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Failed states, false creations : prologue of a new imperial theme.

> *'Is this a dagger which I see before me,*
> *The handle toward my hand ? Come, let me clutch thee.*
> *I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.*
> *Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible*
> *To feeling as to sight ? or art thou but*
> *A dagger of the mind, a false creation,*
> *Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain ?*[1]

The main argument that I want to set out here is that the 'failed state' is, to quote an out of time, out of place Macbeth, "a dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain." Out of the apparent turmoil of the end of the Cold War came the craven-crafted, instrumentally-derived idea captured by the umbrella term of the 'failed state.' Since the end of the Cold War on the one hand, 'failed states' have been identified and been made the new source of instability, anarchy, reaction, human rights abuse, haven for terrorists and perpetrator of terrorism, home to AIDS/HIV, sex trafficking, religious fundamentalisms and extremisms and any other number of human woes; on the other hand 'failed states' are also deemed to be the likely consequence of those societies which do not heed or enact the good governance strictures of procedural democracy, negative human rights, capitalism, and even climate change remediation. This is an extraordinarily heavy load for such a young and immature concept to carry. With similar scepticism, contrary to the fashion for asserting that globalisation is the explanans (or as the mood takes, the explanadum) for all social phenomena, it is worthwhile examining how the 'failed state' is largely the novel manufacture of a renewed imperial theme.

From the classical conceptual lexicon of politics it is difficult to recall any other political concept which has acquired such an all-encompassing fatal vision. And yet this now familiar, almost vernacular, concept so sensible to feeling and sight is, I shall argue, a false creation, a veritable dagger of the mind. Whilst Shakespeare's tragedy speaks to many a condition of human sociation, and whilst cognisant of the problems of historicity, I here use Shakespeare's play not as a scaffold or structure for the talk (still less as a literal analogue of 'failed states') so much as a provocation and register of criticism. Instead, throughout this presentation the common concern is the tragedy of order, change and succession over which the imperial theme is

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[1]   *Macbeth* Arden Shakespeare, London. 2005. Act 2 Scene 1

governor.

The interest of all social sciences in explanations of social order and social change illuminate the potential analytical significance of the 'failed state', whilst the instrumental use of the 'failed state' in public policy is of particular concern to International Relations and cognate disciplines and, broadly speaking, to Development Studies and allied enquiries. Within this general interest in the problematic of social order and social change remain the perennial questions as to how change comes about : how one defines, distinguishes and explains changes within an order from changes between one order and its successor; how one identifies the basic constituents of an order; from whence does instability within an order arise; why do some instabilities precipitate radical transformations whilst other instabilities tend towards gradual changes; and other questions of metamorphosis, adaptation, transformation, rupture, degeneration and resurgence especially in and between world orders.

How do we explain substantial changes in world order, of a sometime dramatic and radical turn, but for which the old and customary explanatory and descriptive language seems lost for words ? How should those of us who are moved by a materialist, historical and critical account of human society explain these sometime momentous transformations in world order ? From whence do promising new sets of illuminating and revealing ideas about the organisation of the world arise ? If the critical and progressive convictions of the past now seem inadequate to explain the radical transformation of world social order and, still worse, the historically progressive path which such convictions had helped navigate seems to have led to a blind alley then must we not start again, or at least switch to a normative, that is to say, a moral analysis of world order ? Whilst there are compelling reasons why a materialist, historical and critical analysis should avoid and reject such a temptation, part of the foregoing account of 'failed states' is partly driven by an attempt to explain how a thoroughly moralised analytics came to depose self-consciously historical and scientific modes of world order analysis. The concept of the 'failed state' is, I shall argue, simultaneously both the product of an aggressive and resurgent imperial theme and the apogee of anti-historical and anti-scientific despair.

