

Conceptualising state collapse: an institutionalist approach

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This paper proposes a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous conceptualisation of state collapse. It seeks to overcome several key deficits of research into fragile, failed and collapsed states, which is often criticised as normatively problematic and methodologically deficient. We argue that this is a worthwhile topic to study but that scholarly inquiry needs to become more systematic and focus on extreme cases of state collapse. Following a Weberian institutionalist tradition, we disaggregate statehood into three dimensions of state capacity: making and enforcing binding rules, monopolising the means of violence and collecting taxes. We then propose a set of indicators as well as a mode of aggregation based on necessary and sufficient conditions. Our framework identifies 17 cases of state collapse in the postcolonial era.

Keywords: state collapse; concept formation; fragile states

Introduction

The state is back. After being out of fashion for decades, the institution of the state is now perceived as a source of peace and well-being. Consequently ‘state fragility’ and ‘state collapse’ are thought to be a challenge to security and development in the global South. However, more work needs to be done to improve the analytical viability of these buzzwords.

This paper takes two recent critiques as points of departure. The first is that looking at state fragility in the broadest sense makes the concept too difficult to operationalise and lumps together very different phenomena underneath the same umbrella. Authors like Call and Ulfelder have therefore advocated a focus on more extreme and clear-cut cases, tightening the scope of inquiry from *fragile* states to *collapsed* states.¹ A second critique holds that current approaches are insufficiently theorised.²

To rectify these problems, this paper proposes a conceptualisation of state collapse that is theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous. We argue that ‘state fragility’ is a worthwhile topic to study but that scholarly inquiry needs to become more systematic. To this end, we develop a concept of state

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collapse that is anchored in a Weberian institutionalist understanding of statehood. We use Goertz's method of concept building to derive a notion of state collapse that is disaggregated into three essential dimensions of state capacity: making and enforcing binding rules, monopolising the means of violence and collecting taxes.³ We then employ this concept to identify 17 cases of state collapse in the postcolonial era (1960–2007).

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we give a brief survey of current debates in the research field. Thereafter we present our concept of state collapse by first elaborating a Weberian theory of the state and deriving a multidimensional operationalisation from it. Next we use our concept of collapse and present results from an empirical survey of the postcolonial world. The concluding part summarises our argument about the merits and limitations of our approach and lays out some directions for future research.

Sorting the field of fragile states research

Ever since the emergence of the research field there have been struggles over how to define, delineate, measure and rank 'fragile', 'failed' or 'collapsed states'. Bueger and Bethke identify four stages in the development of the field:

Only loosely mentioned in academia of the late 1980s (phase one), the concept was extended to numerous disciplines and foreign policy makers in the 1990s (phase two), it was securitised and globalised in the early 2000s (phase three), and in a contemporary phase (phase four) there has been a double trend of homogenisation through quantification and heterogenisation through criticism.⁴

This article engages with the debates in the fourth phase: we first present attempts to quantify and measure state fragility and collapse. As for the heterogenisation dynamic, we present two strands of critique – one analytical, one normative.

Quantification

There are several projects that strive to quantify state fragility. On the academic side the best-known ones include the *Fragile States Index* (FSI, previously called the Failed States Index), the *Index of State Fragility* (ISF), the *State Fragility Index* (SFI) and the *Index of State Weakness* (ISW).⁵ These indices typically employ aggregate data gathered by other researchers. All four indices take a very broad approach to state fragility, using indicators like infant mortality, the rate of deforestation and GDP to assess the capacity of the state.⁶

The problems with these 'kitchen sink' approaches are twofold. First, they overstretch the notion of fragility by lumping a diffuse set of crisis indicators together in the same conceptual basket. Second, they curtail opportunities for causal analysis since most potential explanatory variables are already part of the definition. Furthermore, none of the four projects explicitly deals with issues of weighting. Some are also biased towards democracies.⁷ The most important shortcoming is the lack of validity: by subsuming several different sub-indicators within the concept of state fragility, these approaches measure a random amalgamation of conflict potential, level of development and good governance.

