

# Statebuilding in the Periphery: Why States Colonize and Why They Stop

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## Abstract

How do states secure and maintain political authority over territory? In *Settling for Less: Why States Colonize and Why They Stop*, Lachlan McNamee explores one common mechanism for building authority, namely settler colonialism, that should be of interest to scholars beyond those interested in colonialism per se. Building a novel theory, he explains when settler colonialism is employed by states and, importantly, why it typically becomes obsolete with economic development. Using new data, he surveys paired cases of Indonesian settlement in New Guinea and Australia's failed attempt in Papua New Guinea, as well as two periods of Chinese settlement in Xinjiang. One underdeveloped dimension of this otherwise outstanding book is the strategic choices of the indigenes. A second dimension is the alternatives to settler colonialism, including direct and indirect rule through indigenous proxies. While McNamee pushes the research frontier outwards, exerting and consolidating state authority over peripheries remain a challenge. To the extent settler colonialism "works," that is, migrants from a majority group move into and dominate the periphery so as to attach the region more firmly to the national-state, the indigenous community is not only displaced and exploited in the moment but it is economically and politically undermined for the future. The indigenes are not credibly protected against future exploitation but, at the extreme, are eliminated in genocidal wars.

**Keywords:** statebuilding; colonialism; decolonization; New Guinea; Papua New Guinea; Xinjiang.

How do states secure and maintain political authority over territory? We know that in many regions, states exercise authority unevenly. Imagine a map depicting the political topography of a state. Instead of mountains and valleys, such a map would show "darker" areas where state authority is consolidated and "lighter" areas where state authority is nearly absent, and many shadings in-between. In some states, lighter shades would predominate, especially around their peripheries. In so-called failed states, color might show only around the capital.<sup>1</sup> If we broaden the map, we would also see states exercising authority over "foreign" territories either formally in empires, at least historically, and informally through international hierarchies.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, what is foreign is itself a product of complex authority relationships and claims. This too would be exercised unevenly, with some regions and territories clearly under the authority of some metropole, and others

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa M. Lee and Nan Zhang, "Legibility and the Informational Foundations of State Capacity," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2017): 118–32; Melissa Lee, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).









McNamee is explicit in posing coercion and direct rule as an alternative to settler colonialism (42–43). We see direct rule in the cases in the second period in Xinjiang in which, given China's industrialization, it is now more difficult to induce the majority of Han Chinese to move to the region. Concerned with a restive Uighur minority that might ally with ethnically similar Muslims across the Western border, China eventually resorts to repression and re-education, often moving Uighurs suspected of disloyalty into camps where they can be more tightly controlled—a move similar to the “strategic hamlet” programs that have failed in other counterinsurgency cases and to which McNamee often attaches the label of genocide. Whether repression can solidify the metropole's political authority over a region remains to be seen in the case of Xinjiang or documented well in other historical cases.

A second alternative—and I would argue a more common one, although we have no way of systematically counting instances of any such mechanism—is indirect rule, or the exercise of political authority by the metropole through agents from within the indigenous community.<sup>8</sup> There are at least two modes of indirect rule in theory and practice, both now modeled as principal-agent relationships. In the first, the metropole uses selective incentives to influence the choices and actions of an existing political leader within the indigenous community.<sup>9</sup> Here, the metropole rewards acts by the leader that it desires and punishes those it opposes. The more distant are the political preferences of the metropole from those of the indigenous community, the larger the carrots and sticks that must be employed to control the leader. But this mode of indirect rule fails if the political preferences of the metropole and periphery are too far apart and, as a result, incentives become too costly relative to the alternatives.

In the second model, the metropole selects the group within the indigenous community that has political preferences most closely aligned with its own and aids that group in securing political power.<sup>10</sup> With similar interests, the “allied” group then acts on its own to enact policies more or less desired by the metropole. That is, aid from the metropole supports the group within the indigenous community that wants to do in its own self-interest what the metropole prefers. In this mode, the cost to the metropole is ensuring the group secures and retains office. Again, if the cost of supporting the group is too great, this mode of indirect rule fails.

The second agent selection mode of indirect rule has played out in different ways across historical cases. In one “international” example, England ruled India indirectly through local potentates for centuries. Through the British East India Company and later the crown, Britain allied with various local rulers and recruited minority groups into its colonial army to govern the subcontinent. India never experienced settler colonialism. British viceroys, military officers, and traders rarely migrated permanently to India. Over time, India evolved from indirect rule to more direct rule from London, but even in 1947 at the time of independence, five hundred sixty-five princely states still remained governing 40 percent of the territory and 23 percent of the population of colonial India.<sup>11</sup> In Africa, to note a second

<sup>8</sup> Lord Frederick J. D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh, UK: William Blackwood and Sons, 1922).

