



**Daniel Jordan Smith.** *Every Household Its Own Government: Improvised Infrastructure, Entrepreneurial Citizens, and the State in Nigeria.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. 232 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-691-22989-8.

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## **State Absence as Presence: Service Delivery in Postcolonial Nigeria**

The Nigerian expression Daniel Jordan Smith employs as the main title of his insightful 2022 book, *Every Household Its Own Government: Improvised Infrastructure, Entrepreneurial Citizens, and the State in Nigeria*, is meant to capture the varied ways in which the country's citizens deal with a "willful[y] absen[t]" state—particularly when it comes to the provision of vital infrastructure and social services (p. 3). He compares innovative coping mechanisms and entrepreneurial solutions across six key domains: water, electricity, transportation, telecommunication, education, and security. In addition, he deftly illustrates that the postcolonial Nigerian state is "not so much absent as complicit" in underproviding key services; moreover, many of the ways in which citizens cope with state absence ironically serve to entrench it (p. 2). The book is at its strongest when illustrating such tensions—for example, chapter 2 describes the range of entrepreneurial activity created by perpetual weaknesses in the state's power grid, from mechanics to electricians to vendors selling generators, batteries, and candles. The motorcycle taxis and private minibuses depicted in chapter 3 offer another compelling example

of citizen ingenuity that may ultimately perpetuate underprovision by the state, as do the private nursery schools and tutoring business described in chapter 5. Moreover, by presenting findings across multiple domains, Smith makes his claims considerably stronger than if he had chosen to focus on one service (such as water or electricity), as much of the work on which he builds has done. That said, I would have appreciated a bit more reflection in the concluding chapter as to whether and why state absence as presence is more entrenched in some sectors as compared to others.

The book is on weaker ground when it comes to evidence to support his claim of "deliberate state dysfunction engineered at the top" (p. 3). Such evidence is understandably hard to come by, and Smith does include some enlightening perspectives from low-level state bureaucrats. For instance, he interviews a local tax official who justifies bribe taking as a means of supplementing his salary while also helping a local entrepreneur run his borehole business; similar dynamics are revealed in an interview with a representative of the state electricity utility. These accounts parallel and complement those of citizens, but in general the

Nigerian state is painted with a broad brush, at times as a vague bogeyman. A more nuanced account of state actors and institutions is perhaps beyond the scope of this book but seems important when it comes to devising potential solutions.

The book also misses an opportunity to engage a broader perspective on state capacity and governance—in particular, literature from political economy that also serves to underline the “negative equilibria” characterizing many unresponsive states in the global South. The situation Smith describes with respect to Nigeria has parallels with what Paul Collier refers to as a “governance trap” in *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done about It* (2008). Smith’s accounts also recall Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein, and Jan Teorell’s characterization of systemic corruption as a collective action problem.[1] Furthermore, while Smith employs Charlotte Lemanski’s “infrastructural citizenship” frame to great effect, it might also have been interesting to contrast this with Michael Mann’s state-centered idea of “infrastructural power.”[2] I found myself wondering if the two concepts should be thought of as complements, substitutes, or alternative perspectives on the same phenomena.

Smith is well aware of his positionality as a scholar trained in the global North who is perceived by his Nigerian interlocutors as a Western man with according tastes and preferences. Much as he recounts seeking to evade such perceptions (for instance, by purchasing a cheap generator for his home in Nigeria or using a basic mobile phone), the book’s intended audience appears to be those who share his Western perspective. He takes pains not to romanticize the daily hardships facing his research subjects, but also at times appears to relish describing “outlandish” behavior such as carrying a refrigerator or a butchered cow on a motorcycle or evoking “picturesque rural communities” dotted by colorful call centers (pp. 85, 118). The chapter in which this latter descrip-

tion features (chapter 4, “‘Be What You Want to Be’: Cell Phones and Social Inequality”) is arguably the weakest when it comes to providing evidence in support of his main argument. I was not surprised to learn that it was adapted from an article published in 2006; not only does it seem somewhat tangential, but the descriptions of cell phone technology also appear rather dated.

Overall, however, my critiques reflect a wish for a very good book to be even better. Smith’s writing style is engaging and accessible; I also appreciate how the chapters speak to each other but can equally be understood on their own. As such I can imagine (and would recommend) assigning portions of it to both undergraduate and graduate students. I hope it inspires further scholarship on state absence as presence within and beyond Africa. The dynamics Smith reveals are pertinent in much of the global North as well, given increasing privatization of education and healthcare, and a lack of political will to regulate emerging technologies.

#### Notes

[1]. Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein, and Jan Teorell, “Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail—Systemic Corruption as a Collective Action Problem,” *Governance* 26, no. 3 (2013): 449-71.

[2]. Charlotte Lemanski, ed., *Citizenship and Infrastructure: Practices and Identities of Citizens and the State* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019); and Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” *European Journal of Sociology/Archives européennes de sociologie* 25, no. 2 (1984): 185-213.

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