In spite of these methodological deficiencies, these indices – particularly the FSI – have received political and public attention and have also been employed in other research.

Critique

In a separate development the entire research field has been subject to two major strands of critique. The first comes from a critical, normative perspective that challenges the discourse as such. The second is more analytical and strives for a re-conceptualisation of state fragility and state collapse.

Critical IR literature problematises the effects of the ‘state-building’ paradigm in international interventions in non-Western states. Some contributions discuss how the dynamics of statehood are globalised by international interventions.⁸ Wilén condenses the paradox of these contemporary interventions: while aiming at ‘state building’ they encroach on state sovereignty.⁹ With regard to its ontological implications the ‘failed states’ discourse is thought to depoliticise the non-Western state by picturing it as a pathological case, by the ‘creolization of the African world’.¹⁰ The effect of this depoliticisation is the legitimisation of intervention, either by international agencies or by Western states.

A more radical position highlights the normative conception that underlies the research domain of fragile statehood: states are measured with reference to a Weberian, liberal idea of modern statehood. However, this ideal was developed in a very particular political setting in Late Middle Age to Early Modern Europe, whereas power relations in contemporary non-Western states are conditioned by different endogenous and exogenous structures. On the global level the state is the dominant political idea, but it has to compete with other modes of governance on the level of societies.¹¹ The argument is brought up in particular by postcolonial studies, area studies on non-Western regions and ‘functionalist approaches’ that try to grasp the alternatives to ‘modern statehood’ with concepts such as ‘twilight institutions’ or ‘social orders’.¹² The notion of hybrid political orders catches the simultaneity of the formal – modern state institutions – and the informal – traditional, customary, social institutions.¹³ Schlichte even claims that ‘state failure’ is no more than a discursive product without a corresponding empirical phenomenon.¹⁴

Recently sociological and anthropological views on the state have also joined the debate. Sociological notions point to the embeddedness of ongoing state-building projects in long-term struggles over the institutionalisation of power relations.¹⁵ The anthropology of the state adds an ideational level to the institutionalist and functionalist dimensions of statehood and looks at individuals’ images of the state or state practices.¹⁶

These critiques highlight important shortcomings in our understanding of fragile states, eg regarding the relation between ideals and institutions of the formal state with social orders, informal institutions and societal norms. However, we believe that state fragility and state collapse are still worthwhile subjects of study, as politically loaded as these terms may be. The cases we identify below are examples of periods of political, social and economic crises that are characterised by excessive intra-societal violence. Similar to Putzel and Di John’s notion of ‘crisis states’,¹⁷ we believe that the reasons for resilience and

catastrophe can be located in the institution of the state. Furthermore, while an institutionalist understanding of the state can be criticised on many grounds, it represents the dominant global ideal of political organisation. Citizens and political elites around the world subscribe to it. Approaching the issue in these widely understood terms has merit for comparative research in particular.

Re-conceptualisation

A second strand of critique does not seek to overturn the entire academic discourse about fragile states, but rather to improve it. Partly motivated by the failure to develop a good index measure of state fragility, several authors have started to rethink the conceptual foundations of the field. Most responses follow two different approaches: the first argues for a significant tightening of the concept to focus on extreme cases of state collapse, the second argues in favour of disaggregating fragility into more specific subtypes. We shall discuss these arguments in turn.

