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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The [Re]Imagined state: The Central African Republic. Navigating liberal and postliberal state theorisation

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Abstract

The article introduces the *Imagined State* and applies it to the Central African Republic (CAR), in that conceiving of it in either the Weberian or the non-Weberian image is challenging. It addresses a critical gap in the literature, as the 'failed state' and 'neopatrimonial state' have been rejected; however, academics fail to offer an alternative. Understanding CAR as an imagined state reveals that interveners (namely, United Nations peacekeepers) set out to reimagine the country through the liberal paradigm, whether they know it or not. This calls on us to engage with the literature on reimagining states, which is dominated by postliberal calls to reject the Weberian image of the state, but problematically this agenda neglects so-called failed states. The second contribution therefore arises as it is the first study to expose the harm of reimagining states. It analyses four interlinking issue areas: i) the desires of the population; ii) the goals problem; iii) the transition problem; and iv) the control problem. These are critical in imagined states, as the hypothetical state may place a huge burden on the shoulders of vulnerable populations who could find themselves victims of overactive imaginations, ungrounded visions of the possible, and unrealistic goals.

Keywords: failed state; liberal; postliberal; reimagining; the Central African Republic; the state

Introduction

We live in an era when everything is being reimagined. In International Relations (IR) and Political Science, academics are *Reimagining International Relations,*[1] *Reimagining Power,*[2] *Reimagining NATO,*[3] *Reimagining Global Health*,[4] and *Reimagining Parliament*.[5] This is part of a widespread pattern as established assumptions and alternative futures are debated via *Reimagining Education*,[6]

[1]Sen Somdeep, 'Decolonising to reimagine International Relations: An introduction', *Review of International Studies*, 49:3 (2023), pp. 339–345. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese and Islamic Civilizations* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[2]Piotr Dutkiewicz, Tom Casier, and Jan Aart Scholte, *Hegemony and World Order: Reimagining Power in Global Politics* (Routledge, 2020).

[3]Paul, D., Beaumont, Julie Wilhelmensen and Kristian Gjerde L., 'Reimagining NATO after Crimea: Defender of the rule-based order and truth?', *Contemporary Security Policy,* 45:3 (2024), pp. 396–425.

[4]Melissa Salm, Ala Alwan, Maureen Lichtveld, Patricia García, 'Reimagining global health: Accelerating change for a sustainable future', *Annals of Global Health*, 91:1 (2025), p. 6.

[5]David Judge and Cristina Leston-Bandeira, *Reimagining Parliament* (Bristol University Press, 2024).

[6]Louise Regan and Ian Duckett (eds), *Reimagining Education* (Socialist Education Association with Manifesto Press, 2020).

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Reimagining Business and Management,[7] *Reimagining Capitalism*,[8] and *Reimagining Love*,[9] to name just a few. It appears that there are no foundations that cannot be reimagined. For example, in Medicine, the multinational pharmaceutical Novartis is *Reimagining Medicine*,[10] and we are told to *Reimagine Ageing*.[11] In Religion, academics are *Reimagining Religious Education*,[12] whilst The Reimagine Network seeks to *Reimagine Christianity*.[13] Nothing, it seems, is sacrosanct, and the state has not escaped this trend. What was once described as IR's 'moral unit, the moral referent point'[14] is now being reimagined as Anthropology, IR, Law, and Sociology have sought to *Reimagine the State*,[15] which begs the question, 'what should the state look like?'

This should not be seen as an abstract academic exercise, which brings us to the question, 'why focus on the Central African Republic (CAR)?' In August 2013, the United Nations (UN) envoy to CAR, Babacar Gaye, explained that all the UN Security Council members agreed that the country is 'close to being a failed state and we should absolutely take action'.[16] This sentiment was reaffirmed in semi-structured elite interviews carried out by this author.[17] For example, a senior figure in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (as it was called then) explained that regional support for a UN intervention in CAR was 'much less contentious' than in Mali because 'the region realised they needed to pull together and prevent the country from becoming a completely failed state'.[18] Accordingly, UN Member States invoked the 'failed state paradigm' (that includes 'weak states', 'failed states' and 'state failure') which remains 'alive and well' despite ongoing contestation and predictions of 'imminent demise'.[19] In hindsight, when one combines the 'genocide' in CAR at the time,[20] with the perception of the country becoming a failed state, we see that what would become the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) is about more than 'just' *Saving Strangers*,[21] it is about saving the state in order to save strangers. This takes us back to the question, 'what should the state look like?'

Here the distinction between liberals and postliberals comes to the fore. To be clear, these labels are used in the literature on mass atrocity prevention, peacebuilding, statebuilding, and peace

[7] Ken MCPhail, Mario Kafouros, Petere McKiernan and Nelarine Cornelius, 'Reimagining business and management', *British Journal of Management*, 35, pp. 1099–1112.

[8] Rebecca Henderson, *Reimagining Capitalism* (Penguin, 2020).

[9] Richard White, *Reimagining Love* (Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 2026).

[10] Novartis. 'Our Next Era', https://www.novartis.com/.

[11] Reimagine Ageing Interdisciplinary Network, https://www.leeds.ac.uk/reimagine-ageing.

[12] Heather Marshall, 'Reimagining religious education: Integrating ethnographic and anthropological perspectives', *British Journal of Religious Education,* 46:4 (2024), pp. 534–548.

[13] The Reimagine Network (2024), https://reimaginenetwork.ning.com/.

[14] This was raised in Steve Smith's Presidential Address to the International Studies Association, 27 February 2003, which was subsequently published, 'Singing our world into existence', *International Studies Quarterly*, 48:3 (2004), pp. 499–518 (p. 504).

[15] Lisa Duggan, 'Reimagining the state', *Women's Studies Quarterly,* 51:1–2 (2023), pp. 243–248. Davina Cooper, Nikita Dhawan and Janet Newman (eds), *Reimagining the State: Theoretical Challenges and Transformative Possibilities* (Routledge, 2020). Kwesi Aning, Volker Boege, M. Anne-Brown and Charles T. Hunt (eds), *Exploring Peace Formation: Security and Justice in Post-Colonial States* (Routledge, 2018).

[16] Edith M. Lederer, 'UN: Central African Republic could be a failed state', *The Associated Press,* 14 August 2013. UN: Central African Republic could be failed state | AP News.

[17] See the discussion of methods below.

[18] Interview with a senior figure from the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, New York, 30 June 2016.

[19] Nicolas Lemay-Hébert and Ari Jerrems, 'The afterlives of state failure: echoes and aftermaths of colonialism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 32:2 (2023), pp. 255–279 (p. 255).

[20] Charles Butcher, Benjamin E. Goldsmith, Sascha Nanlohy, Arcot Sowmya, and David Muchlinski, 'Introducing the targeted mass killing data set for the study and forecasting of mass atrocities', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 64:7–8 (2020), pp. 1524–1547 (p. 1532).

[21] Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

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formation,[22] with the relationship between these different agendas becoming increasingly blurred.[23] Liberal is an umbrella term used here to capture liberals, English School solidarists, and experts on CAR that champion certain norms, practices, and rules. The point here is not to gloss over the divisions within the liberal paradigm but to focus on those that express a normative desire to bring about a specific *type* of state.[24] In sharp contrast, postliberals include critical IR, de/postcolonial thinkers and area specialists on CAR that question both the liberal diagnosis of the problem at hand and the proposed solution.[25] Again, the point here is not to downplay differences within the paradigm but to draw attention to why and how they challenge the Weberian image of the state. Returning the focus to CAR, academics argue that viewing it as a failed state is flawed because the country has never been a state in the Weberian sense.[26] This leads Carayannis and Lombard to claim, '[a]s much as anything, then, the current crisis *is a failure of imagination* among international actors, among CAR political elites, among Central Africans more broadly.'[27] This resonates strongly with broader critiques in the reimagining literature that the Weberian state dominates our 'political imagination',[28] places limits on what is politically possible,[29] and acts as a form of epistemic violence.[30] The culmination of which is that what states are, can be, and should be is intensely debated.

