



Review Forum

The Improvised State: Sovereignty, Performance and Agency in Dayton Bosnia, Alex Jeffrey, in: RGS-IBG Book Series.[☆]
Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford (2012).
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Introduction

Neil M. Coe

Over the past fifteen years Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has served as a laboratory of techniques to re-establish state sovereignty and foster democratic institutions. The post-conflict intervention in BiH has justifiably received detailed attention from political theorists and scholars of international relations who have explored the limitations to the institutions and policies of international intervention. Alex Jeffrey's incisive and provocative book, however, starts from a different premise. Rather than examining institutions or charting limitations, it argues for a focus on the enactment of state sovereignty in BiH as it has been practised by a range of actors located both within and beyond the borders of the Bosnian state. In focussing on the state as a process, the book argues that Bosnian sovereignty is best understood as a series of *improvisations* that have attempted to produce and reproduce a stable and unified state. In this way this book advances state theory through

illuminating the fragile and contingent nature of sovereignty in contemporary BiH and its grounding in the everyday lives of the Bosnian people.

Using improvisation as a means of understanding the social character of political and cultural practice has a long scholarly lineage, from structural anthropology in the 1960s through to its more recent reworking in post-structural political theory. This book builds upon this work to illustrate the symbolic and material elements of the improvisation metaphor: it is a term that simultaneously evokes *performance* and *resourcefulness*. In terms of the former, improvisation highlights the situated and embodied ways in which international agencies have attempted to perform a coherent and stable Bosnian state: from re-naming streets to inventing traditions; from implementing new legal frameworks to re-organizing state services. In terms of the latter, improvisation draws attention to the enrolment of social, cultural and economic resources in conveying and resisting nascent state processes in BiH. Such an argument draws attention to the legacy of Yugoslav pasts and the promise of European futures in validating various styles of intervention, and to the role of non-state agents in subverting and appropriating new state practices in order to convey alternative ideas of the state.

The Improvised State therefore provides a grounded and theoretically sophisticated account of the nature and outcomes of Bosnian state practices in the time since the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. The utility of this approach, however, is not simply specific to the Bosnian case, but rather to provide a framework for understanding attempts to build state capacity in other settings at other times. Improvisation offers a means through which the production, reception and resistance to evolving state practices may be observed and theorized. It draws into sharp focus the limits of international intervention, the anti-democratic mechanisms such processes can put in place, and the significant scope for resistance to emergent state effects.

[☆] The Royal Geographical Society with Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) Book Series is published by Wiley-Blackwell. The Series, launched in 2000, publishes monographs at the cutting edge of geographical scholarship and contains nearly 40 titles. It is developing a strong reputation in the area of political geography. In addition to Alex Jeffrey's volume, books already published in this field include *People-States-Territories: The Political Geographies of British State Transformation* by Rhys Jones (2007) and *State, Science and the Skies: Governmentalities of the British Atmosphere* by Mark Whitehead (2009). 2014 will see the publication of Merje Kuus' *Geopolitics and Expertise: Knowledge and Authority in European Diplomacy*. Three other books in this area are under contract and should appear over the next two years: *Peopling Immigration Control: Geographies of Governing and Activism in the British Asylum System* (Nick Gill), *Rehearsing the State: The Political Practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile* (Fiona McConnell) and *Everyday Peace? Politics, Citizenship and Muslim Lives in India* (Philippa Williams).

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Improvising Balkanism: a theory of politics and a politics of theory

Jason Dittmer

Alex Jeffrey's *The Improvised State* is a thought-provoking contribution to state theory that builds on recent work in political geography to highlight the importance of spatial practices to the production of state effects. It is important not only for its theoretical contribution but also for the geographical sensibility it brings to those interested in such questions. The book is careful, based on extensive fieldwork, and yet also refreshingly punchy and brisk. Rife with ethnographic observations, *The Improvised State* moves from contests over the specific site of Brčko to national processes of democratization and transitional justice to EU accession politics, somehow managing to sweep along all these topics without any of them feeling underdone. While I am no expert in Bosnian politics, I found it quite convincing. Having said that, I have some concern over the politics of how the theoretical argument is substantiated in the case study. In what remains of this essay, I will first briefly trace the theoretical contribution of the book before articulating the somewhat problematic fusion of this theory to the site of post-Dayton BiH.