This *fin de siecle* moral analysis of world order which has swept the world, and which has proselytised most successfully amongst an erstwhile Left, has been synthesised in the idea of the 'failed state.' The quotation marks of scepticism around 'failed states' that I use in this text (but feel too embarrassed to signal in this room

with the correctly deployed wiggly fingers) need be as pervasive as they are obligatory in this work. Following the end of history, the victory of capitalism and the collapse of an equally insufferable 'alternative', the crisis-fuelled explanation for the continuing woes of the world have been attributed to a newly-found evil, the 'failed state.' Indeed the 'failed state' is not just a new ideology of the state so much as an old theology of human kind – fallen, expelled, sinful, beyond redemption and the fate of all those who stray from the narrow path. The underlying contention of this book is that the story of 'failed states' has assumed the character of a morality tale for world development and in turn has become the latest project of world ordering. Far from the 'failed state' being a real and concrete historical novelty and the product of a re-newed process of world ordering – in other words of an essential re-configuration of social relations and social power – the core argument and demonstration that I ulitmately wish to elaborate (but which I can only sketch at the moment) is that the 'failed state' was an ideological artifice manufactured to explain, and later to legitimise, a new imperial order. More than this, though, the ideology of the 'failed state' has returned to terrify the very imperial furnace from which it was forged. The 'failed state' is, to use Macbeth's choice phrase, "a dagger of the mind." And lest we doubt the distorting and polluting power of ideas we should take full lesson from that usurper's bloody instruction, "which, being taught, return to plague th'inventor."[2]

Amongst the numerous debates and discussions accounting for the transformation of international order post-1989, the argument which asserts that it was the inherent strength and adaptability of liberalism or capitalism has been the most prominent. Certainly in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the former Soviet bloc and in writings since that time, few have suggested that the collapse and transformation of the old order was due to the prevalence of so-called 'failed states'. On the contrary, the stability and endurance of the Cold War order was attributed largely to the strength, structural as well as at individual 'unit' level, and capacity of the major blocs. Nevertheless from the early 1990s the notion of international or global order being fundamentally shaped by the proliferation of 'failed' or 'failing states' became commonplace not only amongst policymakers and politicians, but also among academic studies. It is the rather sudden appearance, or rather manufacture, of a new, mercurial and paradoxical concept of the 'failed state' that I'm addressing. Furthermore, though, whilst the intellectual provenance of 'failed states'

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[2]   *Macbeth* Arden Shakespeare, London. 2005. Act 1: Scene 7

may be of curiosity to the historian of ideas, it is to the historical and concrete consequences of the 'failed state' concept that is the primary concern.

Let me say something very briefly about my theoretical approach. Whilst sympathetic to some examples of Foucauldian discourse analysis the foregoing critique of 'failed states' aims instead to elaborate a historical and materialist analysis of the ideology of 'failed states.' In this regard ideology, rather than discourse, is the appropriate concept with which to attempt to explain the concrete articulation of social power in the late twentieth century global order. To that end, a reminder of the marxist concept of ideology and the significance of its difference with the now more popular post-structuralist notions of discourse provides the underlabouring[3] required for a materialist critique of 'failed states'. In essence a Marxist notion of ideology insist on the importance of interests, that these interests are identifiable i.e, are knowable, that ideology is an expression or an articulation of those interests, but which despite inconsistencies and contradictions nevertheless presents a coherent picture of the world. Further, to use the highly stylised short hand, following Marx I concur with the basic proposition that the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class and that ideology is not easily deployable in a highly instrumentalised fashion. (Whilst Marxism and critical realism are not equivalent, the latter is prompted by and shares some significant claims on materialism, philosophical realism and method with the former, and in these ways informs this study throughout).

Having prepared the necessary foundations by underlabouring the concept of ideology, one can turn to the compelling empirical question which opens the present study of how the shocking and unexpected collapse of the Soviet bloc is to be explained ? Indeed was the end of the Soviet bloc and 'actually existing socialism' to be accounted for by the idea of 'collapse', either resulting from internal weaknesses or from the application of unsustainable external pressures ? Either way, historians and social scientists from across the political spectrum have tended to agree that the history of world order can be divided between a pre- and a post- 1989 world.