The article argues that CAR should be viewed as an *Imagined State* in that conceiving of it in either the Weberian or the non-Weberian image is challenging. As it stands, the literature on CAR rejects the idea that it should be viewed as a 'failed state',[31] or a 'neopatrimonial state'[32]; yet to date, no alternative has been put forth. Addressing this, the article does not set out a fixed image underpinned by a set of criteria; instead, the *[Re]Imagined State* seeks to draw attention

[22]Geraldine Rosas Duarte and Matheus Souza, 'Illiberal peacebuilding in UN stabilization peace operations and peace agreements in the CAR, the DRC and Mali', *International Peacekeeping*, 31:2 (2024), pp. 157–185. Oliver Richmond P. and Gëzim Visoka (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Peacebuilding, Statebuilding, and Peace Formation* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[23]Richmond and Visoka, *The Oxford Handbook*. Edward Newman, 'Liberal Peacebuilding Debates' in Edward Newman, Roland Paris and Oliver P. Richmond (eds), *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding* (United Nations University Press, 2009), pp. 26–53. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (International Development Research Centre, 2001), p. 67.

[24]Alex Bellamy, *World Peace (And How We Can Achieve It)* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 203–204. Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Brookings Institution, 2008), pp. 148–174. Michael Ignatieff, 'Intervention and State Failure. Intervention and State Failure', *Dissent* (2002), https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/intervention-and-state-failure/ accessed 1 September 2026.

[25]Sara Wong, 'Towards an anti-colonial aesthetic politics: Surrealist praxis and epistemic refusal', *Review of International Studies*, 52:3 (2025), pp. 557–578. Sara Tafakori, 'The intimate public as a decolonial lens: "cripping" affect, nationalism and imperial violence', *Review of International Studies*, 49:4 (2023), pp. 694–720. Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace. How So-Called Ordinary People Can Disrupt Violent Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Sharath Srinivasen, *When Peace Kills Politics. International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (Hurst Publishers, 2021).

[26]Allard Duursma, 'State weakness, a fragmented patronage-based system, and protracted local conflict in the Central African Republic,' *African Affairs*, 121:483 (2022), pp. 251–274. Tim Glawion, *The Security Arena in Africa: Local Order-Making in the Central African Republic, Somaliland, and South Sudan* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Louisa Lombard, *State of Rebellion: Violence and Intervention in the Central African Republic* (Zed Books Ltd, 2016), p. 248.

[27]Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard, 'A concluding note on the failure and future of peacebuilding in CAR', in Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (eds), *Making Sense of the Central African Republic* (Zed Books), pp. 319–341 (p. 336 emphasis added).

[28]Nina C. Krickel-Choi, Ching-Chang Chen and Alexander Bukh, 'Embodying the state differently in a Westphalian world: an ontological exit for the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute', *Third World Quarterly,* 45:6 (2024), pp. 1122–1140 (p. 1123).

[29]Mihalache Oana-Cosmina, 'Norms of protection in IR: humanitarian wars and the ironic creation of pre-Westphalian states', *The International Journal of Human Rights,* 26: 1 (2022), pp. 1–29.

[30]Lisa Hana Sandhu. *Anticolonial imaginaries in the 'failed state': Epistemic violence and the representation of the Congo in cultural discourse,* 2021 (PhD thesis. SOAS University of London). DOI: https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00037132 https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/37132, pp. 17–20.

[31]Glawion, *The Security Arena*. Lise Morjé Howard, *Power in Peacekeeping* (Cambridge University Press 2019), p. 152. Lombard, *State of Rebellion*.

[32]Lotje de Vries and Andreas Mehler, 'The limits of instrumentalizing disorder: Reassessing the neopatrimonial perspective in the Central African Republic,' *African Affairs,* 118:471 (2019), pp. 307–327.

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to the process of how so-called failed states are being imagined and reimagined. As it stands, these countries have been largely neglected in the work on reimagining states, with the exception being Krämer's postcolonial account, 'Why Africa's "weak states" matter'.[33] This omission is problematic precisely because imagined states such as Afghanistan, CAR, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen are often the most susceptible to external interventions which continue to shape their development.[34] If we pause, therefore, to consider what these states are, can be, and should be, the starting point proposed here is that at present, neither liberal nor postliberal state theorisation offers an accurate depiction of what they are – imagined states – which has significant implications for what they can and should be. Upholding a commitment to theoretical pluralism, traditionally associated with the English School,[35] the article highlights the strengths and weaknesses of both the liberal and postliberal paradigms. On one hand, liberal state theorisation needs to engage with postliberal state theorisation to address growing concerns that the Weberian image of the state acts as an [un]intentional straitjacket on the imagination, which works to delegitimise alternative ways of thinking and, as a result, regurgitates Eurocentric and/or racist narratives. More specifically, CAR illustrates that interveners that seek to save the state are in fact reimagining the state, whether they know it or not. On the other hand, postliberals need to reassess their own foundations as imagined states such as CAR reveal the risk and harm that arise as academics set out grand visions of what imagined states can and/or should be.

For the purposes of such an undertaking, methodological considerations are of critical importance. At the theoretical level, the article brings together interdisciplinary studies on state theorisation which includes three bodies of literature, i) the state, ii) the failed state paradigm, and iii) reimagining states. Each of these has garnered a wide range of interdisciplinary attention, including Anthropology, Political Theory, History, International Relations, Law, and Sociology. At the empirical level, the case study combines a widespread and systematic analysis of primary and secondary sources with approximately 30 semi-structured elite interviews that the author conducted with officials in the UN, the US federal government, INGOs, NGOs, and Think Tanks. These were done in two phases, first in 2016, following the first post-Civil War General Election in CAR, and second, in 2025–26, in the period surrounding the third post-Civil War General Election in the country. To note, as these interviews were with external, often Western actors, we need to be conscious that they themselves are socialised by the Weberian image of the state. To help address this, the article also uses survey data to reflect the views of the local population. Unfortunately, this author's disability prevents him from conducting fieldwork in the country. That said, since around 2022 it has become increasingly dangerous for researchers to conduct fieldwork in CAR.[36] At this time of writing, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office advises against all travel to the country other than essential travel to the capital. Hopefully, at some point in the future it will become safer for academics to conduct research in the country.

The article is structured in four parts. The first section sets out the theoretical foundations through a discussion of liberal and postliberal state theorisation. The second section introduces the idea that CAR is an imagined state. The third section shines much-needed light on the unintended consequences that arise in reimagining imagined states and identifies four interrelated themes that can also aid future research into other imagined states: i) the desires of the population; ii) the goals problem: what the state should look like; iii) the transition problem: how should this state be

[33]Anna Maria Krämer, 'Why Africa's "weak states" matter: A postcolonial critique of Euro-Western discourse on African statehood and sovereignty', in Davina Cooper, Nikita Dhawan, and Janet Newman (eds), *Reimagining the State* (Routledge), pp. 79–96.

[34]Robert Dunford and Michael Neu, 'The Responsibility to Protect in a world of already existing intervention', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:4 (2019), pp. 1080—1102.

[35]Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: History of the English School* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. xiii.

[36]In 2024, Joseph Figueira Martin was working for FHI 360 on reducing poverty and preventing gender-based violence in CAR when he was abducted by Wagner. He was imprisoned without trial, allegedly tortured, and released in April 2026.

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brought about; and iv) the control problem: an inability to establish a legitimate monopoly of violence. The conclusion restates the need for theoretical pluralism, and identifies the strengths and weaknesses of both the liberal and postliberal paradigms whilst stressing the need for the latter to address the four problems identified. Whatever one's position, when one considers that some of the most vulnerable populations are susceptible to external interventions embodying grand designs, there is an urgent need to think through the process of [re]imagining the state.

Theorising the state, the failed state, and the reimagined state

In many ways CAR underlines the need to bring these three forms of state theorisation together. The country has a government which neither has, nor necessarily wants, territorial control[37] with multiple sources of authority operating in different locations,[38] and spaces that function between the state and the failed state.[39] It is, therefore, an imagined state in that imagining it as either a Weberian or non-Weberian state is challenging.

In Weber's lecture on *Politics as Vocation*, he poses the question, 'What is a "state"?' and explains,

> we are compelled to say that the state is the only human *Gemeinschaft* which lays claim to the monopoly on the legitimated use of physical force. However, this monopoly is limited to a certain geographical area, and in fact this limitation to a particular area is one of the things that defines a state.[40]

The statement captures the central tenets of the Weberian image as it underlines the intimate relationship between violence and government within a specified territory. Although the term sovereignty does not appear in the definition, and despite Weber using the term 'very rarely', it is understood to lie at the centre of his conception of the state.[41] In his seminal account, Tilly explains that European state formation was driven by competition for trade and territory, ensuring elites had to build state apparatus so that they could tax citizens to raise revenues for war whilst striving to maintain territorial control to prevent land from being seized by competitors.[42] Despite the fact that much of the world did not develop like this,[43] the European state has enabled and constrained the parameters of our imagination ever since.

