar in 1889. Italy's larger ambitions for colonization in the region were thwarted by Ethiopian emperor Menelik II, who defeated Italian forces at the Battle of Adowa in 1896 (Guadagni, 1978). The Ethiopian empire's strength was recognized by Britain and France who signed treaties, most importantly the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1898 which recognized Ethiopian claims to the Ogaden region inhabited by Somali peoples (Sheik-Abdi, 1977). Resistance to colonial occupation arose in all areas of Somali lands. The movement led by Sayyid Mohamed Abdullah Hassan sustained resistance against Ethiopian and British colonial occupation from 1899 until 1920 (Kakwenzire, 1986). In the south, over many years Italian occupation met with armed opposition from various Somali groups, who struggled against the occupation of their lands (Guadagni, 1978; Mukhtar, 1996).

During the Second World War the various Somali lands were temporarily unified under British rule. The question of Italy's colonies was subject to lengthy negotiations and investigations carried out by the UN Four-Power Commission, made up of Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union (Rivlin, 1949). In 1949 it was finally decided that the former Italian Somaliland should be placed under the International Trusteeship system, with Italy the administering power and the date of Independence set for 1960 (United Nations, 1950). This decision was taken against the expressed wishes of Somali peoples, articulated by specific Somali groups. The views of the Somalis were subordinate now to the logics of Cold War geopolitics: the return of Somalia to Italy was informed by the need to welcome Italy into the fold of the Western alliance. With encouragement from the US, Britain once again transferred the Ogaden region back to Ethiopia – now a key American ally. This provoked major protests from the western Somali people, who appealed to the British government, to no avail. In 1954 Britain transferred the regions of the Haud and Reserved Area to Ethiopia, prompting huge Somali demonstrations. A delegation of Somalis travelled to London and New York to appeal against the transfer, without success (Samatar, 1989).

This pattern of colonial occupation has had two important legacies for contemporary Somalia. First, the question of the Ogaden region became a central cause in the emergence of Somali nationalism and formed the basis of long-term hostilities between Somalia and Ethiopia. Second, the different colonial experiences of Somaliland under the British and Somalia

under the Italians created a pattern of uneven socio-economic development between the northern and southern regions, which postcolonial political and economic policies have reproduced and further entrenched (Besteman and Cassanelli, 1996).

The British were primarily concerned with maintaining supplies to the military post of Aden, and thus encouraged the export of livestock. The commercialization of livestock led to the emergence of a merchant class which controlled the export of livestock. This form of accumulation and class formation rooted in merchant capital did not lead to the transformation of forces and relations of pastoral production. Increasing demand led to the commodification of livestock within the pastoral society, increasing production for exchange rather than use, leading to the expansion of herd size and the extent of pastureland, with eventual negative implications for the environment. As the pastoral economy came to support the classes of merchants and state elites as well as the rural producers, the intensification of livestock trade impoverished the majority of direct producers (Samatar, 1992a, 1992b).

The form of the colonial economy, narrowly based on the export of livestock supported by an expanded but undeveloped pastoral sector, had implications for the character of the colonial and postcolonial state. Until the Second World War the colonial state was small with little development of bureaucratic administration structures. This reflected in part the fact that British interest in Somalia was above all strategic, with no settlement, investment of capital, or development of productive enterprises. It also reflected the failure of early plans to raise revenue through taxation, initiatives which met with firm resistance from the Somali peoples (Kakwenzire, 1986, Samatar, 1989). After the Second World War, with the passage of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, the Colonial Office provided substantially increased financial support for the development of administrative and welfare structures (Samatar and Samatar, A.I., 1987: 677).