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[3]   The notion of conceptual or theoretical 'underlabouring' draws from the critical realist tradition associated with, amongst others, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Margaret Archer and Andrew Sayer. Critical realism is a claim for knowledge that is objective, fallible, transphenomenal and counter-phenomenal. Furthermore that it is 'depth realism', specifically that there are three domains of the real, the actual and the empirical. Additionally, both nature and explanation is stratified. Rather than present ones theoretical approach in detail or give full explanations of the causal mechanisms at work in the social world at every twist and turn or before engaging in the substantive analysis, one can first undertake a certain amount of theoretical and methodological 'underlabouring' upon which the rest of the enquiry will be built.

The now orthodox and conventional explanations for the rapid and apparently decisive over-turning of world order in the post 1989 period can be grouped into six broad sets together with permutations of these sets. First is what we can call the 'war economy' or 'arms racing' thesis, namely that Reagan's US-led West defeated the Soviet bloc through a massive expansion of the arms economy against which the Soviet Union in particular could not, ultimately, compete. Second is the broader argument of the victory-of-the-inherent-superiority-of capitalism/liberalism. Here the main claim is that it was simply a question of time before the power of liberalism – especially in the economy and in the ideological realm of freedom – would demonstrate its own superiority and the sheer inability of 'actually existing socialism' to keep pace. Third, a refined version of this thesis was expressed most famously by Francis Fukuyama in his 'end of history' thesis, to which we shall return. Fourth, the transformation of world order was explained as being the result of effective politicking principally of the West, but also of a judicious and compassionate Russian, Mikael Gorbachev and the efforts of *perestroika*. Fifth, others argued that the new age was ushered in through a resurgence of popular democratic forces whose historical moment had arrived. This is a view best exemplified with reference to the Polish Solidarity movement or the velvet revolution of Vaclav Havel. Sixth, and again related, was the broader view that the power of a revitalised global civil society had articulated the unstoppable demand for political and social transformation.

It has to be remarked, already, that these dominant explanations for world order transformation all focus on accounts whose core historical subjects are European on the one hand or whose historical life is regulated by Washington or Moscow on the other hand. Certainly the 'people without history' remain firmly outside history in these explanations. The curiosity of this emphasis becomes still more interesting when contrasted with the accounts of post-Cold War world ordering in which the core historical subjects are the newly-identified 'failed states' which are exclusively non-European and composed of the 'people without history'. Thus, for example, nearly all lists and cataloguing of 'failed states' begin - and some even begin and end – with Somalia and Afghanistan. Where a few short years earlier Berlin, Paris, Leningrad or New York were the crucibles of world history, by the early 1990s world order was, we were led to believe, being forged in Mogadishu and Kabul.

But the 1990s, even from the earliest days, were witness not just to the collapse of the Soviet bloc, but the new-found horrors of other sources of instability, disorder and the rejection of the new liberal peace. From whence did this new

anarchy arise ? If the communist bogey-man was now dead, grace of theses 1 to 6 above, why were the self-evident liberal virtues not enthusiastically embraced and honoured ? It is in this context – at the historical juncture of the demise of an old order and the celebration of a new world – that a new concept or category of political thought arose which had not been present **at all** during the era of East-West rivalry, namely the 'failed state.'

The introduction of a concept entirely new to the lexicon of historical and social sciences is, to introduce matters bluntly, either a consequence of genuine revolutionary paradigm change or emotional spasms consequent of "heat-oppressed brains." The concept of the 'failed state' was magically discovered or falsely created at a particular historical moment, at a decisive historical conjuncture, to fill a newly-found explanatory vacuum and, invented by the instrument-makers of interested policy institutes and politicians.

Wherein does the appeal of 'failed states' lie ?

> *"and often times, to win us to our harm,*
> *the instruments of darkness tell us truths."[4]*

There is an intuitive appeal to the notion of 'failed states'. It offers itself as an immediately understandable and convenient shorthand for a range of ills and woes which have beset the state in a period of globalisation. To use the phrase 'failed state' is to trigger a mental image of disorder, even of anarchy, of incapacity, of degeneration and of corruption. At any rate the notion of 'failed state' serves as a sufficiently vague, sufficiently indeterminate, sufficiently distant but suitably omnipresent to serve as a convenient post-ideological scapegoat.