Whilst not all states that correspond to the Weberian image are liberal, for example, China and Russia, liberal state theories claim this type of state benefits both those inside and outside the state.[44] Regarding the former, it enables the good life. For instance, Snyder's study of human rights is described as pragmatic; however, this is rooted in liberal modernity, as he argues that only when societies become modern, defined in terms of democratic institutions and a middle class,

[37] Lotje de Vries and Andreas Mehler, 'The limits of instrumentalizing disorder: Reassessing the neopatrimonial perspective in the Central African Republic,' *African Affairs,* 118:471 (2019), pp. 307–327 (p. 323–324). Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, p. 182.

[38] Peer Schouten, *Roadblock Politics: The Origins of Violence in Central Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). Glawion, *The Security Arena*, Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier De Sardan, 'Local powers and a distant state in rural Central African Republic', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35:3 (1997), pp. 441–468.

[39] Louisa Lombard, *Hunting Game: Raiding Politics in the Central African Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 20–28.

[40] Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters, 'Politics as vocation,' in Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters (eds) *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics, Bureaucracy, and Social Stratification* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 136.

[41] William Outhwaite, 'Max Weber's conception of "rationalization" and the 21st Century', *Russian Sociological Review*, 18:2 (2019), pp. 16–27 (p. 21).

[42] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States AD 990–1992* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1993).

[43] Kwesi Aning and Festus Aubyn, 'Challenging conventional understandings of statehood: Western African realities', in Kwesi Aning, Volker Boege, M. Anne-Brown and Charles T. Hunt (eds), *Exploring Peace Formation* (Routledge), pp. 24–38. Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

[44] Gerald B. Helman and Steven B. Ratner, 'Saving failed states,' *Foreign Policy*, 89 (1992), pp. 3–20 (p. 3). Also, Sophie Mackinder, 'Ideas, institutions and the world bank: the social protection and fragile states agendas', *Global Policy*. 11:1 (2020), pp. 26–35.

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can human rights progress.[45] Whilst there are countless other explanations for the rise of human rights, this provides an insight into why the Weberian image of the state is viewed positively, as it highlights the associated benefits that come with it for those within. Regarding the latter, these types of states are viewed as facilitating harmonious relations in the anarchical realm. For example, in Bellamy's study on world peace he claims that states that are not prone to conflict have five characteristics: i) 'hold a monopoly of violence', ii) are 'accountable to their people', iii) 'protect the fundamental human rights of their population', iv) 'ensure that their populations have secure livelihoods and fair access to public goods' and, v) have 'gender equality'.[46] The five characteristics go beyond Weber and highlight that the liberal image of the state is not fixed, with aspects such as gender equality incorporated into contemporary liberal visions of the state. There is self-reflection, therefore, within liberalism as liberals seek to tweak, rather than overhaul, the Weberian image. This is not really acknowledged within postliberal critiques, yet when one considers the limits and harm of reimagining imagined states to be discussed below, there is a pressing need for postliberals to go through this process of self-reflection too.

This is not to suggest that liberal self-reflection has fixed the problems within the liberal paradigm. To illustrate this, let us turn to Call's effort to go 'beyond the failed state paradigm' as he stresses the need to identify and address 'capacity', 'security', and 'legitimacy' gaps on a case-by-case basis.[47] A capacity gap refers to cases where the government is incapable of providing the core functions of security, rule of law, and public goods.[48] A security gap is 'where states do not provide minimal level of security in face of organized armed groups'[49] and finally, a legitimacy gap exists where a significant portion of society rejects the rules and/or rulers.[50] From a liberal perspective, one could utilise this approach to 'fix' a state such as CAR, as it is one of the very few countries that appears on both his lists of 'lowest capacity states' *and* 'least secure states'.[51] Problematically, however, it is presented as a paradigm shift, yet it is proposed here that this should be seen as a failed leap beyond the liberal paradigm. From a postliberal perspective, there are three concerns. First, it fails to consider the historical process and international dynamics that may have created these failed states in the first place, which is why critical Genocide Studies scholars[52] and Cosmopolitans[53] reject liberal approaches. Second, he speaks of security, legitimacy, and capacity as value-free labels when, in fact, they are value-laden, which is why critics question the empirical accuracy and normative value of the failed state paradigm.[54] Third, Call rejects critical IR on the grounds that it does not offer concrete prescriptive recommendations, and whilst this has some merit, which is returned to below, he fails to acknowledge the value of critique in and of itself,[55] which clearly animates much of the reimagining literature.

Even if a case can be made, therefore, that the liberal image of the Weberian state is not fixed and that liberals reflect on it and tweak it accordingly, the postliberal paradigm continues to challenge liberalism on several fronts. Primarily, by either omitting or downplaying historical processes

[45] Jack Snyder, *Human Rights for Pragmatists: Social Power in Modern Times* (Princeton University Press: 2022).

[46] Bellamy, *World Peace,* pp. 203–204.

[47] Charles T. Call, 'Beyond the "failed state": Toward conceptual alternatives', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:2 (2011), pp. 303–326.

[48] Call, 'Beyond the "failed state"', p. 306–307.

[49] Call, 'Beyond the "failed state"', p. 307.

[50] Call, 'Beyond the "failed state"', p. 309.

[51] Call, 'Beyond the "failed state"', p. 310.

[52] Martin Shaw, *Genocide and International Relations: Changing Patterns in the Transitions of the Late Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[53] Dunford and Neu, 'The Responsibility to Protect'. Garret W. Brown and Ali Bohm, 'Introducing Just ante Bellum as a cosmopolitan approach to humanitarian intervention', *European Journal of International Relations,* 22:4 (2015), pp. 897—919.

[54] Shahar Hameiri, 'Failed States or a failed paradigm? State capacity and limits of institutionalism', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 10:2 (2007), pp. 122–149 (p. 122). Also, Lars Carlsen and Rainer Bruggemann, 'The "Failed State Index" offers more than just a simple ranking', *Social Indicators Research*, 115:1 (2014), pp. 525–530.

[55] Raymond Geuss, *A World without Why* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

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such as imperialism, colonialism, and empire, liberals fail to understand how Weberian and non-Weberian states came to be. The liberal state is presented as civilised, which masks the fact that colonialism was justified on the grounds that conquerors would end barbarism and prevent these anarchic territories from threatening international trade and security.[56] A logic which still resonates as liberals seek to save failed states to benefit both 'them' and 'us'.[57] This can be viewed as Eurocentric but also offers little space for understanding postcolonial experiences. For example, in Tilly's focus on European state formation, he views cities as playing a critical role; however, Herbst explains that this does not reflect African state experiences, as lower population densities created very different relations between capitals and hinterlands.[58] This remains critical in countries such as CAR,[59] and such worries feed into the broader point that liberals fail to understand how postcolonial states actually work.[60] Finally, the failed state paradigm closes the door on discussions of how states could develop in a non-Weberian image, which brings us onto the reimagining agenda.[61]

The work on reimagining the state and the postcolonial alternatives to the Weberian model raises a daunting number of factors. The complex relationship between sovereignty, territory, security, order, power, legitimacy, gender, and authority, to name just a few, comes to the fore with the police, prisons, healthcare, and education amongst other things, all reimagined. This may be to address patriarchal and paternalistic structures,[62] state-based gender-responsive entrapments,[63] top-down structures that teach people not to ask questions,[64] the culture of poverty myth that underpins liberal policies,[65] or to establish a fairer distribution of resources.[66] This snapshot reveals that there is no one way of reimagining. The overarching sentiment is perhaps best captured by Cooper '[r]efreshing the conceptual toolbox, positing a newly patterned conceptual landscape, reveals, revalues and makes sense of hopeful practices that have been ignored or neglected because they fail to fit prevailing paradigms.'[67] Accordingly, this is very much viewed as an action-oriented process that opens a new 'landscape of possibility' as 'the only way to develop alternatives is to develop alternatives'.[68]

Conscious that this may all sound abstract, it is important to stress that the academics involved offer non-Weberian examples to show that the central tenets of the state are open to contestation. For example, the 1920 Svalbard Treaty grants 'absolute sovereignty' of the Svalbard Archipelago to Norway yet gave equal access to the Soviet Union, which asks us to reimagine traditional understandings of sovereignty.[69] This resonates with decolonial calls for a shift away from universal state

[56]Bhupinder S. Chimni, 'Justification and Critique: Humanitarianism and Imperialism over Time', in Brock Lothar and Simon Hendrik (eds). *The Justification of War and International Order: From Past to Present* (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 471–487.