This form of colonial state and economy contrasted with developments in the south, in the neighboring Italian colony. From the early twentieth century Italian colonial administration embarked on legislation for land alienation with a view to encouraging settler emigration from Italy and significant agricultural development (Guadagni, 1978). From the 1920s Italy's Fascist government pursued a much more aggressive policy of colonial expansion, and set out to create a settler colony in Somalia, with ambitious plans for economic transformation. This entailed far greater appropriation of lands for the settler population and the establishment of a plantation economy. The different character of colonial economic development posed a greater need for cheap labor. As in many other African colonies but in contrast to British Somaliland to the north, this need was met through a combination of taxation and forced labor. This required the development of

stronger and more extensive state institutions in rural areas, and the incorporation of 'traditional' clan leaders into the authoritarian administrative structures of the colonial state (Besteman, 1996; Mukhtar, 1996; Samatar, 1989, Samatar and Samatar, A.I., 1987).

The differentiated incorporation of Somali peoples and lands into the relations of imperialism and global capital had a number of important effects. Accumulation based on the export of livestock and other pastoral products was dominated by merchant capital, leading to the emergence of a prosperous local mercantile class, and an economy heavily dependent on a small range of exports, without transforming the social relations or technology of the direct producers. The pattern of colonization created socio-economic inequalities and uneven patterns of development between the north and south. Negotiations among rival imperial powers over decades had reproduced the division of Somali peoples and lands, with a substantial area retained by Ethiopia. These specific features of Somalia's colonial history are essential to understanding postcolonial processes of political conflict.

#### CONTRADICTIONS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE IN SOMALIA

The incorporation of non-European societies into the global capitalist system through imperial expansion over centuries led to a variety of forms of colonial and postcolonial state and economy. While this prevents a generalized theory of the postcolonial state, it is possible to make some points at a certain level of abstraction which underline the importance of distinguishing between the bourgeois capitalist state and characteristic state-society relations which emerged in Europe, and forms of state which developed in regions which have been subject to imperialism in one form or another.

First, while in Europe the *main* (though not the only) classes are the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, elsewhere different patterns of class relations have emerged according to the particularities of imperial rule and incorporation into the expanding capitalist system. The size of the bourgeoisie and proletariat is often relatively smaller, the proportion of society engaged in direct rural production (whether peasants or pastoralists) greater, and other 'intermediary' classes (state bureaucrats, merchants, petit-bourgeoisie) relatively more significant (Ahmad, 1985; Thomas, 1984). The specific patterns and balances of class relations and social forces influence the character of the state. Second, the imposition of European rule over centuries was invariably and necessarily accompanied by forms of racial ideology, and produced new racialized or ethnicized articulations of political and economic power in colonized societies. The manner in which African societies were incorporated into the colonial order tended to be through structures of authoritarian 'ethnic' power which froze previously fluid identities and built inequalities of power along ethnic lines into the heart of the social order

(Mamdani, 1996). Third, the transformation of economies under colonial rule was integral to the global development of capitalism and created an international division of labor and profoundly unequal economic structures on a global scale. The significance and enduring legacy of colonialism arises from both the character of 'internal' political and economic transformation, and the structured insertion of colonized societies into an uneven global system on disadvantageous terms.

The interaction of these three factors are crucial to explaining the emergence of authoritarianism, parasitic accumulation and corruption, elite rivalry, and reactionary politicization of ethnicity in postcolonial African states. These various phenomena have arisen in the context of the struggles of the postcolonial ruling classes, often dominated by the petit-bourgeoisie, state bureaucrats and merchants, to consolidate their fragmented economic and political power relative to each other and society (Ahmad, 1985; Fanon, 1967; Thomas, 1984). These tendencies were strongly manifest in Somalia as a result of the particular legacy of Somalia's colonial political economy. The pattern of economic underdevelopment and the class basis of the postcolonial state produced a structural tendency towards factional rivalry among the ruling elites. The intense political rivalry which rapidly developed in the early years of independence was subsumed under the one-party authoritarian rule of Siyaad Barre. However, the failure of the Ogaden initiative in 1978 caused the cohesion of nationalism to unravel and factional rivalry to return, with far greater brutality. Although dressed in the appearance of 'traditional' clan identities, the modern development of violent factional rivalry and competition is rooted in the social relations of the colonial and neocolonial political economy of Somalia and is far removed from precolonial institutions and norms of kinship and clan.