For any concept or conceptual category to flourish it must have, it seems to me, some degree of intuitive or analytical persuasiveness or adequacy, even if ultimately we were to conclude that it is fundamentally mistaken or significantly inadequate. This is the case with the concept of the 'failed state'. Nevertheless, so firmly internalised has the intuitive notion of 'failed states' become that it may seem a perverse and contrarian argument to make that the 'failed state' is a gross

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[4]   *Macbeth* Arden Shakespeare, London. 2005. Act 1, Scene 3

exaggeration, let alone that it is a fundamentally misleading and obscuring notion. However I want to outline the ground upon which precisely such a refusal of the 'failed state' label is to be built. In this regard we can begin to examine what kind of historical purchase or resonance is conferred upon 'failed states.'

And so I proceed as if the proliferation of reports of 'failed states' which littered the post-Cold War period, and which became still more prolific in the aftermath of the neo-conservative total war on the world from 2001, spoke of certain truths. Taking reports of the increased incidence of state failure, state collapse and state fragility at face value i.e, accepting the popular currency of 'failed states' (and discounting any dark instrumentality), we can seek to map out the range, extent and composition of 'failed states' across the turn of the century.

To this end we can firstly try to simply report the frequently cited examples of 'failed states' such that we can seek to catalogue or record 'failed states'. Secondly we can begin to distil the essential purported characteristics of those listed as 'failed states'. Thus, for example, the 'failed state' is a byword for Somalia; Somalia is a byword for 'failed states'. They are synonymous. In this fashion, and prior to any criticism, the list of *usual suspects*[5] of 'failed states' can be compiled. In undertaking this second report, some of the more frequently referred examples of 'failed states' can be summarised (see handout) in order that one can test whether the concept of 'failed states' has any ontological or methodological standing. That is to say, does a brief comparative survey of 'failed states' provide promising grounds for confirming some reliable ontological or methodological foundation for the concept of 'failed state'. I offer a brief indicative argument that such foundations cannot and have not

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[5]   Mischievously and for diversionary purpose, Captain Renault the police inspector in *Casablanca*, reports that 'Since [he] realizes the importance of the case, [he] has ordered his men to round up twice the usual number of suspects'. We are complicit with Renault in being able to distinguish the appearance of investigation from the substance of tracking down Major Strasser's killer.

been established.

However, prior to engaging with these two reports, I should really have introduced a brief discussion of the rich range of synonyms for 'failed states'. The 'failed states' discourse has been highly productive, indeed highly imaginative, in its descriptive or adjectival vocabulary. It is probably most revealing that such an empty concept of the state has such a rich and colourful set of modifiers. Thus - without fully rehearsing the ever-growing list and merely hinting at its richness – one is offered the participial adjectives 'failed', 'failing', 'fragile', 'collapsed', 'collapsing', and even one Macbeth would tremble at, 'ghost states'. However as we should know, all that glitters is not gold. There is, I shall argue, little analytical reason for the distinctive vocabulary offered (though there are certainly differentiated niche markets, reflected in each minor variation in descriptive language, to be captured by the inventive academic and wannabe policy consultants).[6]

Ultimately here, I want to ask whether it is possible to identify and isolate a set of criteria which has been used to define and classify so-called 'failed states'. Notwithstanding many disagreements and debates, certain prevalent criteria can indeed be identified. This mapping exercise, supplemented by more detailed reference to the circumstances of the most frequently cited examples of 'failed states' – for example, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Liberia – allows for a more careful and systematic examination to begin. But time forbids. It is not clear, for example, in the orthodox accounts of 'failed states' whether state failure is a cause or a consequence of state character. More importantly, one can begin to show that the descriptive confusion which is prevalent in the discussion of 'failed states' arises because the 'failed state' is not an object of enquiry waiting to be found or discovered

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[6]   A linguistic analysis might prove revealing of the discourse of 'failed states' and its associated confusions and conflations. For example, what difference does the use of 'failed' as a participial adjective or 'failed' as a verb make to the analysis of the state. Unfortunately, such an enquiry is beyond the scope of this particular project.