In the first approach Call and Ulfelder argue that concepts of state failure and state fragility should be abandoned entirely, arguing that these are too broad and too vague.¹⁸ This conceptual overstretch is said to produce two problems: first, the line between failed/fragile and non-failed/non-fragile states is impossible to define; and, second, cases within the group of failed/fragile states are too different, making comparison almost impossible. Hence, they argue, scientists should focus on the extreme instances of failure, which they call 'state collapse'.¹⁹

For Call, state collapse refers to the all-encompassing failure of state institutions to provide any meaningful output:

It refers to countries whose state apparatus ceases to exist for a period of several months. The concept here does not refer to the inability of some ministries to provide services, or to a state under siege in warfare, nor to an absence of the state in some regions, but to a complete collapse of a national state. Here citizens do not know where to go to obtain a recognised passport, and all services normally provided by the state are provided by sub-state or non-state actors.²⁰

By contrast Ulfelder focuses on one particular issue as an indicator of collapse:

A state collapse occurs when a sovereign state fails to provide public order in at least one-half of its territory or in its capital city for at least 30 consecutive days. A sovereign state is regarded as failing to provide public order in a particular area when a) an organised challenger, usually a rebel group or regional government, effectively controls that area; b) lawlessness pervades in that area; or c) both.²¹

The second approach takes a different way to cope with the empirical diversity of 'fragile states'. In contrast to the first, it does not suggest a re-conceptualisation, but tries to identify the groups of states that make up this amorphous totality. Such an approach can draw on many different attempts to disentangle the constituent parts of (fragile) statehood. Patrick makes a fundamental distinction between the inability and the unwillingness of a state to fulfil its functions.²² Ghani et al emphasise the need for effectiveness and legitimacy in state

building.²³ Still others, like the Commission for Weak States and US National Security, identify gaps in the ‘three functions that effective governments must be able to perform: ensuring security, meeting the basic needs of citizens, and maintaining legitimacy’.²⁴ Call furthers this approach by disaggregating state failure into a capacity gap, a legitimacy gap and a security gap.²⁵ Building upon these earlier contributions, Grävingholt et al disaggregate functional statehood into the components of authority, capacity and legitimacy and develop an empirical typology that identifies seven major clusters of states.²⁶

In practice the differences between the first and the second approach should not be overstated. It is easily possible to use the more fine-grained methodologies of the second approach to identify cases of state collapse, as advocated by the first approach. For instance, Carment and Samy mention that countries with gaps in all three dimensions, like ‘Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, DRC and Chad might all be characterised as either failed or collapsed’.²⁷

The conceptual debate has infused the research field with a new vitality. However, we see a serious weakness in that key contributions seem to have no underlying theory of the state. While all provide definitions of state fragility or collapse, and many duly refer to the work of Max Weber, the link between their theoretical foundation and their concept of state fragility remains unclear. For example, Grävingholt et al do not discuss why differentiating statehood into the dimensions of authority, legitimacy and capacity is the best and most logical choice.²⁸ Without a theory of the state, these choices are arbitrary.

We draw two conclusions from this debate. First, statehood needs to be understood as a multidimensional, multi-causal concept. Second, drawing a distinction between fragile and non-fragile states is challenging. Focusing on extreme cases would reduce the uncertainty somewhat, even though we still need some sort of threshold-based definition. A clear theory of the state is necessary to provide guideposts that help us derive and justify such a threshold.

Conceptualising state collapse

A definition of state collapse has to proceed from a theory of the state. Hay and Lister offer a genealogy of the concept of the state that places a Weberian understanding at the centre of a heterogeneous mainstream of institutionalist, pluralist, Marxist/Gramscian and public choice theories.²⁹ In recent decades this mainstream has been challenged by feminist and post-structuralist (Foucauldian and discourse analysis) approaches. The latter posit that the state does not exist *per se* but should be understood as an *effect* of power relations; they criticise the reification of the state as an actor in mainstream theories.³⁰

We follow Barrow’s claim that the state is an essentially contested concept and that ‘specific concepts of the state are linked to particular methodological assumptions’.³¹ In line with a positivist epistemological position we base our choice of theory on two pragmatic considerations. First, since our main objective is to improve the empirical analysis of state collapse, we need a concept of the state that is amenable to comparative research. To facilitate dialogue, we also prefer concepts that are already being used in research on fragile and collapsed states. Thus we opt for an ideal-type definition of state, which is the (sometimes implicit) standard in the literature on fragile states. Methodologically

this means that cases are measured in terms of their distance from the ideal-type. The contrasting approach would be to identify ‘real-types’ from a comparison of cases. We opt for the more deductive ideal-type approach because of the wealth of theories about the state and state collapse. This does not preclude developing typologies or taxonomies of state collapse after empirical analysis.