<sup>9</sup> Eli Berman and David A. Lake, eds., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relations in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> David A. Lake, *Indirect Rule: The Making of U.S. International Hierarchy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).



example, the temperate regions were settled by white Europeans, supporting McNamee's theory, but the tropical regions were largely ruled indirectly, perhaps because their climates were inhospitable.<sup>12</sup> Britain and other European imperialists either worked with existing leaders or, more frequently it appears, "manufactured" leaders who were sympathetic to the empire and, more important, were dependent on goods from Europe or used European support to gain political power. Supported by London, Paris, or Berlin, these "traditional" elites governed in ways that the metropole desired or at least found preferable to abandoning the colonies or attempting to rule them directly. In doing so, Europeans profoundly altered the domestic structures of African communities in ways that have had long-lasting effects.<sup>13</sup> Finally, and in similar ways, the United States backed landed elites in the Caribbean during the early twentieth century against their landless majorities to speed the commercialization of agriculture, and today Washington supports royal families or military regimes in the Arab Middle East against increasingly religious majorities demanding greater income equality. In supporting these elite regimes, moreover, the United States has backed some of the more vicious dictators in history while at the same time giving lip-service to democracy promotion.<sup>14</sup>

The preferences and strategic interactions of settlers, the state, and the indigenous community—and factions within the latter—together shape the possibilities of different authority structures. At the very least, we might pose alternatives as varying from anarchy or relations between fully sovereign states (no authority exerted by the metropole) to indirect rule as described here, settler colonialism in which the metropole governs through its migrants and direct rule by the metropole. The more attractive indirect or direct rule is, the less likely we are to observe settler colonialism, and vice versa. This opens the possibility of a richer understanding of the various forms of political domination.

Understanding alternatives more fully also offers a potential challenge to McNamee's explanation for the decline in settler colonialism. As noted, McNamee sees not settler colonialism but its waning as the highest form of capitalism. As economic development opens more attractive opportunities, it becomes harder to induce settlers to move to typically underdeveloped peripheries. This is, I am convinced by McNamee's evidence, largely true. But various changes in the international system may also make indirect rule more or less attractive. As norms of sovereignty and self-determination take hold in former colonial territories and effective but weak national governments form, ruling through indigenous elites becomes both possible and relatively profitable. This further undercuts the incentives for settler colonialism. Even if settlers are willing to move, ruling through indigenous elites may be preferred.

<sup>12</sup> Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation," *American Economic Review* 91, no. 5 (2001): 1369–1401.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State: Territorial Authority and Institutional Choice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Catherine Boone, *Property and Political Order in Africa: Land Rights and the Structure of Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Lake, *Indirect Rule: The Making of U.S. International Hierarchy*.

## Statebuilding in the Periphery

Exerting and consolidating state authority over peripheries remains a challenge. Political topographies are hardly flat. This does not imply that areas of limited statehood or peripheries where state authority is weak are “ungoverned,” an analytic slip commonly made in the early “failed” states literature.<sup>15</sup> Rather, peripheries are often governed by “traditional” nonstate authorities who resist giving up their rights and powers to a central government.<sup>16</sup> Not everyone wants to be part of a state, especially those indigenous communities that are a majority in their territories but would become a minority in a “national” political community. Weakly integrated peripheries are not given by nature but are the product of political struggle and compromises by all of the actors McNamee posits.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, states typically want to control their peripheries, and indeed many today are hardening their borders.<sup>18</sup> Transnational ties between indigenes in one state and majority groups in a neighboring state are often a source of friction and war.<sup>19</sup> Indigenous communities are sometimes too weak to control illicit activities within their borders or form alliances with violent actors seeking sanctuary against their states, all of which can create negative externalities for regional or international communities. On the positive side, states can exploit economies of scale and often provide better public services than many traditional authorities.<sup>20</sup> Weak state authority over peripheries is not necessarily a problem, though states themselves and much of the international community treat it as such and promote the march of central-state consolidation.

The impediment to integration for indigenous communities in peripheral areas is the threat of future exploitation by the central government. Consolidation of indigenes into a national community typically weakens these groups over time. Group solidarity frays as identities change. Central authorities take over the roles traditional leaders used to secure their positions, leading to the further fraying of group solidarity. Unequal “treaties” divert resources from the indigenes to the government or majority groups, depleting their political power. As their political power wanes, agreements reached today on indigenous autonomy and political rights can and likely will be violated and even overturned by the central government tomorrow, which further erodes their ability to bargain with the metropole. The history of Westward expansion by the United States and repeated violations of treaties reached with Native American communities is but one striking example of this problem.