[57]See Ignatieff, 'Intervention and State Failure'.

[58]Herbst, *States and Power in Africa*, p. 15.

[59]Lombard, *Hunting Game*. Bierschenk and Sardan, 'Local powers and a distant state'.

[60]Pritish Behuria, Lars Buur and Hazel Gray, 'Studying political settlements in Africa,' *African Affairs*, 116:464 (2017), pp. 508–525. Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Indiana: Bloomington, 1999).

[61]Raza Saeed, 'The ubiquity of state fragility: Fault lines in the categorisation and conceptualisation of failed and fragile states', *Social and Legal Studies*, 29:6 (2020), pp. 767–789 (p. 777). Sandhu, *Anticolonial imaginaries in the 'failed state'*.

[62]Janet Newman, 'The political work of reimagination' in Davina Cooper, Nikita Dhawan, and Janet Newman (eds), *Reimagining the State* (Routledge), pp. 19–36.

[63]Ren-yo Hwang, 'Trans of color entrapments and carceral coalitions', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 51:12 (2023), pp. 141–154.

[64]Lenora R. Knowles, 'How do we grow grassroots critiques of the state? A close reading of *Triple Jeopardy* from East Baltimore', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 51:12 (2023), pp. 191–199.

[65]Robert Thomas Choflet, '"We wanted to talk about plumbing" organisation and mutual aid in Baltimore's high-rise public housing', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 51:12 (2023), pp. 79–95.

[66]Shirin, M. Rai, 'Reimagining the state: Marxism, Feminism, postcolonialism', in Davina Cooper, Nikita Dhawan, and Janet Newman (eds), *Reimagining the State* (Routledge), pp. 37–56.

[67]Davina Cooper, 'Introduction', in Davina Cooper, Nikita Dhawan, and Janet Newman (eds), *Reimagining the State* (Routledge), pp. 1–17 (p. 4).

[68]Duggan, 'Reimagining the State', pp. 243–245.

[69]Krickel-Choi et al., 'Embodying the state differently in a Westphalian world', p. 11.

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sovereignty to a pluralistic understanding of sovereignty.[70] To give another example, discussing Palestine, Duggan explains that the binary discussion of a two-state/one-state solution ignores the work of Palestinians seeking a no-state solution.[71] Whether this could work is not the issue here; the point is that if liberals do not engage in broader conversations, they will recycle blind spots.[72] To return to the *[Re]Imagined State*, academics have been theorising the state for so long that it is difficult to even gauge just how embedded certain views are[73], which brings us to the imagined state.

An imagined state

This section puts forth the idea that CAR is an imagined state in that conceiving of it in either the Weberian or non-Weberian image is difficult. Adding flesh to the bones, this section explains the inappropriateness of the failed state label prior to proposing that it is not the mass violence that arose within the country that is so difficult to imagine, but the absence of the state itself, which reveals that it is an imagined state.

The inappropriateness of the term failed state was captured in the International Crisis Group study that coined the seminal term 'phantom state' to describe CAR.[74] They explained that the country 'is if anything worse than a failed state' as it 'lacks any meaningful institutional capacity'. In other words, despite the plethora of external actors intervening in CAR in the post-Cold War era,[75] the country did not meet the threshold of a failed state, which, in turn, suggested a new category was needed. This resonates with critiques of the failed state paradigm as they highlight that this umbrella term is inherently problematic because of the huge variation between states in this bracket. For example, Glawion highlights that CAR, Somalia, and South Sudan often rank alongside one another in the Fragile States Index (FSI) as the most fragile states, yet this downplays the difference between them in terms of 'security apparatus', 'factionalised elites', and 'external intervention'.[76] In so doing, they show that even if we narrow the parameters of the FSI to focus on those at the very bottom, placing these within a single category is still flawed as it implies similarity whilst obfuscating significant difference. Against this backdrop, one could be forgiven for thinking that 'phantom state' provides a more appropriate label for CAR, which in turn helps explain why it has been cited in countless reflections on the country since.

Before we accept 'phantom state', however, the reality is that the country in 2013–15 was even more stateless than in 2007. During the 2013–15 civil war, Vircoulon explained that the green shoots of the state that did exist when CAR was a 'phantom state' were now gone, with no healthcare, education, civil servants or security forces present in the provinces, whilst around 230 of the 250 foreign companies in the country had departed: 'the state in CAR is now a souvenir'.[77] This

[70] Ajay Parasram, 'Pluriversal sovereignty and the state of IR', *Review of International Studies,* 49:3 (2023), pp. 356–367. Also, Federica Caso, 'Settler imperial ordering: Settler colonialism and the production of hierarchical sovereignties', *Review of International Studies*, 52:3 (2026), pp. 579–596.

[71] Duggan, 'Reimagining the State', p. 247.

[72] Beverley Loke and Catherine Owen, 'A contextual approach to decolonising IR: Interrogating knowledge production hierarchies', *Review of International Studies,* Published online 2024, pp. 1–21. doi:10.1017/S0260210524000639. Somdeep, 'Decolonising to reimagine International Relations'.

[73] Peter Bratsis, 'Unthinking the State: Reification, Ideology, and the State as a Social Fact', in Staney Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis ed., *State Theory Reconsidered: Paradigm Lost* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 247–268.

[74] International Crisis Group, 'Central African Republic: Anatomy of A Phantom State,' *Africa Report* (International Crisis Group), no 136 (2007), pp. 1–44.

[75] Tatiana Carayannis and Mignonne Fowlis, 'Lessons from African Union-United Nations cooperation in the Central African Republic,' *African Security Review*, 26:2 (2007), pp. 220–236.

[76] Tim Glawion, Lotje de Vries and Andreas Mehler, 'Handle with care! a qualitative comparison of the Fragile States Index's bottom three countries: Central African Republic, Somalia and South Sudan', *Development and Change*, 50:2 (2019), pp. 277–300.

[77] Thierry Vircoulon, 'The Central African Crisis: The Conflict Today', *International Crisis Group*, 20 June 2014. The Central African Crisis: The Conflict Today.

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resonates with interviews that this author did with those who had been on the ground at the time. One senior figure from *Human Rights Watch* explained,

> I have never seen a country like that..it was like..there was no state left to be honest. There was no police, no army, no administration, the only functioning institutions were the religious ones….the Séléka destroyed everything, there was no state to speak of which is scary really, to be in a country like that.[78]

The statement begins to convey that whilst they had witnessed human rights crises before, it was the stateless nature of the country that they found so shocking. In an interview with someone from another NGO, the interviewee recalled being stood in the grounds of their accommodation in CAR and hearing screams of people seemingly being subject to extreme violence whilst at the same time realising that there was no one they could approach for help.[79] They told me they never wish to set foot in the country again and have since left the NGO in question. Reflecting on the stateless state they found themselves dealing with, senior figures in the UN claimed MINUSCA focused on 'everything', as although the mandate was framed as a form of international assistance, 'how can you provide assistance to something that does not exist?'[80] To give a final example, in an interview with a member of the United States Administration who visited Bangui at the time, they described it as an 'inferno'.[81] The metaphor resonates with Graeme Wood's *Hell is an Understatement* following his visit to CAR.[82] Essentially, the situation on the ground was so grave that academics, policymakers, practitioners and journalists struggled to convey what they were witnessing.

The difficulty of making sense of CAR in 2014 reveals two dimensions: the human rights violations and the imagined state. The pressing point here being, it is not the former that is so challenging to imagine as such, but the absence of the state itself. Taking these in order, consider that history is littered with mass atrocities that continue to shape our collective lived experience and learning.[83] For example, in the United Kingdom, studying the Holocaust is compulsory on the National Curriculum.[84] Once someone learns of that horror, one may need, as Primo Levi claimed, a new language to describe it,[85] but one suspects that people can draw on such learning to imagine mass atrocities elsewhere. After all, popular culture conditions us to think about violence daily.[86] As part of this, companies *reimagine violence* to make a profit. For example, Faux's analysis of *Oppenheimer* explains that it brought in $850 million at the box office as it put forth the 'latest reimagining of the dominant and largely masculine imagining of nuclear weapons and war'.[87] Such productions capitalise on the apocalyptic potential and, as a result, alter our understanding of imaginable violence. To return to CAR 2013–15, the point here is not to downplay the grave violations that took place but to suggest that it is simpler to imagine them than it is the stateless nature of the country itself, which brings us onto the second dimension.