According to Eriksen, the literature on fragile states is dominated by two different understandings of the state.³² The first presents the state as a service provider. In this perspective a state’s primary purpose is to provide public goods like security, the protection of property rights, justice or public health. Depending on the exact definition, welfare issues like access to education, basic social services, opportunities for participation and the rule of law can also be considered part of the state’s core functions.

The second approach views the state in terms of territorial control and the monopoly of violence. This is clearly inspired by Max Weber’s definition of the state, which focuses on the instruments of the state. The Weberian state has a legitimate monopoly over the means of physical coercion, which it employs to implement policies of its political leadership and the bureaucracy within a given territory. Weber strongly objected to a definition that uses aims to distinguish states from other forms of polities:

It is not possible to define a political organisation, including the state, in terms of the end to which its action is devoted. All the way from provision for subsistence to the patronage of art, there is no conceivable end which *some* political association has not at some point of time pursued.³³

Eriksen rightly points out that the first, output-oriented approach has several drawbacks. First, this approach takes a normative position about which tasks a state *should* engage in. As a result, the definition of a state is very closely tied to the ‘OECD model’ of statehood, which is even more remote from realities in the global South than is a Weberian conception. Moreover, states that do not provide certain public goods out of a conscious political choice will be classified as weak or failing. Conversely, states where non-state actors compensate for the state’s incapacity by providing crucial public goods look more capable than they really are. Finally, these approaches usually exhibit a strong democracy bias by including the rule of law or participation among the definitional elements of statehood. For these reasons we prefer to follow the Weberian tradition and focus on the institutional capacity of the state.³⁴

An institutionalist theory of the state

Weber famously defined the state as follows: ‘A compulsory political organisation with continuous operations [*politischer Anstaltsbetrieb*] will be called a “state” insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of physical force in the enforcement of its order’.³⁵ The crucial element that distinguishes a state from other kinds of polities is its ability to make a legitimate claim on the monopoly over the means of violence and to assert and defend its sovereignty within a given territory. Additionally, it shares several characteristics with other forms of political

organisation, like a hierarchical governance structure, an administrative apparatus and social relations based on domination and rule (*Herrschaft*).

Weber's approach lends itself to an understanding that looks at statehood as a variable: 'Even in cases of such social organisation as a state [...] the social relationship consists exclusively in the fact that there has existed, exists, or will exist a probability of action in some definite way appropriate to this meaning'.³⁶ This means that, within Weber's framework, all institutions and all forms of social relations exist only to the degree that people act in accordance with their orders. The corollary is that if the state only exists as a particular likelihood of certain forms of social action, then there must logically be different degrees of statehood. Weber himself asserts:

The fact that, in the same social group, a plurality of contradictory systems of order may all be recognised as valid, is not a source of difficulty for the sociological approach. Indeed, it is even possible for the same individual to orient his action to contradictory systems of order...Thus for sociological purposes there does not exist...a rigid alternative between the validity and lack of validity of a given order. On the contrary, there is a gradual transition between the two extremes; and [it is] also possible, as it has been pointed out, for contradictory systems of order to exist at the same time. In that case each is 'valid' precisely to the extent that there is a probability that action will in fact be oriented to it.³⁷

However, the role of legitimacy in Weber's concept of the state needs to be critically examined. Weber has an empirical understanding of legitimacy that focuses on the impact of legitimacy beliefs on actors' behaviour. In his view legitimacy consists of two components: (1) obedience towards an order given by some authority; and (2) the intellectual or emotional affirmation of this authority and its orders as rightful and justified.³⁸ This second component is crucial if conformist behaviour resulting from coercion or out of pure self-interest is not to be mistaken for an act of legitimation.