The basis of elite rivalry in postcolonial Somalia lies not in culture but in the specific structure of the colonial economy and the mercantile form of accumulation and underdevelopment. The source of colonial accumulation was the intensified extraction of value from a qualitatively untransformed pastoral and peasant economy. The social and material power of the postcolonial ruling elite was thus mercantile and bureaucratic. Postcolonial development policies did little to alter the basic structural character of the economy, in terms of both internal social relations and external export orientation (Samatar, A.I., 1988). The absence of an expansionary economy with sources of accumulation arising from expanded production meant that, as elsewhere in Africa, the petit-bourgeois elite sought to consolidate their power through primitive accumulation enabled through control of the state (Samatar, 1989, 1992a; Samatar and Samatar, A.I., 1987). The logics of intra-class competition and rivalry over the private appropriation of public resources were exacerbated by the high aid dependence of Somalia's economy, and the economic decline suffered from the 1980s (Samatar, A.I., 1987).

Somalia's economy had been structurally dependent on financial aid in the form of grants and loans throughout the colonial period (Kakwenzire, 1986; Karp, 1960; Samatar, 1989; Samatar and Samatar, A.I., 1987). The basic character of Somalia's economy, dependent on exporting a very narrow range of agricultural goods – livestock and skins from the north, bananas from the south – and its insertion into the world market and international division of labor, generated a chronic balance of payments deficit. This structural condition, shared by many postcolonial economies, was particularly acute in the case of Somalia and became further entrenched due to declining terms of trade and increased competition for Somalia's few exports. During the 1960s and 1970s Somali livestock merchants enjoyed good prices and a secure market due to Somalia's proximity to Saudi Arabia. However, from the early 1980s Somalia's livestock was unable to compete in terms of price and quality with new exporters with more advanced productivity, notably Australia; while global demand for skins fell with invention of synthetic alternatives (Samatar, A., 1987).

During the Cold War international donors maintained significant flows of aid to Somalia: by the mid 1980s Somalia was the third highest recipient of aid in Africa, on a *per capita* basis (Samatar and Samatar, A.I., 1987; Woodward, 2002). This reflects the political nature of economic aid and the perceived strategic importance of Somalia, which also invited military support.

### SOMALIA IN THE LOGICS OF COLD WAR MILITARIZATION

Just as in the colonial period, so too during the Cold War and up to the present, international interaction with Somalia and the Horn of Africa has reflected geo-strategic interests. The Horn of Africa remains important because of its geographic location as a key node in international trade routes. The region has acquired added significance since the Second World War because of the global importance of the Persian Gulf's oil reserves. These twin imperatives have long informed the West's concern to secure and maintain military access and bases in the Red Sea region. As a result the entire region has been very considerably militarized. This inevitably influenced already-existing regional tensions rooted in the colonial political economy – in Aijaz Ahmad's words, the 'imperialist dimension is grafted on top of these aggregated violences' (1985: 57). Decades of arms transfers from the US and USSR to Ethiopia and Somalia led to two of the largest and most powerful armies in Africa. The authoritarian governments of both Somalia and Ethiopia prioritized strengthening their military forces and this was enabled by willing, and alternating, support from America and the Soviet Union, supplemented by other regional allies. The major

militarization of the region secured the longevity and brutality of authoritarian rule, and fuelled conflict.

Ethiopia, an important Western ally from the 1950s, received massive financial and military support from the US, which sustained and strengthened the oppressive aristocratic regime of Emperor Haile Selassie. This gave the US access to the military communications post at Kagnaw, near Asmara, which was developed into a vital link in America's global radio system (Lefebvre, 1991; Woodward, 2006). Siyaad Barre's military regime which took power in Somalia in 1969 aligned with the Soviet Union, declaring a commitment to 'scientific socialism'. The USSR provided substantial military and financial aid in return for a military base at the port of Berbera. Under Soviet support Somalia's military forces more than doubled in size, and major imports of Soviet military hardware drained the economy. Somalia was at the time reputed to have the most powerful military forces in sub-Saharan Africa (Samatar, A.I., 1987).

