



Reo Matsuzaki. *Statebuilding by Imposition: Resistance and Control in Colonial Taiwan and the Philippines.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-3483-0.

Reviewed by Amanda Hendrix-Komoto (Montana State University)

Published on H-Diplo (May, 2020)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Reo Matsuzaki's *Statebuilding by Imposition* explores the dilemma that statebuilding presents to Western democracies. According to Matsuzaki, democratic nation-states often feel compelled to establish strong, effective states in "ungoverned and undergoverned spaces" for humanitarian reasons (p. 183). Yet their commitment to democratic institutions and processes prevents them from enacting the type of policies that would be necessary to establish a strong state. After pointing out the dilemma that statebuilding poses, Matsuzaki asks if nations like the United States should engage in statebuilding abroad at all, or if they should allow people to continue to live in unstable regions in an effort to avoid comprising their own values.

The question that Matsuzaki asks seems particularly relevant given decades-long conversations about statebuilding in the Middle East and the destabilizing effect that climate change will have in already vulnerable regions.[1] Matsuzaki's tale is ultimately a cautionary one. He contends that it is important for democratic leaders to be clear-eyed about the compromises that effective statebuilding requires. In order to create strong states in undergoverned spaces, he argues, would-be statebuilders must be willing to use coercive measures to quell dissent. Although Matsuzaki suggests that there may be times when national security interests and humanitarian concerns override

the dangers of statebuilding, he argues that Western nations must be honest about the sacrifices they are willing to make when considering whether or not they should engage in statebuilding.

To make his argument, Matsuzaki focuses on two case studies: Taiwan under Japanese rule and the Philippines under US governance. According to Matsuzaki, these two situations are a useful comparison because Taiwan and the Philippines offered similar levels of difficulty to foreign powers trying to establish new governments. He argues that Japan was ultimately more successful at building an effective state than the United States. In the early twentieth century, for example, the Japanese government was able to eliminate bubonic plague from Taiwan. The United States, however, failed in its public health mission in the Philippines. According to Matsuzaki, US officials tried "to isolate the sick, as well as those who came into contact with them, in hospitals and detention camps" (p. 139). Filipinos responded by visiting local doctors and covertly burying those who died.

Matsuzaki's analysis suggests that the United States' failure to establish a strong state may have been the result of its commitment to democratic ideals. He argues that American officials felt constrained by the opinion of the US electorate and were unable to impose compliance through brute

force. As an autocracy, however, Japan was able to implement policies without worrying about public opinion. According to Matsuzaki, the United States failed to create a strong state in the Philippines in the early twentieth century because American officials could not compel local elites to comply with US policies that were against their individual interests. Instead, local elites manipulated tax laws and the power of the US state to enrich themselves. Japan, on the other hand, was able to create small administrative units called Hoko that bypassed the scholar-gentry and local elites who had previously controlled Taiwan. As a result, they were able to create a strong system of governance that could be the basis for statebuilding in the future. For Matsuzaki, the strength of any particular government partially rests on its ability to gain uniform information about its populace and “see like a state.” He, of course, draws this term from James C. Scott.[2] The United States was unsuccessful in its statebuilding efforts because it was unable to obtain the information it needed to govern.

As a historian of empire, I found the absence of a robust discussion of colonialism and its effect on statebuilding notable. Although Matsuzaki recognizes that the United States and Japan engaged in colonialism, he is not interested in how it affected their policies. The effects of this absence on his analysis are uneven. He does discuss US ideas of racial superiority even if he does not explicitly connect them to American colonialism. On the other hand, he occasionally makes throwaway comments that could bear fuller analysis. At one point, for example, he suggests that “statebuilding proceeds more smoothly in smaller territories with geographic features that allow for ease of travel and in cooler climates” (p. 12). I immediately found myself reminded of Karen Kupperman’s work on the “fear of hot climates” and wondered about the connections between early modern ideas about the tropics and current scholarship on statebuilding in those climates.[3]

Matsuzaki also does not fully employ cultural analyses. Although he acknowledges that a lack of cultural knowledge may have influenced the success of foreign statebuilding, he does not extensively analyze the cultural differences that may have hampered the Japanese and Americans in their colonization of Taiwan and the Philippines respectively. The miscommunication between Americans and Filipinos over issues of medicine seems particularly ripe for cultural analysis. Future scholars might find the intersections between the failure of translation and the failure of statebuilding to be a fruitful area for study.

These points should not take away from the importance of his analysis. I ultimately agree with Matsuzaki that democratic ideals may lead individuals and nations to question the ethicalness of “statebuilding by imposition” and that it is important for the American people to be clear-eyed about the kinds of compromise statebuilding requires. According to Matsuzaki, it is impossible for the United States and other nations to force statebuilding without resorting to authoritarianism. The ultimate question is: Are there times when it is preferable to accept the violence, civil rights violations, and autocracy that is necessary to create strong states in initially resistant populations, or is the imposition of foreign rule always wrong? Matsuzaki does not completely foreclose the possibility that there may indeed be times when statebuilding by imposition is necessary foreign policy. He asks, however, that Americans be willing to confront the violence and authoritarianism that is required when forcing foreign countries to accept the imposition of new governments. His book is well argued and impressively researched. In the coming decades, questions about how best to create stability in undergoverned countries will continue to be raised. Matsuzaki’s work deserves to be a part of the conversation that answers them.

Amanda Hendrix-Komoto is an assistant professor at Montana State University where she studies race, US colonialism, and religion.

Notes

[1]. For the latter, see Todd Miller, *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2017).

[2]. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[3]. Karen Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1984): 213–40.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Amanda Hendrix-Komoto. Review of Matsuzaki, Reo. *Statebuilding by Imposition: Resistance and Control in Colonial Taiwan and the Philippines*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54379>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.