A theory of politics

Jeffrey draws on work in political geography and elsewhere emphasizing the state as an entity continually performed into existence. By focussing on the state effects of practices, he redirects our attention from the macro scale of institutions and legal sovereignty to the micro-scale practices enacting the state. This perspective has become increasingly popular over the past decade or so, but Jeffrey provides an injection of freshness through his turn to Bourdieu and the concept of improvisation. Adopting a relational approach in which the seeming permanence of the state and the ephemerality of improvisation enable one another, Jeffrey sees the state as an ongoing process of *bricolage* in which a range of actors pull from available resources to legitimate their various state projects. Crucially, he also highlights the methodological importance of particular state projects' messy and contradictory specificities in comparison to the abstractions of state theory:

The key contribution of improvisation is the attempt to disperse state theory through a range of settings, relationships, and dispositions. While the implications of grand historical shifts in [BiH] are clear [...], the lens of improvisation seeks to examine how different interpretations of history and geography are performed in the present, and in doing so to advocate different ideas of the present and future state. This fragments state theory, rather than providing the integrative framework of either the strategic-relational approach or structuration theory. What is left is a sense of the limits to pure theoretical reflection in the absence of empirical engagement and experience. (p. 40)

This fragmentation – both spatial and temporal – calls our attention to actors normally not considered within state theory, but who are crucial to Jeffrey's formulation. He introduces us to NGO grant writers, international administrators, graffiti artists, and others who promote particular visions of BiH. This exciting formulation of the state – as always multiple and tenuous, contested and contextual – is clearly evidenced in his account of post-Dayton BiH, with international administrators struggling to gain legitimacy and various ethnic organizations refusing participation in order to delegitimise (for instance) Brčko's Western administrators. What plays out through the book is an ongoing struggle to establish authority and legitimacy.

In short, I find Jeffrey's argument compelling. And he is clear that, while affirming the importance of context in specific state projects, his argument in *The Improvised State* is about improvised states, plural. While the improvisations are necessarily diverse, all states are improvisations of some kind. In his concluding chapter, for instance, he points to practices of wall-building on the borders of seemingly 'stable' states like the USA as a symbol of the need to constantly work at the illusion of coherence even in the heart of the international system. However, this point is not particularly born out in the empirical elements of the book, centred as they are on a single state.

A politics of theory

I am reminded of how, in the wake of the Cold War, authors from the post-Soviet bloc and the Global South contested both post-structural criticisms of the nation-state as a social construction, and liberal efforts to render sovereignty contingent (through doctrines – since we are on the topic – such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P)). Their complaint was that just as independence, sovereignty, and equality were fully achieved, the goalposts were moved just that much further (Evans, 2008). Of course, social constructionist and liberal criticisms of the state/sovereignty applied to all countries equally. But who would invoke R2P against the United States in order to, for instance, end human rights abuses in Guantanamo Bay? Even imagining this ludicrous scenario shreds the fig leaf of equality offered.

Of course, I am not advocating some conspiratorial view of Western social theory, and nor am I remotely implying anything of the sort regarding *The Improvised State*. Rather, I am noting that social theory has a range of political effects that must be taken into account in the way that theory is articulated. In Chapter 3, Jeffrey traces the history of Balkanism as a geopolitical discourse that marks BiH (and other regional countries) as an internal Orient, one that is not only 'an inert space within southeast Europe that is a site of primordial deviance' but also one that 'has a capacity to draw in others from outside' (p. 63). It is nevertheless possible to see Jeffrey's account of the improvised Bosnian state as having Balkanist effects, if not Balkanist intentions. The rich, ethnographic description of the processes serving to produce state effects tacitly undermine BiH's claim to equality with the more effective states such as the United Kingdom or Germany who intervened in Bosnian politics and whose coherence is taken for granted.

Again, Jeffrey's theoretical discussion makes it clear that this is not his intention. But close attention to Chapter 7, which is about processes of Europeanization occurring in BiH, indicates some of the hazards that are nonetheless present. This chapter has two sections, the first of which shows how the EU dangled eventual accession to motivate Bosnian leaders to implement the Dayton Accords, while the second section shows how Bosnian Serb leaders have improvised with 'European' discourse in order to produce their own state visions. In both sections the EU is portrayed as a stable source of power, either intervening in Bosnian politics or serving as a resource from which others can draw in their efforts to produce particular state effects. However, it is equally possible to see the EU at the time of the Bosnian War as a diverse set of actors frantically trying to establish their own state effects, improvising around events in BiH and grasping desperately towards a coherent foreign policy (Dover, 2005). Indeed, both Bosnian and European leaders were reacting to events and one another in parallel efforts to establish legitimacy, authority, and other state effects. Both 'states' were becoming together.

Going forward

Earlier I mentioned that Jeffrey's theoretical project is about improvised states, in the plural. The problem here is that his

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