To draw an analogy, it is said that 'it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism'.[88] In a similar vein, I propose that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine

[78]Interview with a senior figure from *Human Rights Watch* New York, 29 June 2016.

[79]Interview with a senior member of staff at an NGO, London, July 2016.

[80]Interview with several people from the UN Department of Peace Operations, Department of Political Affairs, the Central African Republic Integrated Team as well as other branches of the UN, online, 17 July 2025.

[81]Interview with a former member of the United States Administration, online, 8 July 2025.

[82]Graeme Wood, 'Hell is an Understatement: A Report from the bloody crumbling Central African Republic', *The New Republic*, 1 May 2014, https://newrepublic.com/article/117519/central-african-republic-conflict-africas-bloodiest-fight.

[83]Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[84]Holocaust Education Trust, 'Holocaust Education in the UK', Holocaust Educational Trust – Holocaust Education in the UK.

[85]Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (Abacus, 2009), pp. 32–33.

[86]Laura L. Finley, ed., *Violence in Popular Culture: American and Global Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

[87]Emily Faux, 'Deserted myths and nuclear realities: Revisiting the symbolism of nuclear weapons in contemporary popular culture through Oppenheimer,' *Media, War and Conflict*, 17:3 (2023), pp. 354–372 (p. 359).

[88]Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (UK: Zero Books, 2022), p. 2.

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stateless states. By which I mean, the Weberian image of the state, like capitalism, is so entrenched that it is difficult to conceive of states that do not fulfil the Weberian image or alternatively reimagine Weberian states as something else. This is why Political Science grapples with *Unthinking the State*.[89] Accordingly, whether being discussed within the context of the failed state paradigm, state theorisation or reimagining states, countries such as CAR are challenging as they ask us to contend with the fact that they are neither Weberian nor non-Weberian yet embody elements of both. By this it is meant that there is a government, security forces, and territorial boundaries (the Weberian image), however, the government is propped up by external actors (discussed below), does not hold a monopoly of violence as armed groups control parts of the country and its territory (like many countries in Africa) has porous borders and large areas that act as 'buffer zones' that are 'not subject to direct control, exclusive domination, or close supervision'.[90] This Weberian non-Weberian ambiguous entanglement is rooted in the postcolonial need to mimic Western states. As Krämer explains, 'independent postcolonial states could only gain agency and an intelligible position to be heard by subjecting themselves to the global order of states, thereby becoming legal subjects – a status they have mostly been denied in their precolonial condition'.[91] In other words, non-Weberian state elites learnt that they had to imitate the Weberian image of the state because this was their only hope for being perceived as legitimate. The outcome, ever since, is a hodgepodge which is unsettling as we have been conditioned to imagine states in either the Weberian image or failing to fulfil it, with the latter often giving rise to the Eurocentric view that lazy or corrupt despots are the root of 'neopatrimonialism' or 'state failure'.[92]

Ten years on from the elections that were meant to bring in a new era of democracy, one could be forgiven for thinking the state is making progress as it fulfils more of the criteria associated with the Weberian image of the state. Yet this is simply a veneer. Vries and Schomerus note that the state remains 'an elusive dream',[93] whilst Marchal explains that the stabilisation supposedly represented by the ballot box is not trickling down,[94] and the Varieties of Democracy survey classifies it as an 'electoral autocracy'.[95] The government is propped up by external actors. MINUSCA has not changed the underlying security dynamics as it acts as a 'long-term substitution of state security apparatus'.[96] Meanwhile, Wagner operates with very different motives as it pursues resource extraction but nonetheless holds up the government.[97] For example, in 2024–25, Wagner was involved in five of the six 'non-international armed conflicts' as it fights armed groups.[98] The ever-present threat posed by armed groups in CAR leads Beninga to coin the term 'désétatisation' as he seeks to capture the state losing its power to such actors who challenge the government's monopoly over

[89] Bratsis, *Unthinking the State.*

[90] Achille Mbembe, 'At the edge of the world: boundaries, territoriality and sovereignty in Africa', translated by Steven Rendall, *Public Culture*, 12:1 (2000), pp. 259–285 (p. 263). This is applied to CAR in Lombard, *Hunting Game,* p. 25.

[91] Krämer 'Why Africa's "weak states" matter', p. 91.

[92] Krämer 'Why Africa's "weak states" matter', p. 81.

[93] Lotje de Vries and Mareike Schomerus, 'They consider themselves very different' disparate dreams of Zande governance across the South Sudan-Central African Republic borderland', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 14:3 (2024), pp. 619–28 (p. 619).

[94] Roland Marchal, 'Centrafrique: La Fabrique d'un Autoritarisme', (Les Études Du CERI. Paris, 2023), p. 56.

[95] Marina Nord, David Altman, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, 'Democracy report 2026: Unravelling the democratic era?' University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, pp. 3–51, p. 45.

[96] Glawion, et al., 'Handle with Care!', p. 291.

[97] Juliette Ganne, 'Localizing Regime Complexity in the Central African Republic: An Ecosystem of Interveners', Ph.D. thesis. The Graduate Institute Geneva, 2025. Available, ThesisJG.pdf, Marchal 'Centrafrique', p. 63, and Bohumil Doboš and Alexander Purton, 'Proxy Neo-colonialism? The Case of Wagner Group in the Central African Republic,' *Insight on Africa,* 16:1 (2023), pp. 7–21. John Lechner, *Death Is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025).

[98] The Geneva Academy, 'War Watch, IHL in Focus Report: 1 July 2024–31 December 2025,' *The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights*, 1–543, 83.

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legitimate violence.[99] This is half-correct in that these de-statised areas are no longer state-like; however, it is not that the advancement of armed groups causes the state to recede, thus revealing non-state-like spaces, but rather their advance exposes that these areas never formalised the state in the first place. The sudden departure of MINUSCA and/or Wagner could set the scene for another civil war, as witnessed in 2013–15, especially as the underlying identity politics have not been resolved.[100]

Whilst the intervention by the Security Council was framed as saving CAR from becoming a failed state, it is more appropriate to view it as trying to save the idea of a state; quite simply, there was no state to be saved. CAR is, therefore, being reimagined by those intervening, even if it is not being reimagined within the literature yet; whilst the academic call to reimagine states is noble, it must be approached with caution.

The limits and harm of reimagining

As touched on above, liberals have self-reflected on the failed state paradigm, yet when one turns to postliberal calls to reimagine states there are only fleeting mentions of the potential harm involved. For example, Cooper warns that there are 'risks in defining the state too expansively' as we lose both specificity and sight of the achievements of the state.[101] To date, however, there have been no substantive discussions. This section identifies four interrelated themes that postliberals must address.

The desires of the population

Postliberal critiques of the failed state paradigm need to address the fact that people may actually want the Weberian state. Prior to the 2013–15 civil war, the *Harvard Humanitarian Initiative* conducted a survey of 1,879 adults in CAR, which evidenced that the population wanted peace.[102] Of course, peace can mean many things.

> When asked about the meaning of peace, respondents define it as a broad social concept that goes beyond the absence of violence and includes the absence of fear (47%), living together united (39%), freedom (34%), having basic needs fulfilled (29%), the absence of violence (26%), a good economy (21%), and health and education services (15%).[103]

The report explains that people knew all too well that the state is failing to provide the services and provisions they desire; however, they still yearned for many of the things associated with the Weberian state. Following the civil war, Gallup polling discovered 54% viewed security as their top priority,[104] whilst the *Harvard Humanitarian Initiative* found respondents focused on the need for security forces such as police.[105] Accordingly, the central tenets of what liberals would view as the

[99]Paul-Crescent Beninga, 'Surdité Politique, Institutionnalisation de La Militarisation Des Revendications Sociopolitiques et Territorialisation En Centrafrique', *Les Cahiers Du CCRAG*, 1: (2022), pp. 39–54.

[100]Suzanne Francis, 'Violence against Muslims: Conquered, not fully colonized, in the making of the Muslim "other" in the Central African Republic,' *African Studies Review*, 68:1 (2025), pp. 68–90. Gino Vlavonou, *Belonging, Identity, and Conflict in the Central African Republic* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2023).

[101]Cooper, 'Introduction', in *Reimagining the State,* p. 6.