<sup>15</sup> Anne L. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds., *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Peter T. Leeson, *Anarchy Unbounded: Why Self-Governance Works Better Than You Think* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Tanja A. Boerzel and Thomas Risse, *Effective Governance Under Anarchy: Institutions, Legitimacy, and Social Trust in Areas of Limited Statehood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*.

<sup>18</sup> Beth A. Simmons and H. E. Goemans, “Built on Borders? The Institution Liberalism (Thought It) Left Behind,” *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 387–410.

<sup>19</sup> Will H. Moore and David R. Davis, “Transnational Ethnic Ties and Foreign Policy,” in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, eds. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 89–103; Stephen M. Saideman, *The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy and International Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Idean Salehyan, *Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Idean Salehyan, Kristian S. Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, “Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups,” *International Organization* 65, no. 4 (2011): 709–44.

<sup>20</sup> Alberto Alesina and Enrico Spolaore, *The Size of Nations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).



The inability of the government to commit credibly to an autonomy agreement with indigenes in the face of shifting power can result in war.<sup>21</sup> The solution, if you will, that might draw peripheries into the national political community is for the distant metropole to commit to an informal or formal constitution that protects indigenes over the long term. None of the forms of rule considered previously nor the strategies of statebuilding advocated by the international community in recent decades are likely to achieve this result.

Take settler colonialism first, as it is the subject of this review. To the extent settler colonialism “works,” that is, migrants from a majority group move into and dominate the periphery so as to attach the region more firmly to the national-state, the indigenous community is not only displaced and exploited in the moment but is economically and politically undermined for the future. The indigenes are not credibly protected against future exploitation but, at the extreme, are eliminated in a genocidal war carried out by the settlers or the state. Sons-of-the-soil conflicts are not inevitable—indigenes might recognize their plight and simply flee further into the periphery—but fear of the future can drive groups to greater resistance in the present.<sup>22</sup> Direct rule and repression have much of the same effect, merely confirming for the indigenes that their interests and any agreement will not be respected by the central government. Indirect rule is usually no better. When an external actor bolsters the political power of an allied group at the center, it strengthens the government against the indigenes, as well. Unless the indigenous group is the ally, as in the case of the Kurds in Iraq under U.S. indirect rule, the now stronger central government can more easily impose its will on the indigenes. Anything that strengthens the central government typically increases fears of distant minorities about their future.

Since the end of the Cold War, the international community has pursued a liberal statebuilding strategy emphasizing democracy and minority inclusion to address just such fears of exploitation.<sup>23</sup> This is sensible but insufficient. Even when successful, no present majority, no matter how democratic and inclusive, can bind a future majority. Supreme courts might be charged with overseeing minority rights, but as recent events in Israel and even the United States suggest, courts can be politicized and minority rights threatened. Especially in weakly consolidated democracies, common in what we consider fragile or failed states, a democratic government may be replaced by a different government in the future. Liberal models of statebuilding work only when all parties expect democracy to persist. In fragile polities, however, decades and even centuries of political struggle mean expectations of future stability are difficult to form and sustain. Many hope that external actors can enforce a peace settlement and defend new institutions over the long term so that a new equilibrium can emerge. There is evidence that following civil wars in which the parties themselves have reached an agreement, external guarantors can lend credibility and reduce the likelihood of renewed

<sup>21</sup> James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379–414; Robert Powell, “War as a Commitment Problem,” *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 169–203.

<sup>22</sup> David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, “Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (1996): 41–75.

<sup>23</sup> Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (New York: Routledge, 2009); David A. Lake, “The Practice and Theory of U.S. Statebuilding,” *Journal and Intervention and Statebuilding* 4, no. 3 (2010): 257–84.

fighting.<sup>24</sup> This does not appear to hold, however, or at least has not been investigated across cases where the parties have not reached a settlement.<sup>25</sup> In the end, the question hinges on the willingness of an external power to invest in the peace over the long run.

Statebuilding is hard. Integrating all parts of a national territory is difficult. To the extent that settler colonialism is ever a solution, it works by defeating and displacing the indigenes. Settling the American West at the expense of Native Americans, or Indonesia in New Guinea, and China in Xinjiang are hardly examples we should seek to emulate. The search for effective statebuilding strategies continues. Political topographies are likely to vary long into the future. We might well question whether this is a bad thing.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Alia M. Matanock, *Electing Peace: From Civil Conflict to Political Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Melissa M. Lee, "International Statebuilding and the Domestic Politics of State Development," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 261–81; Kelly Matush and David A. Lake, "Militarized Statebuilding Interventions and the Survival of Fragile States," *Journal of Peace Research* (forthcoming).