Haile Selassie's regime finally collapsed in 1974, in the face of a severe drought, crippling oil prices and growing internal dissent, and was replaced by the Derg – a military junta claiming to espouse Marxism–Leninism, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. American aid to Ethiopia was terminated, and the Derg signed a \$380 million arms deal with the Soviet Union (Samatar, A.I., 1988: 133). The Derg continued to repress Ethiopia's numerous marginalized nationalities and was met with growing armed resistance from national liberation movements. Siyaad Barre took advantage of the multiple pressures on the Derg to launch a military invasion, to reclaim the Ogaden region. When the Soviet Union refused to support Somalia's attack nor withdraw support from Ethiopia, Somalia officially terminated the Treaty of Friendship and expelled all Soviet advisors. The USSR then organized a massive airlift of military supplies and troops to Ethiopia. A total of 18,000 Cuban troops were sent, as well as an estimated \$1 billion worth of arms (Lefebvre, 1991; Selassie, 1980). The combined forces of Ethiopian, Cuban and Yemeni troops inflicted crushing defeat on Somali forces.

Somalia's offensive in the Ogaden had been initiated with the anticipation of military support from the US and other Western allies (Borchgrave, 1977; Lefebvre, 1991). With the termination of its relationship with Ethiopia, in spring 1977 America had begun to consider increasing support to Somalia: President Jimmy Carter was reported to have instructed officials to 'get Somalia to be our friend' (Borchgrave, 1977; Lefebvre, 1991: 75; Selassie, 1980: 140). National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski advocated supporting Somalia as part of a wider security arc in the face of Soviet 'expansionism'. Carter was reluctant to offer military support in light of Somalia's irredentist ambitions. However, in June 1977 a 'private back channel' was established between Carter and Barre (Lefebvre, 1991: 175), and messages of support from Carter to Somalia were interpreted by

Barre as an indication of support for an attack on Ethiopia (Borchgrave, 1977; Halliday, 1986). Carter had agreed to sell arms to Somalia for 'defensive' purposes, only days before Barre invaded Ethiopia (Lefebvre, 1991: 176; Woodward, 2006: 25).

When the invasion came to light the arms deal was suspended, discussions resuming only after Somalia's withdrawal in 1978. However, by the end of 1979 a series of events had changed the Cold War context. Revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran, the subsequent Iranian hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan combined to fuel a renewed vigor in America's policy of 'containment' in the Third World. The massive Soviet support to Ethiopia was construed as evidence of expansionism in the Horn of Africa, lending weight to those who advocated support for Somalia. More immediately, the hostage crisis in Iran produced 'a growing willingness within the Carter administration to view Somalia in a broader strategic setting as American policy makers began to plan for the possibility of direct U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf' (Lefebvre, 1991: 199). In December Carter decided to seek military agreements with Somalia, Kenya and Oman, as part of a strategy to establish military forces in the region ready to defend the Persian Gulf and America's access to oil. In the State of the Union address in January 1980 the Carter Doctrine was announced:

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force. (Carter, 1980)

After lengthy negotiations the US agreed to provide \$40 million military assistance over two years in return for access to Somalia's port and air facilities at Berbera and Mogadishu, and in August 1980 the US signed a ten-year agreement granting access to Somalia's bases (Lefebvre, 1991).

