



## Book review: *Extralegal groups in post-conflict Liberia: How trade makes the state*

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Christine Cheng's *Extralegal groups in post-conflict Liberia: how trade makes the state* is an ambitious undertaking that seeks to connect the emergence of order in post-conflict settings to one of the biggest issues of international relations: the nature of state-building in the 21st century. She argues that the need to establish a stable commercial environment leads profit-motivated groups, backed by their coercive capacities gained in the preceding conflict, to provide the essential governance mechanisms of contract enforcement and dispute resolution. In this way, Cheng presents a bold re-iteration of Charles Tilly's fundamental axiom regarding the emergence of the Western Weberian state (Tilly, 1975), as she concludes, 'it is trade, rather than war, that drives contemporary statebuilding' (Cheng, 2018, p. 17). This simple yet powerful assertion is grounded in a fine-grained analysis of the micro-processes that motivate individual actors in a post-conflict environment, as well as the historically rooted paths and global economic structures, such as the relative accessibility to international commodity markets, that organically promote the emergence of nascent governance groups out of the ashes of destructive conflict.

The first half of this review will outline the conceptual scaffolding around which she builds this argument, suggesting that it provides a fresh toolbox for understanding a field of inquiry, i.e. post-conflict reconstruction, that is in severe need of re-invigoration. It will then move to addressing areas that could benefit from a more nuanced investigation, and an appraisal of how these lessons can be applied in reconstruction projects that take non-state actors more seriously.

By focusing her research design on post-conflict Liberia, she examines a country that, by the end of a tumultuous period of nearly two decades of civil conflict, presented an acute deficit of formal governance. As such, 21st-century Liberia approximated, as much as possible, Hobbes and Locke's 'state of nature' that Cheng also takes as a first principle for analysing the emergence of social and political order. For Cheng, however, this state of nature is not an ahistorical *tabula rasa*, but rather an environment fundamentally informed by its immediate conflict past, as well as a longer history of economic exploitation and deep distrust of state institutions. In order to illustrate these legacies, she presents the concept of 'conflict capital' that describes the fresh capacities of certain groups to use or threaten violence to coerce populations into accepting their role as arbiters of disputes and enforcers of local order (p. 60). In addition, such capital allows for the efficient remobilisation of wartime social and smuggling networks to exploit natural resources that lay beyond the ability of the state – weakened by years of war and popular distrust – to regulate.

She designates these groups as 'extralegal' in order to distinguish them from their 'conceptual cousins': warlords, rebels, big men and mafias (pp. 52–53). This is done to emphasise their focus on profit over politics, as well as to begin the analysis 'with a blank slate, without assumptions or preconceived notions about who these people are, what they do, and whether or not we approve of their behavior' (p. 9). While some may consider this violation of Sartori's injunction against 'parochial' or redundant conceptual definitions (Sartori, 1991), she presents a strong case as to why fresh terminology is needed to overcome decades of myopic thinking and policymaking. Indeed, a common theme throughout the book is Cheng's sincere desire to re-orient international policy and scholarly communities away from what she perceives as antiquated and parochial conceptions



of state-building, particularly concerning who the legitimate and productive participants in the process are, and towards a more grounded understanding of where true political power actually lies. Following a particularly illuminating field visit to the Butaw Oil Palm Company plantation (BOPC) in 2005, a thriving diamond mine supporting a vibrant social and economic life far from the reaches of the Liberian state, Cheng notes, 'I came to re-evaluate my own ideas of what constituted "statebuilding" and indeed, to question whether key governance functions had to be performed by the state at all' (p. 6).

In order to explore how these groups – and the governance functions they provide – emerge and develop, Cheng presents a three-stage model based on the rational choices made by actors in the precarious post-conflict environment. The first stage focuses on the emergence of extralegal groups as a response to a local demand for third party conflict resolution and contract enforcement. With their fresh capacities to organise and exert violence (i.e. conflict capital), ex-combatant groups often emerge to provide these functions and, hence, form the kernel of the extralegal groups that ultimately perform the basic governance functions required to create and sustain markets. Following their emergence as the pre-eminent enforcers of order, extralegal groups then develop and entrench themselves by taxing a portion of the extraction activity in a way that develops their organisational capacities and aligns their interests with the local social base. The specific structures this taxation regime assumes depend on the nature of the economic activity in question, as well as the guiding 'time horizon' that limits how long the groups anticipate controlling the area (p. 61). For example, Cheng demonstrates how the BOPC Group, the extralegal group that developed to control a substantial diamond mine in southeast Liberia, taxed access to mining sites rather than the mined resources themselves due to the ease with which diamonds could be clandestinely smuggled from the area. In the case of other sectors, however, namely timber and rubber, resources are taxed and directed upwards through a more complex hierarchical structure that entails multiple steps of value exchange and organisational control.

Despite these apparent organisational differences, the essential similarity, Cheng maintains, is that these sectors are characterised by relatively low entry barriers and capital requirements: the requisite traits of a resource base that renders it fertile for extralegal governance. Here, she channels Ross, LeBillon and others' contention that it is not only access to resources, but the *types* of resources that inform how non-state actors attain control and are able to channel revenues towards their goals (Ross, 2004; LeBillon, 2001).

While this appeared to open a path for exploring differences between extralegal groups, it was an avenue Cheng did not take, at least in any robust way. Granted, she acknowledges that a high degree of variation exists between the organisation and behaviour of different extralegal groups, but she largely attributes this to the strength (or lack thereof) of social ties between the groups and the local population. Drawing on social psychology literature, she emphasises the importance of in-group/out-group thinking in determining the levels of exploitation and/or legitimacy that characterise the groups' relations with the surrounding community. For example, in speaking of the pre-eminent extralegal group managing Liberia's illicit timber industry, she notes:

General Kofi, the de facto leader of the Nezoun Group, maintained deep local ties to his area, was of the same ethnicity (Bassa) as local residents, and was enmeshed in informal local authority structures [...] over time, as peace took hold, Kofi responded to community activism, and a decline in his own legitimacy. It took time, but the in-group restraint mechanism later came into full effect (p. 257).