[102]Patrick Vinck and Phuong Pham, 'Building Peace, Seeking Justice: A Population Based Survey on Attitudes about Accountability and Social Reconstruction in the Central African Republic', *Human Rights Centre* (University of California, Berkeley, 2010), p. 10.
https://hhi.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum6866/files/humanitarianinitiative/files/building-peace-seeking-justice.pdf.

[103]Vinck and Pham, 'Building Peace', p. 18.

[104]Gallup, 'Security a Top Issue in the Central African Republic, South Sudan', 22 December 2016. Security a Top Issue in Central African Republic, South Sudan.

[105]Patrick Vinck, Phuong Pham, Catherine Kelly and Meyer Timothy, *Justice and Security Diagnostic: Bangui, Central African Republic*. American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative and Harvard Humanitarian, 2017, p. 51. Justice_and_Security_Diagnostic_Bangui_C.pdf.

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Weberian state are evident. As the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index explains, in more recent years concrete survey data has not been available; yet high levels of voter registration, for example, in December 2020, suggest an ongoing commitment to democracy.[106] Clearly, it is not as though the population has experienced the state, rejected it, and desires an alternative. In sharp contrast, the majority hold onto ideals such as democracy and security and define these in liberal terms.

To develop this further, let us turn to the fieldwork conducted by Glawion, Lijn, and Zwaan, as they explain that 'the vast majority of respondents' want the state to have three key characteristics.

> First, it should be as strong as people perceived it to be under former president and emperor Jean-Bédel Bokassa (1966–79), when the state was said to be able to control its frontiers and suppress rebellion. Second, it should be accountable to the needs of the people, using taxes and resource revenues in a traceable manner for the provision of education, health services and infrastructure. Third, it should be decentralized through elections and significant budgeting powers at the local level, such as the village or quarter, and group chiefs and mayors.[107]

The statement clearly resonates with the liberal view of the state, as people want the government to have a monopoly of violence within its territorial boundaries. They favour a tax system that enables the construction of the infrastructure needed to ensure some sense of a good life. This is something that liberals have notably called for in an effort to end the 'cycle of insecurity' in CAR and provide examples of citizens in the country explaining their view that without a tax base the government cannot create the necessary security forces, courts, or other state institutions.[108] Finally, there is the issue of decentralisation, which in part may seem a departure from the classic Weberian image, yet many liberal states have undergone such changes. Ultimately, if this is what the citizens of CAR yearn for, then who are 'outsiders' to suggest that a different image of the state should be implemented?

At this point, the postliberal may simply argue that citizens of CAR want the Weberian state because they have been conditioned to think that this is what a state looks like.[109] Yet clearly those who have conducted extensive research in the country do not share this view. Lombard explains that despite the nature of politics in CAR, its population continues to 'yearn' for the state and that if anything, this has increased in the face of corruption and hollowed-out institutions.[110] Lombard goes on to explain that this cannot simply be dismissed as a form of 'false consciousness' because there are 'problems with trying to argue away the importance of the state': i) it has worked, at least to some extent, in the past; ii) how can international aid be channelled into the country if not through the government; iii) historically, examples of local ownership and attempts to regulate control have been unsuccessful and met with hostility; and iv) the challenge of coordinating so many different people with 'the state' so that they can work together is not easily overcome.[111] This is why Lombard sets out to 'save the state' despite her rejection of rigid state ideals, yet more detail is needed, which brings us to the next two problems.[112]

[106] Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2024 Country Report – Central African Republic. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, pp. 15–16. BTI 2024.

[107] Tim Glawion, Jair Van Der Lijn, and Nikki de Zwaan, *Security Legitimate Stability in CAR: External Assumptions and Local Perspectives*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019, pp. 1–19 (p. 4).

[108] Lise Morjé Howard, Gino Vlavonou, Nina Steinitz, Dr. Yvan Ilunga, 'Assessing the effectiveness of the United Nations multidimensional integrated stabilization mission in the Central African Republic', *Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network*, 2019, pp. 1–131 (pp. 46–53). EPON-MINUSCA-Report.Complete.pdf.

[109] Krickel-Choi et al., 'Embodying the state differently'. Sandhu. *Anticolonial imaginaries in the 'failed state'*, p. 18.

[110] Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, p. 245.

[111] Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, p. 247–252.

[112] Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, pp. 247–254.

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The goals problem

Liberals criticise postliberal critiques of the failed state paradigm on the grounds that they do not provide clear policy prescriptions.[113] Although the work on reimagining the state published since helps make inroads, it still predominantly centres on 'the problem' of the Weberian approach rather than providing a detailed account of alternatives. To put this another way, whilst the Weberian state is anchored upon certain central tenets, establishing what the non-Weberian state looks like is difficult. This is not surprising given that the literature brings together feminists, anarchists, Marxists, and postcolonial theorists (to name just some), and as a result 'there is no easy consensus'.[114] Furthermore, even if we accept and factor in the insight provided by critiques that do not set out to offer normative contributions,[115] the lack of detail does become stifling because when it comes to reimagining the state, the grandiose and often inspiring calls to go beyond what we know, lack clarity over *where* it is 'we' are going or *how* 'we' should get there. It is the former that is the focus here.

The lack of detail is evident in studies on CAR. In Carayannis and Lombard's conclusion to their seminal edited volume *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, it ends with less than three pages devoted to the future of peacebuilding in CAR. They begin with a reminder that 'there are no quick fixes for a defective system' and offer a series of questions: what other possibilities are there? Should there be reconciliation between Muslims and Christian? If so, what should this reconciliation look like? How will citizenship be determined?[116] Sadly, they do not offer answers to these questions. Furthermore, Lombard's subsequent monograph discusses saving the state from the rigid set of ideas embodied in the Weberian state in just five pages.[117] The overarching sentiment being that interveners should focus more on material support and human dignity, but surely many academics from across the liberal-postliberal divide would welcome this. The key difference, at least in relation to Lombard's analysis, is her hope that the state can develop 'organically'.[118] The problem here is that despite the considerable value of Lombard's anthropological research in the country, this specific point appears to be naïve. I am reminded of Lieutenant General Sir Nick Carter's presentation in which he reflected on the British Army's military engagement in Afghanistan.[119] He showed a photo of himself with key local actors and explained that when he first met them he thought that they all shared one vision of what Afghanistan should be; however, over time he learnt that they had radically different views and that these competing interests hindered progress. Although the complexities of Afghanistan cannot be reduced to an anecdotal tale, surely the history of state formation shows that his initial thinking was also naïve. We should expect tensions to arise precisely because actors have competing images of the *[Re]Imagined State*.

What we begin to see, therefore, is that identifying goals is challenging, but also that the boundary between the liberal and postliberal ends to be fulfilled is, at least at times, blurred. For example, in the studies on peace formation in postcolonial states, Brown and Aning explain that some of the contributors 'call for the emergence of an African state' and go on to speak of the need for 'a contemporary state grounded in, intelligible to, and answerable to its own population and their cultures, and serving their collective well-being'.[120] On one hand, therefore, the authors form part of a passionate call to go engage with anti-colonial voices and different historical experiences. However, on the other hand, the African state they envisage resonates strongly with what many

[113]Call, 'Beyond the "failed state"', p. 304. Roland Paris, 'Saving liberal peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies*, 36:1 (2010), pp. 337–365 (p. 339).

[114]Cooper, 'Introduction', in *Reimagining the State,* p. 3.

[115]Raymond Geuss, *A World without Why* (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 68.

[116]Carayannis and Lombard, 'A Concluding Note', pp. 336–338.

[117]Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, pp. 247–252.

[118]Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, pp. 251.

[119]Nick Carter, 'What our military engagement in Afghanistan suggests for the future of conflict', public talk at the University of Leeds, 24 March 2014.

[120]Anne M. Brown and Kwesi Aning, 'Peace Formation in Heterogeneous States', in Kwesi Aning, Volker Boege, M. Anne-Brown and Charles T. Hunt (eds), *Exploring Peace Formation* (Routledge), pp. 226–236 (p. 226).

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liberals would welcome in that they too want governments that are answerable to the people they serve. Furthermore, it is not clear what makes this African state African. As Englebert once wrote, *The Contemporary African State: Neither African nor State.*[121] In Brown and Aning's defence, they go on to explain that the relationship between the state and society in African politics does not play out as envisaged in the Weberian model and stress the need for 'exploring, clarifying and recrafting the relationship between the state's governing bodies and society'.[122] The sentiment is commendable; however, it is unclear why this recrafting cannot be done within the parameters of the Weberian state or should not be done to bring it about.