Somalia had already acquired arms from other Western sources, mainly Italy, with financial support from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states who were keen to reduce Soviet influence in the region (Lefebvre, 1991; Mamdani, 2004; Selassie, 1980). Progress in receiving arms from the US was initially slow, but by the mid 1980s under Reagan's administration America became ever more willing to overlook internal policies when arming strategic allies. Reagan continued the more militarized and interventionist Cold War strategy that Carter had begun in 1979 (Halliday, 1986; Klare, 2004). Under Reagan the US developed a distinct approach to the Third World which involved intervention by proxy, supporting third-party states and counter-revolutionary forces (Halliday, 1986; Klare and Kornbluh, 1988; Mamdani, 2004). Other cases of crisis and conflict in Africa which have earned the label of 'state failure' were produced by these logics of containment by proxy. America's policy of 'constructive engagement'

with apartheid South Africa, providing diplomatic and financial support, encouraged and enabled South Africa's policy of regional destabilization and terror. America and South Africa's other Western allies were indirectly complicit in the decade of terror produced in Mozambique by the counter-revolutionary force Renamo (Minter, 1986). America and South Africa were active in brutal destabilization of Angola from the moment of independence, financing and arming the proxy forces of FNLA and UNITA for two decades, which destroyed Angolan society (Wright, 1997).

A central plank of Reagan's strategy was to transfer arms to governments and forces as an instrument of 'containment'. When Ethiopian forces entered Somalia in 1982 to provide backing to an Ethiopian-based Somali dissident force, this was seen as evidence of regional expansionism by Soviet-backed forces against pro-Western states (Lefebvre, 1991). America swiftly organized an emergency airlift of arms to Somalia, and continued to provide major military and economic assistance over the following years, totaling almost \$500 million over seven years. This made Somalia 'the beneficiary of one of the largest U.S. security assistance programmes ever put together for a sub-Sahara African state' (Lefebvre, 1991: 241). The 'militant policy of containment' applied in the Horn of Africa against perceived Soviet expansionism entailed arming Somalia, Kenya and Sudan. During the mid 1980s these three countries received an average of \$500 million in security assistance annually, totalling well over half of America's security assistance to sub-Saharan Africa (Lefebvre, 1991). This is one particular instance of the general pattern described by Aijaz Ahmad in the 1980s:

It is the historic fact of our age that the major means of military violence are produced by the metropolitan bourgeoisies but utilized, more often than not, and almost as a fact of daily existence, by the rulers of the periphery. None of these armies would be what they are without the means of mass destruction they receive from the metropolitan exporters of weaponry. It is in this sense that imperialism is the constitutive element and the stabilising factor in the whole global structure of military violence. (Ahmad, 1985: 57)

American support enabled Barre to remain in power throughout the 1980s, a decade marked by the deliberate politicizing and militarizing of clan identities and increasingly brutal repression of internal dissent, including bombing raids in the north killing tens of thousands (Abdullahi, 2004; Cassanelli, 1996). The Reagan administration, followed by the Bush administration, maintained financial and military support to Somalia in full knowledge of Barre's brutal oppression against dissident groups and the civilian population in various areas of the country, above all the north. During 1988 and 1989 the Somali government armed forces carried out indiscriminate aerial bombardments in northern areas, destroyed crops,

livestock and agricultural facilities, poisoned wells, and killed thousands of unarmed civilians, with the aim of reducing popular support for the Somali National Movement. Investigations carried out by American officials in 1988 had revealed such practices but it was only in August 1989 that America began to re-evaluate its policy. In 1988 US military aid to Somalia had included \$1.4 million of M-16 automatic rifles and ammunition, and the administration's request to Congress for financial year 1990 included \$38 million in military and financial support for Somalia (Human Rights Watch, 1989).

