

15 January 2023
Joint evaluation report,
Marius Swane Wishman PhD thesis, NTNU

Introduction

Marius Swane Wishman submitted his thesis “Janus-faced: Historical statehood and organized violence” for the degree of PhD in Political Science at NTNU on 13 September 2022. To assess the scientific merit of the thesis, the Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences, NTNU, appointed the following evaluation committee: Professor Tore Wig, University of Oslo; Senior Lecturer, Dr. Florian G. Kern, University of Essex; and Professor Halvard Buhaug, NTNU and PRIO (administrator). This report summarizes the committee’s assessment and substantiates the final recommendation. In brief, the committee finds the thesis worthy of public defense for the doctoral degree.

The thesis consists of an introductory chapter and four independent papers. Three of the chapters are co-authored, two of which are already published. Each chapter is also accompanied by a technical appendix with additional documentation and empirical tests. The overall length of the thesis is 269 pages. The thesis addresses the following research question (p. 3): “How is organized violence shaped by the underlying topography of historical statehood?” The main argument developed in the thesis is that historical statehood (HSE) may both increase and decrease contemporary conflict risk, depending on the type of conflict in question, the number of overlapping historical states in a location, and the degree of spatial overlap between historical and modern states. To test the association between historical statehood and contemporary conflict, the thesis contains three papers (Chapters 3-5) with novel quantitative empirical analyses at various levels of resolution. Two of these chapters focus on Africa whereas the third is global in scope. The thesis also presents two new datasets: Chapter 2 introduces the Anatomy of Resistance Campaigns (ARC) dataset whereas Chapter 5 introduces and makes use of new georeferenced data (Geo-ISD) on historical African states.

General comments, including to the introduction

There is much to like in this thesis. The overarching focus on legacies of past political structures for present-day conflict is important and very welcome. In so doing, the thesis breaks with the dominant and naïve approach in quantitative peace and conflict studies to seek explanations for recent events by looking exclusively at contemporaneous factors and conditions. Although the thesis is not the first to propose an imprint of historical statehood on modern conflict, it brings attention to underexplored spatial dynamics of the relationship as well as how this may vary across configurations of actors (notably civil versus communal conflict). This is not a trivial undertaking. Another impressive and important contribution of the thesis is the provision of two new datasets, both of which are likely to see considerable use by peers when they are made available. The fact that two of the chapters already are published in reputable peer-review journals is further evidence of a significant contribution to the discipline.

Yet, as with any scientific work, some parts of the thesis are unclear, suffer from shortcomings, or warrant further development in order to maximize comprehensiveness and rigor. It is the nature of doctoral evaluation reports such as this that most of the subsequent discussion focuses on areas of improvement.

A first aspect of the thesis that the committee finds underdeveloped concerns the conceptualization of terminology and proposed causal processes. The different chapters define individual concepts well, but a more overarching presentation of the compound idea is mostly missing. Relatedly, the thesis uses the terms “historical” and “pre-colonial” states interchangeably, but it is not always clear that the polities in question are “pre-colonial”, nor to what extent the thesis distinguishes those entities which still have a manifest presence in Africa from those which do not. Much colonization started before these polities were coded (from 1800 onwards). This should have been discussed more, ideally as part of a more comprehensive, self-contained overarching theoretical framework, to guide the subsequent empirical analyses. As it now stands, the theoretical contribution of the thesis consists mainly a collection of different mechanisms with (sometimes) different assumptions behind them.

The absence of such an overarching theoretical framework results in seeming incompatibilities and some inherent tension between the empirical chapters. For example, it is not clear why the mechanisms outlined in chapter 4 (e.g., Fig. 4.1) do not apply similarly to interaction between state and non-state actors (ch. 3 and 5). The committee believes the thesis would have been significantly improved by offering a more developed introductory chapter that could better elucidate how the different chapters complement each other, theoretically as well as empirically, and outline what might be reasonable implications of this work for (a) the field’s understanding of how historical statehood shapes present-day societies as compared to rivaling or complementing explanations, (b) the contribution to social science more generally in addition to peace and conflict studies narrowly defined, and (c) the candidate’s future research agenda.

Thirdly, the committee notes an untapped potential for further exploration of what the distance measure really is capturing. In many cases, the fact that an HSE is close to the capital would suggest that the ethnic group of the HSE remains in power today (with the ability to locate the capital in its ancestral homeland). One way to explore this could be to code whether the historical capital of an ethnic group constitutes the current capital city and compare that to the estimated distance effect. Furthermore, if an HSE is close to the capital but some other group is in power in the capital today, how does geographical proximity matter in this case? Being “close” to the capital shouldn’t really matter if the group is excluded from power, for example. Furthermore, it seems implausible to assume that being 1000 km away from the capital should matter more than, say, being 500 km away, if both groups are excluded from political power. In short, the distance measure is likely to capture underlying spatial and political configurations of politically relevant ethnic groups, and the results could reflect that.