(unlike, for example, a republican state, a federal state, or even a militarily powerful state). We shall see that it is from the moment that the term 'state' is prefixed or modified with the verb or participial adjective 'failed' (or its many connotations), that any scientific analysis has been abandoned in favour of a political or moral evaluation or judgement. Nevertheless there *seem* to be some obvious examples of failed states and in the spirit of analytical enquiry I'd want to 'test' their histories or origins as well as form and characteristics. And one preliminary result is that the 'failed state' is a western creation albeit, no doubt, unintended. So if one compares US-NATO patronage of neo-colonial states with Soviet patronage, especially in Africa, but also in the Middle East and SE Asia there is, ironically, a clear association between those states that came to be labelled as 'failures' and western patronage. Should we conclude from this that the source and origin of failure is indeed the west ? Should we conclude that it was the West that failed those states ? Or should we abhor the making of such simplistic conclusions ? I think the latter, whilst not forgetting the teasing possibilities of the former.

All this is so that we can conclude, as reliably as possible, by asking (and answering), can a consistent set of classificatory criteria of 'failed states' be, first, identified, and second, applied ? We also need to be cognisant of the tendency by which politicians, policymakers and academic commentators oscillate between deductive and inductive methods of identification of 'failed states' subject to the convenience of an *a priori* position. Simply put, has the concept of 'failed states' been drawn from historical examples or have examples been identified definitionally ?

Although I've only sketched the opening part of a project which forms a book that I've been working on forever, I need to end this presentation which has emphasised the powerful ideological manufacture of a concept with some comments on the emergence of the 'failed states' ideology.

"Say from whence you owe this strange intelligence."[7]

I've argued that over the past couple of decades a distinct ideology has arisen in the articulation of foreign policy by the major western powers, and relatedly among western political scientists, which provides a particular description and purported analysis of conditions of social crisis and that this ideology centres on the notion of the 'failed state'. The notion is now well embedded in the popular consciousness, and has rapidly become integrated into university teaching programmes as well as scholarly and policy-related accounts. Having identified when and in what historical circumstances the concept of 'failed state' emerged, the subsequent investigation needs to show how it emerged and why it took the shape that it did. (I must emphasise that there is no 'necessity' to 'failed states''; there is no functional requirement of 'failed states' in latter day imperialism or globalisation; nor are 'failed states' some ideological trickery, chicanery or false consciousness. This is where I *would* turn to a strict reading of Macbeth : daggers of the mind are no less real).

Most western foreign policy establishments and most development organizations now operate with an explicit presumption of the centrality of the 'failed state' to current international crises. As such, the 'failed state' or its synonyms now form a central category in the lexicon of foreign policy advisors and politicians from the US State Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to the EU, the World Bank, NATO and the OECD. My argument is, of course, that the question of failed states cannot be understood, still less explained, without immediate consideration of the international or global forces which have historically created the form of polity known as the state and which simultaneously produced the language, concepts and ideology of 'state failure.' Trying to locate the reasons for 'state failure'

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[7]   *Macbeth* Arden Shakespeare, London. 2005. Act 1, Scene 3

within those allegedly 'failed states' themselves is at best misleadingly partial but more commonly it is merely an exercise in self-denial and deflection. What is for sure, though, is that the policy institutes do not typically engage in a serious historical analysis. And lest we're tempted to discount the significance of historical thoroughness to policy makers let us remember the reported reactions of Tony Blair to the warnings of Toby Dodge, George Joffe and Charles Tripp.