### CONCLUSION: 'STATE FAILURE' IN THE CONTRADICTIONS OF IMPERIALISM

While the superficial facts of Somalia's current crisis are captured by the term 'failed state', the accompanying discourse lacks explanatory power. The forces which led to the disintegration of Somali society into intractable violent conflict during the 1990s, after the final overthrow of Barre's regime, are rooted in the colonial and postcolonial contradictions of the local and regional political economy, which were heavily militarized by international intervention governed by geo-strategic logics. However, the significance of the 'failed state' discourse lies not simply in its lack of explanatory power. This discourse, in persistently mis-characterizing social conditions and mis-identifying their causes, serves to legitimize and reproduce the very imperial qualities of international order which lie at the heart of so-called 'state failure'. It remains to highlight this ideological character of the 'failed states' discourse and its relationship to imperialism. A recurring feature of imperialism in the global development of capitalism has been intervention in non-European societies, with the objective of securing or establishing social orders, conditions and institutional arrangements beneficial for imperial commerce and economic expansion (Anghie, 2005). Forms and techniques of imperial intervention have varied through time and in different regions. Two particular aspects of these general imperatives of imperial intervention are especially significant with regard to the *discourse* of 'failed states' and the *production* of social and political crises.

First, all forms of imperial intervention have to be legitimized. A persistent element in the ideological legitimization of imperial intervention is the identification of some lack or inferiority on the basis of which different societies and states can be distinguished, both from the imperial powers and among each other. In the nineteenth century formal colonial occupation was legitimized by distinguishing between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states (Anghie, 1999). This discourse was further refined in order to distinguish varying capacities for self-rule under the trusteeship system of the League of Nations and, later, the United Nations (Grosvogui, 1996). During the Cold War the 'evil' of communism became the prism through which to

categorize friends and enemies. In the post-Cold War era of 'War on Terrorism' the discourse of 'state failure' with its hierarchy of categories – 'weak', 'fragile', 'failed', 'collapsed' – legitimizes intervention by identifying lack, inferiority and incapacity.

Because of the ideological function of these changing discursive regimes, there is necessarily only a warped or wholly false relationship between the logics of the discourse and the realities to which they refer. The social tensions and conflicts within societies of the Third World during the twentieth century, which gave rise to attempts to bring about changes to the prevailing social conditions and orders, in most cases had little to do with 'Soviet expansionism'. While the Soviet Union did provide support to a number of left-wing governments and movements under threat, the movements were largely the product of 'internal' contradictions. The terms of discursive distinction reflect the imperatives of imperial power rather than actual social conditions. This is perhaps clearer in the case of nineteenth century colonial ideology: few today would endorse the reality of a hierarchy between more or less civilized peoples. A critical understanding of the discourse about 'uncivilized' peoples cannot be based, therefore, on comparative inquiry into the actual characteristics of different societies, but must focus on the logics of imperial power. Similarly, an understanding of the discourse of 'state failure' cannot proceed on the basis of trying to distinguish different modalities of state failure. Just as with the ideology of 'civilized' states, the entire basis of the discourse must be seen for what it is – an imperial ideology – and therefore rejected as a useful component of social inquiry. The 'failed state' discourse can only be the *object* of critical inquiry; it cannot offer tools for inquiry.

The second aspect which requires emphasis is the consequences of imperial intervention. From colonial institutions of indirect rule in Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth century, metropolitan attempts at managing decolonization, Cold War support to clients and proxies, to the current 'War on Terrorism', imperial powers have selected or created individuals, groups, regimes or movements to support, as a means to securing imperial order. The general pattern, across forms of imperial intervention in different eras, has been to reinforce authoritarian tendencies and social forces and undermine democratic and progressive forces and tendencies. The incorporation of African societies into the colonial state through institutions of indirect rule had the effect of reinforcing authoritarian, hierarchical and divisive aspects of precolonial institutions, while undermining pre-existing democratic procedures (Mamdani, 1996). The transformation of power relations under colonial rule changed ethnicity from a fluid, cultural identity to a fixed political identity. These effects were related to and reinforced by processes of class formation rooted in the colonial reorganization of African economies. These two features of colonial rule constitute the major 'internal' roots of authoritarianism in postcolonial African states; while

the politicization of ethnicity in so many postcolonial African conflicts is rooted not in tradition but in the colonial articulation of culture and power (Mamdani, 2003).