Although the thesis relies on state-of-the-art data at various levels of spatial resolution, certain aspects of the methodology and inference could have been improved. For example, the thesis uses causal language of “effects” when interpreting (cross-sectional) correlations throughout without clarifying what assumptions are necessary to draw causal conclusions. The introductory part of the thesis would have been improved in this respect by a more thorough discussion of causality (what is the approach taken to causality in the thesis, what are the strategies for inference, etc.). Most of the chapters suffer from inattention to causal inference, and would have been improved by more discussion and care. Being clear about identifying assumptions and limits to causal interpretations is now the state of the art.

Relatedly, the thesis would have benefit from more detailed exploration of the causal mechanisms proposed, be it through more focused quantitative analysis or further qualitative inference. An example of a concern relating to causal inference is potential endogeneity between historical conflict and the configuration of present states (e.g., the location of national capitals). The presence of many historical states can reflect unresolved conflicts that never resulted in congruence between the state and the historical “nation”. Moreover, more could have been said about the substantive importance of the uncovered correlations – how does the “effect” of historical statehood rank compared to other well-established explanations of conflict that we have much evidence about?

Fifth, the thesis engages almost exclusively with the quantitative branch of peace research, but the community and discipline are of course much broader. Relevant questions that could have been explored to enrich the discussion include: What could the more case-based, qualitative literature learn from these findings? What lessons are we learning here that speak to more multi-method research going forward? Moreover, there is a lot of good literature by African and other Global South authors that is not cited here.

A final, general comment to the thesis concerns the contribution of the candidate to the co-authored chapters. Short statements on author contributions are offered in a separate attachment to the thesis, but it would have been helpful if the introduction had elaborated a bit on where the individual contribution sits of the overall dissertation as compared to the collective contribution.

Comments to the empirical chapters

Chapter 2 is an article presenting the Anatomy of Resistance Campaigns (ARC) dataset, published in the *Journal of Peace Research* (Butcher et al. 2022). This is an impressive and useful contribution to the research community, but how well does it fit with the rest of the dissertation? There is little evidence of overlap with the other chapters and the article does not address the posed research question guiding the doctoral project (i.e., the chapter does not consider potential influence of historical statehood on contemporary resistance campaigns). Given that the candidate’s contribution to this article also appears to be quite limited, it is not clear to the committee what purpose Chapter 2 serves in the doctoral thesis.

Chapter 3, which is co-authored with the candidate's main supervisor and published in the *European Journal of International Relations* (Wishman & Butcher 2022), studies the degree of overlap between current and historical states and the frequency of civil conflict at global scale. The idea of multi-ethnic empires is very intriguing, and clearly an improvement over a narrow focus on ethnicity. At the same time, the theoretical focus is limited to considering the sheer number of overlapping historical units. There is a spectrum of ways in which historical states were organized; in what ways do (or do not) qualitative differences between historical states moderate the proposed association? And to what extent does the analysis account for institutional changes over time?

Chapter 4 shifts focus to how pre-colonial states shape modern communal conflict in Africa. It is an unpublished manuscript co-authored with a former colleague at the department. Similarly to the previous chapter, the dichotomous treatment of historical states leaves theoretical nuance (and potential empirical insights) to be desired. What role might various pre-colonial institutions play in facilitating or moderating the proposed theoretical mechanisms? A more in-depth case study to supplement the statistical analysis could be an effective way to validate and substantiate the uncovered correlations and bridge the gap to the theoretical argument.

Chapter 5 is a solo-authored unpublished manuscript, studying the conditional nature of the HSE-civil conflict relationship, relying on newly collected high-resolution digital "topography" maps of historical African states. The idea of fuzzy borders is really intriguing because it reflects the non-hegemonic pre-colonial state in Africa. Yet, one gets the feeling that the theoretical argument is driven by the possibility of empirical measures (distance to the capital). Would it be possible to better account for variations in the influence of customary institutions, for example by separating those that still have a manifest presence today from those that do not, or only have marginal presence? In addition, many of these institutions were not just altered by the slave trade and colonial powers, but also by the current state in terms of integration and exclusion. How is this accounted for here or does it not matter?

Verdict

Judged in terms of sheer volume, there is no doubt that the submitted work exceeds the minimum expectation for what constitutes a doctoral dissertation with some margin. In terms of scientific contribution to peace and conflict research, the thesis also fills a clear niche, presenting novel empirical findings drawing partly on own collected data. These are the main strengths of the submitted work. As a thesis consisting of an introduction and four stand-alone papers, the committee found the work to be clearly connected and sufficiently coherent, with the exception of one published article. The committee also believes that the candidate's contributions to the co-authored papers, in combination with two solo-authored chapters, jointly fulfill the independence criterion. In conclusion, this evaluation finds the thesis worthy of the doctoral degree and recommends that Wishman is given a chance to discuss his work in a public defense. This recommendation is unanimous. The committee would like to end by stating that they really enjoyed reading Wishman's work and would like to congratulate him on his achievement.

F. Kern

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