The notion of 'failed state' has a relatively clear and identifiable history. As such, the provenance and etymology of 'failed states' can be traced and uncovered. Now this is where a simple genealogy is inadequate and where I want to insist on referring to 'the ideology of failed states'. The form and shape of the 'failed state' concept has often been described as a discourse. In contrast to this, as I noted at the outset, we need to recover a marxist notion of ideology which seeks to emphasise how different interests are articulated through, as well as shape, the notion of 'failed states'. (In so doing, the elite policy wonk conception of failed state can be subverted and the significance of a materialist constitution of failed states can be developed). We can see how the application of the 'failed state' label (and various synonyms or quasi-synonyms) grew out of a particular international configuration of the late Cold War and 'end of history'.

We can then take the development and rejection, dissolution or collapse of empires into formally sovereign independent states as the key historical moments from which the notion of 'failed states' came to be constituted. The relationship between imperial polity and sovereign polity can be examined in the context of the Cold War during which period the forms of international governance, the notions of conditionality, and the degree of *de facto* latitude or proximity to superpower interests was regulated. Although the objective conditions of many states during the Cold War were not dissimilar to those found in the post-Cold War period, the policy sciences had identified no 'failed states' during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War allowed for the recasting of these governance requirements and for the discovery or invention

of the 'failed state'.

While its current pervasiveness is fairly recent origin, the substance of the discourse is not new, but simply a new variant of a set of concerns and approaches which emerged in the 1950s. The basic tenor and approach of the discourse can be traced back to the original concerns about political stability and order in 'traditional societies' which arose in Western, especially American, political science and comparative politics in the 1950s-60s, in response to the spectre of independence and potentially revolutionary change in former colonies . This concern with stability, order and the instrumental management of change in 'traditional' societies was the political twin of economic modernisation theories, and both were formulated explicitly in the interests of averting revolutionary change in the Third World. Indeed the very notion of state 'failure' can be traced back to the 1960s behavioural analysis of change in non-European societies.

Current concerns with description, diagnosis, 'early warning' and preventative intervention, strong and weak institutions and institution-building, follow on directly from the 1950s-1970s, and so we can examine the fabrication and geo-politics of 'failed states' including how and when the ideology of 'failed states' emerged, the institutions in which it was produced and by whom it was disseminated, emphasising its specific organic relation to the current global conjuncture.

> *"We still have judgement here : that we but teach*
> *bloody instructions, which, being taught, return*
> *to plague the inventor."[8]*

A handful of authors have rightly identified the 'failed states' concept as arising after the Cold War. The central question is why at that moment ? Here we need to establish the connections between the rise of the concept and the historical conditions which produced such a concept. There are three principal historical referents. First there is the end of the Cold War, signalled by the collapse of state

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[8]   *Macbeth* Arden Shakespeare, London. 2005. Act 1 Scene 7

socialism and the Soviet bloc (curiously and tellingly the collapse of the Soviet Union itself had not been attributed to 'state failure'). Second, there is the announcement of a new world order signalled by the end of the 1990-91 Gulf War. Third , there is the emergence (however mistakenly identified) of a new civilisational struggle in which Islam figures most prominently as the new threat to the western world order. In all these, and other accounts, neither the structural organisation of the world by the 'West' nor the particular policies implemented by Western powers features as a serious explanation of state failure. At best Western policy and organisation is seen as a possible compounding of already extant problems of weakness. Thus the production of the state and the causes of 'failure' are to be found exclusively outside of the West and inside the 'failing state' itself. Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis is the most powerful and most pervasive – yet most ill-founded and ignorant – of those from which the failed states concept has prospered. It is the 'new barbarism' thesis to which most foreign policy establishments have been attracted and which forms the popular imagination circulating in the mass media.

The concept of 'failed states' derived as it is from instrumental not analytical reasoning, is significant for what it allows and not for what it can explain. It is necessarily a permissive concept and not an analytical concept. The 'failed state' has now become central to the neo-imperialist account of world order, its woes and corrections. Take three examples : terrorist haven, humanitarian crisis, and good governance of neo-trusteeships.

The concept of 'failed states' manufactured by the policy wonks went from the policy institutes – where it was created for relatively clear instrumental purposes – to the mass media before being adopted by the academy. No self-respecting academic should touch this defiled concept.