

# State Fragility: Some Reflections

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Some examples

Take aways:

What we have learnt

The missing knowledge

How to do it

Research Studies in  
Democratic Republic of the Congo



# 1. On the Origins of the State (JPE, 2020)

## • The environment

- Some places: absence of central state
- People use violence, and organize it
- Sometimes they use force for banditry/expropriation
- Other times, they use force to create state functions

## • The question

- When do armed actors create state functions?
  - Taxation, protection, monopoly of violence
- Naïve conjecture: economic incentives?





# Flaws in the approach and later progress

- **Implications for state-building**

- “Monopoly of taxation without a monopoly of violence” (ReStud 2024)
- Implications: when the state is “weak”
  - confronting armed groups can undermine their incentives to protect
  - Bargaining with armed groups can destroy the state

- **This ignored the really existing institutions: customary chiefs**

- “From Indirect to Direct Rule” (*working paper*)
- Implications: the logic of colonial empires institutions, but also of weak state governance

- **This ignored the social origin of these armed groups**

- Community creates militias, through chiefs, to provide security
- Implication: demand and conflict theories of state formation co-exist

## 2. Whither Formal Contracts? (ECMCA 2021)

- **Question**

- what is the effect of expanding a weak state contract enforcement?

- **Field Experiment** (Bukavu)

- Create a market, to experiment with state contracts and observe who pays

- **Findings:** nuances notion of weak state and suggests informality has advantages

- Society has governance of transactions that compares with state (ethnic)
- The state can actually enforce contracts, but controlled by dominant groups

### 3. The Real State (AER, 2024)

- **Some problems that motivate the inquiry**

# Traffic jams in Kinshasa



### 3. The Real State (AER, 2024)

- **Question:** How is Corruption organized and how does that matter?
- **The study: Kinshasa 2015**
  - Drawing on years of relationships along with anthropologist and insider
  - Commanders agree to vary (experimentally) aspects of corruption scheme
  - Civilians, Min of Fin, Transport Agency to create data collection systems (160)

# 3. The Real State (AER, 2024)

- **Descriptive findings**

- A scheme called “quota system” based on coalition of officers inside stations
- Generates 5 times more income than that which is visible in statistics
- Based on *extorting* drivers

- **Experiment findings**

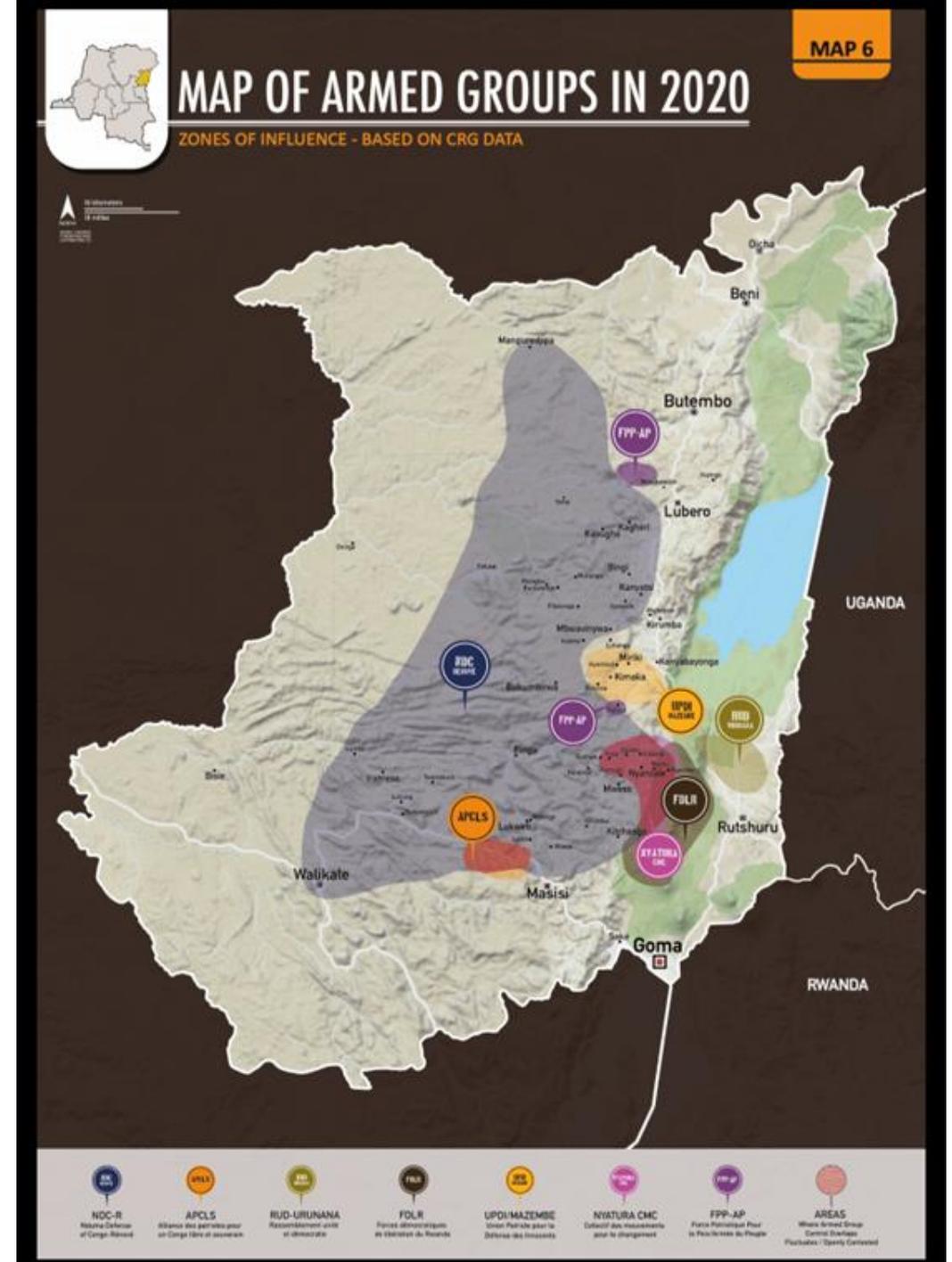
- The scheme is costly for public service (traffic jams, accidents, deterrence)