The extent, however, to which material elements, or the structural necessities of a particular political economic system, restrain extralegal groups in their efforts to exert control both over



local populations and within the organisation would warrant further exploration. Aside from merely granting a comparative advantage vis-a-vis the state, an interesting avenue of further research would explore how the varying entry and capital requirements across economic industries create extralegal groups with different structural and behavioural traits. For example, the tax regime of the timber trade was relatively centralised on the person of General Kofi, whom Cheng describes as 'the local Big Man' (p. 239). While one may view this centralised revenue stream as a function of Kofi's political power, flipping the equation around (namely, how this low-value, high-bulk resource facilitates the concentrations of political power due to its relatively high capital requirements and lower incentives to evade per unit taxation) would shed light on why various extralegal groups develop different organisational traits.

Indeed, as Cheng notes, understanding the different developmental paths of extralegal groups is crucial in determining how they should be viewed and dealt with by states and the international community alike. Following the development of taxation regimes and the organisational capacity to maintain economic and political arrangements, extralegal groups then enter what Cheng describes as the entrenchment phase. This is the point at which an extralegal group and the state are likely to come into their most intimate contact, as the former attempts to secure its long-term position via the corruption of local and national officials. Here, the central state faces a choice of whether to confront, co-opt or ignore the group, a choice based on the perceived balance of power between itself and the group.

While determining the feasibility of a successful confrontation or co-option will be significantly rooted in the groups' social base, how this social base interacts with, and is largely built upon, supportive material structures is equally vital to determining the nature of the glue that holds these groups together and, thus, their overall organisational strength. For example, while a group may maintain minimal social ties to an area, they may disperse resources in a way that grants them much more local support and legitimacy than simply analysing ethnic compositions would predict. In turn, if a nascent group were to oversee or inaugurate a significantly novel or dramatic economic transformation, we could then expect the emergence of new social groups whose allegiances to pre-existing hierarchies and group narratives would quickly fade in favour of the new socio-economic order. There is perhaps no other context like the conflict environment, where we witness such a flux in livelihoods and socio-economic systems. If we were to take Cheng's extralegal groups as an institutional manifestation of these changing orders, a more robust comparative analysis could reveal the mechanisms of social and economic rebalancing that takes place across various environments. While Cheng's approach, deeply rooted in historical institutionalism, tends to view these groups as re-iterations of the old, appreciating the destructive capacity of civil war to obliterate old orders could answer to a bolder question as to how they represent the new, either in the limited context of a particular country's post-conflict rebuilding process, or the state of contemporary conflict in general.

Cheng concludes her book with a bold attack on what she calls the 'The Myth of the "Good" State' and 'State as Saviour', which subsequently leads to a discussion of how extralegal groups are often better placed to fulfil vital governance mechanisms than impotent or abusive states in the Global South (p. 260). This stubborn state-centric approach to post-conflict reconstruction, she argues, is rooted in the Western conception of the necessary and benevolent state, itself rooted in Hobbesian/Lockean political philosophy, as well as the experiences of policymakers and scholars with their own liberal democratic states in the West. While this cultural and intellectual zeitgeist certainly matters in accounting for the hegemony of Western state-centric approaches, one would also need to unpack the existing international aid and development regimes that privilege the institutional form of the state. Aside from the philosophical biases of Western actors, the preference



for dealing solely with states, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, arguably has more to do with the way these states have developed to serve as “gatekeepers” between their domestic societies and international institutions. Until it becomes more efficient and secure to deal with more locally based groups than the state, such as extralegal groups, international actors will likely continue to centre their attention on national capitals as the only feasible channel for imbuing their preferences into the reconstruction process.

Of course, encouraging the international community to hold back on such interventionist approaches and allow for societies to regenerate organically is undoubtedly a necessary condition for sustainable reconstruction, an argument Cheng implicitly makes; however, the persistence of the particular form of international involvement that Cheng criticises has as much to do with the very real economic and political incentives that animate the global system as any lack of political philosophical imagination. Nonetheless, as we advance into an age of rapid global change, it is perhaps the ideal time to ask bold questions about the future role of states, both locally and globally.

Hence, Christine Cheng’s ground level analysis of extralegal groups in Liberia’s post-war order is an admirable and helpful contribution to our understanding of how political power emerges and solidifies out of a period of fundamental and violent change. By objectively considering the functions and roles, both good and bad, played by extralegal groups, she places the discussion of non-state groups on a new plane that is devoid of antiquated conceptual baggage. This potentially opens up a new era of research into the nature of governance that is rooted in the realities of the 21st century. Thus, this book is highly recommended to scholars and policymakers interested in grappling with the fuzzy lines between state/non-state, licit/illicit, political/economic, and even war and peace. Rather than considering these fault lines as hermetically sealed boundaries closing off our current approaches to understanding politics, Cheng effectively demonstrates how powerful forces in fact emerge from them. Indeed, I would argue the book’s greatest strength lies in its direct focus on these grey areas often characterised by conceptual and empirical fuzziness. In turn, the limitations discussed above are not weaknesses per se, but openings for future research, such as more robust comparative analyses and considerations of how international political economic systems can engage more effectively with locally embedded political actors. Such future research will certainly be heavily indebted to Cheng’s work on extralegal groups in post-conflict Liberia.

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