We prefer to exclude legitimacy from our definition of the state. First of all, legitimacy is very difficult to measure, making any assessment vulnerable to *post hoc* rationalisation. By excluding it from the definition we are freed from the burden of having to operationalise and measure it as a component of statehood. Second, Weber's understanding of legitimacy sets a very high bar for a state to be considered legitimate. If we take his two components of legitimacy seriously, a majority of what are generally considered 'states' in the contemporary world would be hard pressed to meet the second criterion in particular. This is greatly at odds with the everyday use of the word 'state' – there are many instances of states with little to no popular legitimacy that nonetheless persist.

Therefore we define the ideal-type of the state as an institution characterised by monopolies on rule making, violence and taxation within a defined territory and among the population living therein. This institution finds its organisational expression in an administrative apparatus, political organs and bodies for collective decision making. It is represented by symbols and social practices that remind citizens of the existence of the political order.

The monopoly of rule-making is inherent in the concept of the state as that institution which makes binding decisions about the allocation of values, to borrow a phrase from Easton.³⁹ This monopoly is the core element of state

sovereignty. A state's claim to the monopoly of rule-making includes the corollary that no one else is entitled to make binding decisions for another citizen unless he or she has been specifically delegated this authority by the state.

The monopoly of violence follows logically from the monopoly of rule-making and is inextricably tied to it. To make its binding decisions stick, a state has to be able to implement them even in the face of resistance. The state might need to employ violence to get its way but, more importantly, it can never tolerate means of violence in the hands of those who would defy it. Nevertheless, some private means of violence are still acceptable but only insofar as the state explicitly authorises this.

The monopoly of taxation derives from historical experience rather than theory: to finance the means of violence centralised under its control, the state in Early Modern Europe started to monopolise the collection of taxes and duties. Elias has noted that the resources that became available to the state supported the monopoly of violence, and that the means of violence supported the monopoly of taxation.⁴⁰ As with the other two, the private collection of binding taxes is outlawed except with the assent of the state.

As discussed above, the state's ability to achieve, enforce and defend this 'holy trinity' of monopolies can vary. This means that states can be fragile in different ways, eg with little capacity to collect taxes but effective security forces that guarantee internal and external stability. We can represent variation in statehood as a three-dimensional space (Figure 1). Theoretically a state can inhabit any point within this space, although some of the extremes are highly unlikely to exist. We would hypothesise that deficiencies in one dimension strongly correlate with deficiencies in the other two – but that is ultimately an empirical question.

Operationalising state collapse

We now derive a concept of state collapse from our definition of the ideal state given in the previous section. We focus on state collapse instead of broader

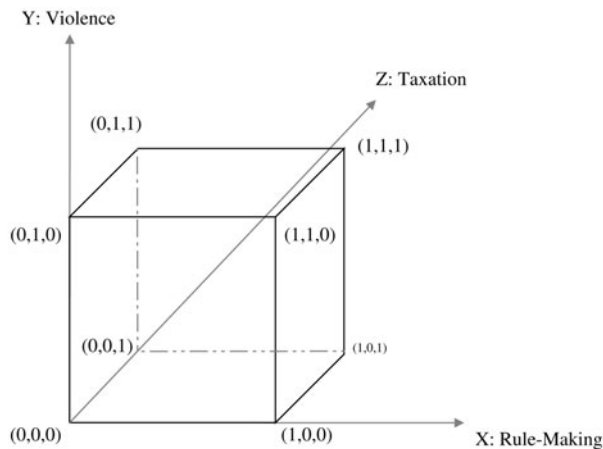


Figure 1. Dimensions of statehood.

notions of state fragility for the same two reasons mentioned earlier. First, setting a threshold is easier when focusing on extreme cases. In the space depicted in Figure 1 we focus on the (0, 0, 0) corner of the diagram and its immediate surroundings. Second, even though cases of state collapse differ from each other, they still recognisably belong to the same class of object. We thus avoid the problem of grouping wildly different phenomena under a single, broadly defined header.

