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Book Review

***The State in Burma*. By Robert H. Taylor.** London: C. Hurst & Co., 1987. Glossary, bibliography, index, vii, 395 pp. £27.50 cloth.

As his starting point, the author introduces the reader to one of the current approaches in comparative politics that challenges some of the assumptions of political sociology and those of more orthodox Marxist theories of the state. Writers in this genre of comparative politics argue that the state cannot be explained or analysed as a by-product of socio-cultural factors or of economic and class conditions, because the state, as the central repository of power and decision-making, has the capacity to perpetuate its power and impose its pattern on all other social and economic institutions. The state, so it is argued, must be seen as autonomous and as a casual actor, rather than as a derivative of social, cultural, or economic phenomena. In short, this model constructs a "Leviathan" theory of the state which assumes it is primarily an instrument of coercion and is largely insensitive to popular opinion or demands, regardless of the political rituals that are used to secure legitimacy and public compliance.

From this vantage point, the author proceeds to analyse the evolution of the state in Burma from the traditional pre-colonial kingdoms of the Pagan state, through the colonial state of British rule, the Japanese interregnum, the post-war experiment with transplanted democratic institutions, and, finally, the post-coup state of General Ne Win and his Burma Socialist Programme Party. From the author's account, it would seem that all these regimes were mere stages in the evolution of a continous Burmese state which was perfecting its capacity to rule, to extract resources and to be largely impervious to popular demands, mainly because of its over-arching

concept of the commonwealth based on the requirements of superior authority and the maintenance of stability and order.

The traditional Burman state is depicted as being inherently weak because of its relations with the *Sangha* and the structure of authority in Burman society. The account gives the impression that the Burman state extended to most of present-day Burma with a stable and benign role. No mention is made of the Burmese invasion of the kingdoms of Thailand, Ahom, Mon or Arakan. The hill tribal areas are treated as an integral part of the traditional Burman state, but on the periphery of the state, where control was less effective and less crucial.

For the colonial period, the author adopts Furnivall's model of a "plural society" ruled by a Hobbesian state that imposed "rationalized" bureaucratic order but without community. He plays down ethnic and cultural differences and suggests that ethnicity was created by British policy. The picture is one of an all powerful state manipulating an extremely pliant and compliant society. In the nationalist period, a reversal occurred, with mass assertion against the exactions of the "rationalized" state. The Japanese rule during the war and the civil war period is treated as a period when state hegemony was broken, only to be reasserted in 1962 by the military coup headed by General Ne Win.

The last 80 pages are devoted to an account of the "strong and autonomous" state created by Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Programme Party. An extensive account of official ideology and party structure is presented, with frequent comparisons to Soviet institutions and styles of political organization. While some mention is made of opposition to the regime by the *Sangha* and university students, the book argues that the regime has widespread support. It does so by unifying the population with a coherent ideology utilizing "non-divisible" symbols and by building a monolithic party that permeates all aspects of society, especially the peasantry, that constitute "the only internal group powerful enough to bring down the state . . ." (p. 300). The last two sentences in the book summarize his conclusions. "Most people have contact with the Party and the People's Councils in their daily life, and the local agents of the state who live in the community are recognized and used as intermediaries with the authorities at the middle and top levels of the state. For better or worse, the state is accepted as inevitable and dominates other institutions." (p. 372).

The theoretical perspective used throughout the book tends to reify the state. Too often the theory is not treated as propositional and heuristic, but is assumed as a given and used selectively to present only data that confirms the theory. The confusions and ambiguity of the real world are sacrificed to an elegant model that exaggerates the unity of the state and

its capabilities, while diverting attention from those individuals who hold office and act for the state. Thus, almost no mention is made of Ne Win's style of leadership, his arbitrary and erratic behaviour and his ruthless actions against critics and potential rivals. Differences within an administration are assumed not to exist, and, at least for the Ne Win period, policy pronouncements tend to be treated as reflecting reality. The author's particular criticisms of British colonial policy are matched by the suspension of disbelief when it comes to the post-1962 era. While his scholarship is meticulous, and sections of the book are excellent, the overall account is a fundamental distortion of reality. The subject of this book is extremely timely, but the book is already outdated and many of the theoretical interpretations have been refuted or made irrelevant by recent events.

The author should not be held accountable for events he could not foresee at the time of writing. In a sense, this book reflects the malaise in all scholarship about contemporary political events in Burma. Two and a half decades of restriction on independent social science field research in Burma has forced scholars to rely on government documents and pronouncements. The denial of visas to all but a few favoured foreign scholars and the requirement of government approval for all field research topics means that scholars must avoid any presentations that put the authorities in an unfavourable light or that might generate domestic controversy. This book illustrates how the "strong Burmese state" can influence scholarship but does not explain why that same state has had limited capabilities to deal with the mounting pressures of massive opposition within Burma over the past year.

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