At times one wonders whether the goals involved are given scant attention because they raise profound and unsettling issues that may be viewed as hindering rather than aiding progress. For example, Brown and Aning point out that everyone who studies African politics would undoubtedly acknowledge the impact of colonialism on state formation; however, in international policy circles this is often not given due consideration, which they pose may be because 'it is not clear what policies or practices to draw from it'.[123] In other words, everyone knows that A, in this case colonialism, has had a significant impact on B, in this example the state, yet when putting forth recommendations, they do not factor A into their thinking because it may be so profound that they are not even sure of the ramifications that stem from it. This would depend very much on the goal in mind. Are the policies being created meant to fulfil the goal of addressing the legacy of colonialism, bring about a stable and prosperous state, facilitate peace, address legitimacy, security, and capacity gaps? Or something else entirely?

The overarching apprehension here is that when it comes to imagined states, the parameters of what is possible seem far greater than in 'mainstream' states, and whilst this may at first appear to be a positive, paradoxically, it may undermine the objective of postliberal approaches. Critics seek to go beyond the Weberian image of the state but create a context in which the citizens of such countries may find themselves victims of overactive imaginations, ungrounded visions of the possible, and unrealistic goals, which in turn beg the question: are these not just postliberal pipe dreams that could do more harm than good? To illustrate this, in the UN's comprehensive review of peacekeeping, it raises 'seven deficits' facing peacebuilding, the first one being 'mindset', as it is claimed '[c]ountries emerging from conflict are not blank pages, and their people are not "projects". They are the main agents of peace.'[124] The statement is critical of international approaches for embodying a one-size-fits-all logic that often marginalises local actors and can, therefore, be interpreted as a call to alter the mindset that is said to dominate liberal peacebuilding. Yet equally, when juxtaposing this statement with the vague recommendations embodied in non-Weberian images of the state, is it not the postliberal approaches that set out highly experimental agendas that unintentionally treat people like projects? At times it feels as though it is the postliberal rather than the liberal that is treating the state in question as a blank page as they speak of unending possibilities and alternative realities.

The transition problem

In Brock's analysis of global justice, they explain that the lack of clarity over how we might transition to where we want to be, from where we are now, is one of the key issues that make up the feasibility critique.[125] It highlights that the goals problem and the transition problem are two sides of the same coin; to transition towards X, you must establish what X is. This has direct relevance for those reimagining states as they seek to reimagine what the state in question should look like (the

[121] Pierre Englebert, 'The Contemporary African State: Neither African nor State', *Third World Quarterly*, 18:4 (1997), pp. 767–775.

[122] Brown and Aning, 'Peace Formation in Heterogeneous States', p. 227.

[123] Brown and Aning, 'Peace Formation in Heterogeneous States', p. 227.

[124] United Nations, 'Comprehensive review of the whole question of Peacekeeping Operations in all their aspects', United Nations General Assembly/Security Council, A/70/95-S/2015/446, pp. 1–104 (p. 48).

[125] Gillian Brock, *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 117.

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goals problem) but also develop principles and strategies to enable this to be brought about (the transition problem).

To illustrate the dual nature of the problem at hand, let us turn to Niemann's critique of the failed state paradigm.[126] They claim that when it comes to the DRC, rather than viewing it in terms of state failure, it is 'more helpful to consider this conflict another and hopefully final step in the process of political transition from a repressive colonial state to a truly postcolonial state'.[127] The statement captures the two-fold issue at hand: what does this 'truly postcolonial state' look like and 'how can it be brought about?' Niemann attempts to answer both: 'the form and shape of such a state must, in the end, be determined through the interplay of powerholders and ordinary people'.[128] The sentiment expressed is commendable in that so-called ordinary people should be involved in determining the nature of the state they live in; however, it runs the risk of placing a huge responsibility on the shoulders of these very people who it seems must overcome both the goals and transition problem themselves whilst negotiating with powerholders. If further clarity is not provided on how these postcolonial states can be brought about (if we assume we know what they look like), then how can checks and balances be identified to reduce the risk of exploitation?

The research on reimagining states does engage with power relations whilst drawing on Marx, Derrida, and Foucault to name just a few. The limitation, however, is that these predominantly focus on transforming Weberian states rather than postcolonial states. For example, reflecting on the contributions to the special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Duggan's *Reimagining the State* explains that the contributions offer three options

> (1)grassroots organizing against the punitive, coercive, violent carceral and surveillance state, as in prison abolition and campaigns to defund the police; (2) social democratic reforms to claim state resources, as in the fight for universal accessible health- and childcare; or (3) organizing to protest the exploitation and violence at the nexus of corporate and state profit machines, as in protests of oil pipelines and environmental degradation.[129]

It is difficult not to be drawn to Duggan's plea for an alternative state within a different world. Indeed, this author supervises a Ph.D. researcher who has engaged with indigenous groups which highlight, first, that they live enriching lifestyles that do not conform to Western expectations, and second, that Western companies continue to destroy their very existence in the name of 'progress'.[130] From a postliberal perspective, these land grabs are in part due to actors 'seeing like a state'.[131] This reiterates the underlying logic of what Miliband refers to as the process of 'bourgeoisification', as the elites, who may be made up of people from different classes, are socialised and conditioned into thinking like the state and in turn advance its interests.[132] In attempting to overcome such issues, however, we need to be cautious when applying transformative visions to states such as CAR.

To illustrate the problem of transition further, let us focus on the goal of accountability. Whether one reads feminists' rejections of the Weberian state for maintaining patriarchal structures,[133] or the lessons to be learnt from postcolonial states,[134] there is a consensus that accountability is needed. To aid this, Ransby builds on Feminist calls to abolish prison systems which, it is claimed, needs

[126]Michael Niemann, 'War making and state making in Central Africa', *Africa Today*, 53:3 (2007), pp. 21–39.

[127]Niemann, 'War Making', p. 34.

[128]Niemann, 'War Making', pp. 34–35.

[129]Duggan, *Reimagining the State,* p. 243.

[130]Jennifer Kennedy, 'Resisting cultural genocide: Territorial destruction and resistance in Panama and Mexico', ongoing. University of Leeds.

[131]Simon Manda and Lizzy Banda, 'Seeing like the state? Customary land pressures and fracturing tenure systems in rural Zambia, *Land Use Policy,* 132: (2023), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2023.106833.

[132]Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. 44, 64, 71.

[133]Barbara Ransby, 'Review of abolition. feminism', *Women's Studies Quarterly,* 51:1&2 (2023), pp. 227–230.

[134]Brown and Aning, 'Peace Formation in Heterogeneous States', p. 228.

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to be done by building 'alternative mechanisms to ensure safety and accountability' and developing 'violence prevention' as it is better than 'violent punishment'.[135] This fits into broader efforts to reimagine the coercive state and the multifaceted nature of social control within it.[136] However, it is a high-risk strategy to suggest that we should advocate dismantling all prisons and, in so doing, place all our eggs in the basket of prevention – what if this fails? The goal, therefore, of accountability is something most people would support, yet the question of how this is brought about in this specific non-Weberian image of the state is vague and highly experimental. Indeed, the 'dysfunctional' legal system was identified by the UN as a root cause of the 2013–14 mass atrocities in CAR,[137] with the lack of functioning prisons identified as a specific problem.[138] Here we gain insight into the problem of having too few rather than too many prisons and the implications that arose as the government could not control the violence within its borders.

The concern, therefore, is that despite the noble intentions of the authors involved, the vague roadmap of transition places an enormous burden on the shoulders of local populations. In so doing, these perspectives run the risk of overstating agency and capacity, especially within states that have experienced mass atrocities. This is not to downplay local populations, as they play a critical role in conflict resolution and help foster buy-in so that institutions such as the courts and police gain the legitimacy they need to be effective in failed states.[139] However, we need to acknowledge the limitations of both external and local actors. For example, studies on CAR show that top-down initiatives do not dictate that peace trickles down,[140] but also highlight that external actors such as MINUSCA have been pivotal in reducing the risk of communal violence by fostering local-level dialogue.[141] Accordingly, if external actors are portrayed as nothing but a problem, or a barrier to radical change, we run the risk of creating counterproductive policies. This is particularly alarming in a country which has experienced so much sexual and gender-based violence. Experimenting with tenets such as the prison system may aid perpetrators rather than victims.