We use Goertz's three-level method of concept formation for the operationalisation of state collapse.⁴¹ The basic level contains the phenomenon itself, eg 'democracy'. This concept needs a definition and it has to be distinguishable from its opposite ('non-democracy'). The second level contains the dimensions that make up the basic phenomenon. For instance, democracy can – depending on its definition – include second-level dimensions like 'competitive elections', 'participation', 'civil rights' and others. These dimensions represent the core aspects of the underlying concept. On the third level dimensions are operationalised through indicators. These provide criteria that answer the question: how do we recognise a certain dimension when we see it?

This multidimensional approach to concept formation is a very useful way of breaking down complex concepts. However, to answer the fundamental question, 'is object A a member of set Y?' (eg 'is Russia a democracy?'), we need a way to aggregate the information from the lower levels. For this Goertz proposes two prototypical logics: The essentialist two-valued logic of sufficient and necessary conditions; and the family resemblance logic.⁴² The first of these assumes that all instances of a particular concept are alike in their fundamental aspects. In our example an essentialist understanding of democracy would mean that certain dimensions of democracy (like competitive elections) are considered to be so crucial that political systems without these features would not be classified as democratic. This requires a clear specification of which dimension, or combination of dimensions, are necessary and/or sufficient conditions for a particular concept to be present. The second logic assumes a continuum of cases that are closely related but do not necessarily share a core set of characteristics. A common way of formalising family resemblance is by setting a threshold on how many dimensions of the basic phenomenon have to be present for an object to be an instance of this concept (eg 'a political system is democratic if it meets any three of the following four criteria').

For our purposes the basic level phenomenon is 'state collapse' as the polar opposite of the ideal-type of the state (see the section on institutionalist theory above), which we define as the situation where the state has no meaningful capacities in its three core dimensions of rule-making, violence control and taxation. We then follow an essentialist two-valued logic and define sufficient and necessary conditions of state collapse. This means that we have to establish a threshold between collapsed and non-collapsed states. While this dichotomy might seem to be in conflict with our continuum of statehood (see Figure 1), this is actually not a problem, since our objective is merely to theorise about collapsed states, not about statehood in a more general sense.

Drawing on the three core dimensions of statehood, we define the second-level dimensions of state collapse as:

- (1) no meaningful capacity to make rules;
- (2) no meaningful control over the means of violence;
- (3) no meaningful capacity to extract taxes.

These three dimensions jointly create the necessary and sufficient conditions for state collapse, if they occur continuously over a time span of at least six months.⁴³

At the indicator level we use a combination of both logics (Table 1). Every dimension of state collapse – rule making, means of violence and taxation – has primary and secondary indicators. Primary indicators are unambiguous signs of state collapse, eg when the government leaves the capital or when security forces cannot even control the entire capital. These indicators were formulated to be as specific as possible to maximise their objectivity and reliability. The presence of any primary indicator is sufficient for a particular dimension to be coded as collapsed.

Because these events only occur infrequently, even during state collapse, we added a group of three secondary indicators to each dimension.⁴⁴ These secondary indicators share two features: (1) they do not only indicate state collapse but can also occur in other phenomena, ie they are not particularly specific; and (2) they do not occur in all instances of collapse, much like the first-level indicators, ie they are not necessary conditions of the outcome. Therefore we use a family resemblance logic: if two out of three of the secondary indicators are present, the dimension is also coded as collapsed.⁴⁵ For example, in the ‘means of violence’ dimension, if non-state actors command large parts of the country *and* if the state’s security forces are *de facto* private militias, this is sufficient to diagnose a lack of meaningful control over the means of violence.

Instances of state collapse

To demonstrate its implications for empirical research, we used the framework elaborated above to identify cases of state collapse in the international system.

Table 1. The concept of state collapse.