- **Implication**

- The *really existing* state actually has capacity
- Funds officials income, operating costs, but also undermines some service

# 4. Moral Violence (2025)

- **Question:**
  - Do social preferences fuel violence?
- **What the study does**
  - Major armed groups of DRC
  - Real-time monitoring system inside HR division
  - 10-year long personal friendship
- **Answer**
  - Joiners are more prosocial than the rest
  - Joiners suppress their empathy to enemy
  - Environment of morality of war
    - that justifies joining and killing enemy (genocidal)



# Some take-aways I: What we have learnt

- **Better to think of state functions than of “states”** (state system)
  - The provision of those is deeply embedded in informal institutions
- **Formal state can undermine stability of informal state functions**
- **Nuances notion of weak state**
  - Not that it can't do, but that it does not want to (society has taken over)
  - Not weak actually, but you just can't see how it works (real governance)

# Some take-aways I: What we have learnt

- **Historically**, most societies have been in a form of “fragile states”
  - The “Weberian” state is an anomaly in the historical process
- **Intellectually**
  - There is a gap: since Douglas North, economists study institutions (again)
  - But how those work in “weak” state is poorly understood
- **Contribution to humanity’s experience**
  - “the contribution of this tradition to the general experience of humanity” (Paths in the Rainforest, Vansina, 1990).

# Some take aways II: Three types of questions

- **Can “we”? Policy**
  - Technocrat advice: long-run vs short-run trade off (applicable?)
- **Understanding fundamentals of human collective behavior**
  - Social democratic mission: consultant for the people of fragile states
- **Understanding causes and effects of events of historical importance**
  - Eg. Effect of the slave trade today
  - Important for social justice but also for implications of critical junctures

# Some take aways II: The missing knowledge

- **Descriptive studies**

- “We” don’t know anything about how society organizes itself in a fragile state (only the participants do, which are rarely the researchers)

- **Quasi-experimental studies**

- Critical junctures

- **Experiments about institutions**

- More than about what works – inductive research to contribute to cumulative knowledge about how fragile state institutions work

# Some take-aways III: How to?

- **Creation of measurement where there isn't**
  - Extremely high reward to creative measurements
  - Creation of data collection capacity (e.g., Marakuja)
- **Personal friendships/relationships**
  - For the efficiency of data collection (labor relations)
  - To develop the questions in the first place
- **Ethical and legal risks** (IRB is not prepared, legal counsel, local actors)

# Some Take-aways III: How to? *Positionality*

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- Who are the “fragile states”? European Imperialism
- Who are the “researchers”? Typically from US/Europe
- Who is the audience of the researchers: Typically from US/Europe

“We”: who is we and who is we talking to and what for?



ECOLE

GUYS, I THINK I HAVE  
CREATED A MONSTER!!

ODS

ANY DOT ID

# Some Take-aways III: How to?

- **Implications**

- Research on Fragile States is at its infancy
- This is precisely why the “anthropological” side
- This is also why must reflect on relationships of power
  - Who you want to be as a human being
  - But just as important for quality of research

# Some Take-aways III: How to?

- **Fielwork and qualitative human-centered work**
  - You cannot do social science without doing qualitative work. It is the very basis of it.
- **Embracing subjectivity:** « *Subjectivist social science* »
  - Physics: cannot talk to apples or ask them how they feel
  - Social science: infinite ways of acquiring knowledge (body language, probe, spend time together, share experience)
- **Social Science Technology: Empathy**
  - Affective empathy
  - Emotional empathy
  - Cognitive empathy