The control problem

At the outset, it is worth noting the complex relationship between control, stability, order and security, the main point being that it does not really matter what one imagines the non-Weberian state to be, as the required policies to bring it about cannot be implemented without first gaining control. This is particularly acute within imagined states, as actors, namely armed groups, compete for control and all that comes with it in these non-Weberian spaces. Once again, we see how the issues are interlinked, as the transition, to whatever the goals may be, needs to address the issue of control because if it does not, then the goals in question will never be achieved.

To consider this, let us turn to Howard's defence of peacekeeping, in which she takes on Lombard's position and, in so doing, articulates the overarching concern here,

> Although I agree that reimagining what might count as "the state" may be necessary for Central Africa, I contend that Lombard and others miss the centrality of violence and its control as a defining characteristic of any legitimate state or foreign intervener.[142]

[135] Ransby, 'Review of abolition. feminism', *Women's Studies Quarterly,* 51:1&2 (2023), pp. 227–228.

[136] John Clarke, 'Harmful thoughts: Reimagining the coercive state?' in Kwesi Aning, Volker Boege, M. Anne-Brown and Charles T. Hunt (eds), *Reimagining the State* (Routledge), pp. 171–190.

[137] United Nations, 'The international commission of inquiry on the Central African Republic, final report'. S/2014/928, 22 December 2014, p. 20. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2014_928.pdf.

[138] Evan Cinq-Mars, *Too little, too late: Failing to prevent atrocities in the Central African Republic*, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 7: (2015), pp. 1–22 (p. 6).

[139] Aning and Aubyn, in *Exploring Peace Formation*, p. 33.

[140] Duursma, 'State Weakness'.

[141] Allard Duursma, 'Political solutions to political problems: UN peacekeeping operations and dialogue-based protection of civilians in communal conflicts', *International Peace Institute*, September 18 (2025), pp. 1–10.

[142] Lise Morjé Howard, *Power in Peacekeeping* (Cambridge University Press 2019), p. 152.

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The statement is rooted in the Weberian image of the state in that governments need to have a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force. On too many occasions we have seen that if a state does not control violence, violence controls the state. The implications for the populations involved are often horrific. This is why even leading critics of liberal interventionism accept that stability and control are needed, as much of human progress has depended on it.[143] In CAR, we see that widespread and systematic human rights violations became everyday practice as state and anti-government forces fought civil wars in the post-Cold War era.

To return to the links between the four issue areas raised here, it is the lived experiences of the population in CAR which drive their desire for security, which they perceive will only come with the Weberian state. Thus, whilst Glawion's study of security in CAR is highly critical of top-down approaches, he acknowledges that '[a] dominant expectation of the state is to provide stable ordering in the domain of security. Local inhabitants often raise this demand and non-state actors can claim their own legitimacy precisely when the state does not deliver predictable security.'[144] At the local level, the population sees what happens when spaces emerge for non-state actors to step in. This is neatly illustrated by the contemporary presence of Wagner, as despite the violent methods used, there are still many sections of society that view them in a positive light.[145] Whilst one can find many civilians who oppose their presence, when the government fails to control violence, this opens a space within which other actors can operate and enter into the legitimisation process.

To return to postliberal discussions of territory, the reader may question why, in a country such as CAR, alternative forms of control such as rebel governance cannot be advocated.[146] Again, we need to tread carefully. For example, Glawion and Le Noan's study of Ndélé in CAR, which was controlled by rebels for seven years, found there was no causal relationship between the rebels holding control on one hand and progress in terms of security and education on the other.[147] The improvements were made despite, not because of, rebel rule. They discovered rebels were a root cause of insecurity at the local level and warn that external actors seeking to protect civilians should not assume rebel governance is taking place when, in fact, it is rebel extraction. The combination of an 'incapacitated state and disinterested rebels' saw locals praise international development organisations for providing public goods yet criticised them for failing to provide security by confronting rebels.[148] In short, therefore, we should not fall into the trap of romanticising non-state forms of governance as we imagine alternatives to the state. This is captured in a study of Zande governance across the South Sudan-CAR borderland as Vries and Schomerus explain that the independence of the former invited 'dreams of alternative governance and authority' yet they explain that CAR offers little inspiration for 'governance alternatives'[149] as people project their 'hopes and dreams onto the state', as opposed to the reinstatement of the Zande kingdom, because they want the army to 'protect the external borders'.[150] Here we again see the linkages between the themes raised, as the will of the people is for the government to take control.

Whilst postliberals may reject such views on the grounds that the people have been conditioned by liberal theorising, the need to gain a monopoly of violence seems particularly prevalent

[143]Roger Mac Ginty, 'Against stabilization', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development,* 1:1 (2012), pp. 20–30 (p. 26).

[144]Glawion, *The Security Arena,* p. 143.

[145]Yemisi Adegoke, 'Why Wagner is winning hearts in the Central African Republic,' British Broadcasting Corporation, 2023, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-67625139 accessed 1 September 2026. Also, Lechner, *Death Is Our Business.*

[146]Zachariah C. Mampilly and Megan A. Stewart, 'A typology of rebel political institutional arrangements', *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 65:1 (2020), pp. 15–45.

[147]Tim Glawion and Anne-Clémence Le Noan, 'Rebel governance or governance in rebel territory? Extraction and services in Ndélé, Central African Republic', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 34:1 (2023), pp. 24–51.

[148]Tim Glawion, 'Living up to popular expectations during intervention: Filling voids and confronting spoilers in the Central African Republic and beyond', *International Peacekeeping*, 32:3 (2025), pp. 299–326 (p. 302).

[149]Vries and Schomerus, 'They Consider Themselves Very Different', p. 619.

[150]Vries and Schomerus, 'They Consider Themselves Very Different', p. 624.

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in societies that have experienced, or are experiencing, mass atrocity crimes. Thus, to return to the question, 'what should CAR look like?' it is difficult to defend any conception of the state that does not seek to establish a legitimated monopoly over the use of force.

Conclusion

The article introduces the *Imagined State* and applies it to CAR in that conceiving of it in either the Weberian or the non-Weberian image is challenging. This is important because it calls on liberals to reflect further on the idea that interveners can save the state, as it proposes that they are in fact saving the idea of the state, and to do so, they have to first create it and be aware that, in so doing, they are reimagining the state through a liberal prism. Here, there is a pressing need to engage with the reimagining states agenda which, to date, has neglected the so-called failed state paradigm. Postliberals are right to point out that many countries have developed in a radically different manner to that set out in liberal state theorisation. As a result, they question the feasibility of creating the Weberian image of the state in what this article identifies as imagined states. Yet postliberals themselves fail to reflect on the harm and limitations embodied in the reimagining agenda, which is exposed by imagined states such as CAR. The article identifies four themes: i) the desires of the population; ii) the goals problem: what the state should look like; iii) the transition problem: how should this state be brought about; and iv) the control problem: an inability to establish a legitimate monopoly of violence. These themes can also aid future research into other cases of imagined states, with Afghanistan, DRC, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Yemen being pertinent examples. The overarching fear is that attempts to bring postliberal voices to the fore run the risk of placing a tremendous burden on vulnerable populations who may find themselves the victims of unbounded imaginations and unrealistic goals.

To end, let us return to the English School's commitment to theoretical pluralism. This is not to suggest fundamental divisions between different approaches can be overcome, but that there should be an ongoing conversation to facilitate a more holistic understanding.[151] Postliberal critiques of liberal state theorisation are undoubtedly valuable as they help expose blind spots and remind us not to reinforce harmful structures and narratives. Equally, however, we need not throw the [liberal] baby out with the bathwater by overlooking the value of the Weberian state. In a similar vein, the fact that postliberals have neglected so-called failed states when reimagining states does not in and of itself mean that the reimagining agenda is a dead-end street. The four problems identified in this article are not necessarily insurmountable; it is simply that academics have a responsibility to address these in relation to imagined states; otherwise, they run the risk of engaging in irresponsible reimagining.

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[151] Richard Little, 'History, theory and methodological pluralism in the English school', in Cornelia Navari (eds). *Theorising International Society: English School Methods* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2009), pp. 78–103 (pp. 89–94).

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larger projects. First, the outputs from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project with Dr. Helena Hinkkainen (PI) on 'Explaining Non-State Armed Groups Perpetrating Mass Atrocities' in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Nigeria. Second, a monograph entitled *Saving States to Save Strangers: Mass Atrocity Protection in the Central African Republic*, which will hopefully be published in 2027.

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