The tragedy of imperialism is that the effects of one era are reinforced in the next, 'grafted onto aggregated violences'. America's Cold War policy towards Africa was informed by economic and strategic imperatives which paid little heed to the realities of socio-political forces and developments within Africa, or the consequences of American intervention – covert or otherwise – for African peoples. Western support kept brutal corrupt dictators such as Barre, Mobutu and Moi in power for years; many conflicts including those in the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa were prolonged and brutalized through heavy militarization. The legacy of such policies constitutes a major contributing factor in the global political economy of socio-political crisis in Africa today. This legacy is silenced by the 'failed states' discourse.

Such patterns continue today. Paranoia regarding 'Islamic terrorism' has replaced the paranoia regarding Soviet expansionism. As before, regressive forces take advantage of this strategic logic of imperial intervention. The intervention of Western powers and regional allies in Somalia over the past year is prolonging and worsening conditions of violence and breakdown, undermining democratic or moderate forces and reinforcing regressive forces. Declaring 'counter-terrorism' its priority in Somalia, the US has, through the CIA, covertly financed and armed some of the same 'warlords' which sustained violent conflict during the 1990s; promoted a UN resolution to abandon the arms embargo against Somalia; and provided substantial economic and military support to the repressive dictatorial regime of Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, whose troops invaded Somalia. What appeared in the middle of 2006 to be prospects for longed-for peace and order, when the Union of Islamic Courts defeated the US-backed warlords and took control of Mogadishu with considerable popular support, had by the end of the year descended to the brink of regional conflict.<sup>6</sup> That the notion of the 'failed state' harbouring terrorists facilitates such policies should serve to illustrate the dangers of academic inquiry continuing to unwittingly lend credence to this ideological discourse.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author very much thanks Julian Saurin and Alison Ayers for their numerous discussions. She also thanks Dani Gelz, Mari Ryömä, Mustapha Kamal Pasha and Eric Herring for helpful discussions. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the BISA conference in 2004, the WISC conference, Istanbul 2005, and at departmental research seminars at the University of Aberdeen and the University of Leeds. The author thanks participants at the BISA and WISC panels, and students and colleagues

## REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

at Aberdeen and Leeds, for helpful discussion and comments. She is very grateful for the comments and suggestions from the two anonymous reviewers and the RIPE editors.

### NOTES

- 1 This paper arises from the author's ongoing work with Julian Saurin and Alison Ayers on the 'failed states' discourse, which originated in the conference *The Global Constitution of 'Failed States': The Consequences of a New Imperialism?*, held at the University of Sussex in 2001.
- 2 DFID (2005), Batt (2004), Benn (2004), Straw (2002), Bruntland (2002).
- 3 Menkhaus (2006), Coyne (2006), Reno (2006), Bøås and Jennings (2005), Pham (2004), Kreijen (2004), Rotberg (2004), Crocker (2003), Milliken (2003), Wainwright (2003), Debiel *et al.* (2002), Goodson (2001), Cliffe and Luckham (1999), Alao (1999), Langford (1999), Herbst (1997), Gros (1996), Zartman (1995), Helman and Ratner (1992).
- 4 ODI (2005), Baker (2004), Maass and Mephram (2004), Garrett and Adams (2004), Weinstein (2004), Wise (2004), African Studies Centre (2003), International Crisis Group (2002), Baker and Weller (1998), Eriksson (1998).
- 5 The use of the term 'postcolonial' here does not refer specifically to postcolonial theory; nor does it imply that colonial conditions or relations are over. In the context of the argument developed in this paper, the present is understood in terms of neocolonialism. Postcolonial is used to indicate processes of change which have occurred during the period after the end of formal colonial rule.
- 6 Mazzetti (2006); Rice *et al.* (2006); Wax and DeYoung (2006); Samatar (2006); Lobe (2006); Woodward (2006).

### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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