Rule making	Means of violence	Taxation
First-level indicators		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cessation of the work of the High Court • No formal legislation • Government or parliament leaves the capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>De jure</i> dissolution of the security forces • Security forces do not control the whole capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No official government budget is declared • Central bank ceases work
Secondary indicators		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Massive corruption • Laws are only rarely enforced • Widespread legal pluralism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security forces become <i>de facto</i> private militias • Security forces control only small parts of the country • Private non-state actors control large portions of the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No organised fiscal administration • Taxation by non-state actors • Tax ratio below 8%

Since there has been no prior systematic collection of data for most of our indicators, we had to assess potential cases through qualitative case studies. To limit the number of case studies, we culled the number of ‘candidate cases’ in a series of steps.

Our first aim was to identify all cases where the state had potentially collapsed. We cast a very wide net so as not to miss any ‘false negatives’ – of course, this came at the price of increasing the number of ‘false positive’ cases in the initial sample. To come up with this first sample, we identified all country-years from 1946 onwards that fulfilled one or more of the following conditions:

- Polity IV:
 - Indicator 1.7 (Polity Fragmentation) = 3 (‘serious fragmentation’);
 - Standardised Authority Code = -66 (Interruption) or -77 (Interregnum), or -88 (Transition) for three concurrent years;
 - Indicator 4.10 (Total Change in POLITY value) = 96 (‘state disintegration’);
 - Indicator 4.12 (State Failure) = 1;
- Index of State Weakness 2008 score < 2;
- Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2008): Indicator Q1.1 (Territorial Extent of State Monopoly of Violence) ≤ 3;
- State Failure Task Force: ‘Near-total Failures of State Authority’;
- Categorisation as ‘failed’ or ‘collapsed state’ by Rotberg;
- Personal assessment by researchers.⁴⁶

This resulted in a list of 87 countries that had potentially experienced state collapse at some point after 1946. Many countries fulfilled multiple of the above criteria, often for overlapping time periods. These were then consolidated into continuous periods.

This initial list still contained a lot of cases that were obviously not cases of state collapse in our understanding. These included the dissolution of states under international law (eg East Germany 1989), foreign invasion (eg Kuwait 1990) or regime change (Greece 1974; Portugal 1974–75, Spain 1975–77). Most cases from the immediate post-World War II period were qualitatively different from our understanding of state collapse (eg Czechoslovakia 1947, West Germany 1946–48, East Germany 1946–48, Hungary 1946–47, Japan 1946–51, and Romania 1946–47). While these cases could also be considered instances of state collapse, the historical context suggested that the causal structure of such collapse was very different from state collapse in the postcolonial period. Because of the comparability issues, we decided to shorten our period of observation to 1960–2007.

This narrowed our list to 48 potential country-periods of state collapse. We then conducted desk studies of these candidates and identified 17 cases of state collapse (Table 2).⁴⁷ Five cases met all the criteria but only for a period of less than six months (Albania 1997, Central African Republic 2001, Ethiopia 1991, Iran 1978, Rwanda 1994). Another five cases had collapsed in two of the three dimensions (Burundi 1993, Cambodia 1975, Côte d’Ivoire 2004, Nicaragua 1979, and Solomon Islands 2000). Finally, another four cases exhibited symptoms of collapse in one of the three dimensions (Colombia 2000, El Salvador 1979, Ghana 1979, Nigeria 1966).⁴⁸

Table 2. cases of state collapse.

Cases of state collapse			
Afghanistan	1979	Iraq	2003
Afghanistan	2001	Laos	1960
Angola	1992	Lebanon	1975
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1992	Liberia	1990
Chad	1979	Sierra Leone	1998
Congo-Kinshasa	1960	Somalia	1991
Congo-Kinshasa	1996	Tajikistan	1992
Georgia	1991	Uganda	1985
Guinea-Bissau	1998		

The majority of instances of ‘state collapse’ involved cases in sub-Saharan Africa, where, usually, armed rebellions challenged state authority and shattered projects of centralised control (Angola 1992, Chad 1979, Guinea-Bissau 1998, Liberia 1990, Somalia 1991, Sierra Leone 1998, Uganda 1985, Zaire 1996). An exception was Congo-Kinshasa in 1960, where decolonisation from Belgian rule resulted in rival claims to power and political order and stripped the state of its governing apparatus. Similarly the situation of institutional uncertainty in the wake of the disintegration of the USSR, and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, respectively, led to a state of collapse in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992), Georgia (1991) and Tajikistan (1992). The Laotian state collapsed after an American-backed attack on the capital of Vientiane in 1960 that left the country partitioned into spheres of influence of neutralist, communist and pro-Western forces. In Lebanon an incident in April 1975 linked to the highly controversial armed presence of the PLO triggered a full-scale civil war that paralysed the otherwise comparatively well-functioning state institutions. In Afghanistan state authority had never been institutionalised to a significant extent, but the insurgency against the communist regime, further propelled by Soviet intervention in December 1979, led to an effective loss of state control that was extreme even for the Afghan case.⁴⁹

It is not coincidental that these instances of state collapse also occasioned civil wars and other forms of widespread intra-state violence. In some ways this is inevitable given our coding scheme, where territorial control by government forces plays an important role. However, we wish to note that our concept of state collapse is more than a fancy name for situations of pervasive violence. Our concept asks whether the state is capable of functioning as a provider of governance but also as an actor in conflict. State capacity is a crucial precondition for counterinsurgency, as a multitude of cases, eg in Latin America, readily shows. By contrast, conflicts in the countries in Table 2 were characterised by a predominance of non-state actors of violence. This is why many of our more recent cases, like Afghanistan, Liberia and Somalia, have been discussed in terms of ‘warlordism’.

To borrow a distinction from research into civil wars, all our cases are instances of a particular kind of ‘governmental conflict’, ie an incompatibility concerning the type of political system or the composition of government. In contrast, ‘territorial conflicts’ about secession or regional autonomy (as in the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan or Senegal) are not found in our final list of

cases (with the exception of Congo 1960). This is consistent with Buhaug, who found that rebellion in institutionally capable states would more frequently occur as secessionist conflict, whereas weaker states were more likely to experience governmental conflicts.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated an approach to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of state collapse. We have asserted that current attempts to measure state collapse (as well as the broader concept of state fragility) suffer from key weaknesses that limit their analytical value. Therefore we sought to develop a concept that represents an improvement in two crucial aspects. First, our approach has a firm theoretical grounding. It is based on a view of the state derived from a modification of Weberian institutionalism. Second, our approach is methodologically rigorous. We employed Goertz's method of concept formation and provided a multidimensional disaggregation of the concept of state collapse, as well as the logic for the aggregation of the data. Using this framework, we identified 17 cases of state collapse in the postcolonial era.

This concept is designed to be employed in comparative research. Classifying states as 'collapsed' or 'not collapsed' would be little more than *l'art pour l'art*, especially as we reject normative and teleological claims about the sort of politics that take place in collapsed states. Our approach works much better in providing a common reference point to compare disparate countries, especially in cross-regional research. In other, small-N research designs sociological approaches are more appropriate as they paint a richer picture of individual cases.

Our conceptualisation of state collapse opens up several avenues of research. In our own research we use it to analyse the causes of collapse.⁵¹ In particular, we are interested in whether there are structural differences between collapsed states and those that are fragile but that did not collapse, or whether collapse is a result of particular political dynamics. Another possibility would be to use it in research on the dynamics of violence and deprivation in collapsed states, or to improve early warning systems. This approach can also lay the foundation for research that looks at how political and social order is constructed in the absence of formal statehood. There is substantial research on governance in areas of limited statehood which could be enriched by a focus on those cases where the state completely ceases to be a meaningful institution.⁵² Its usability for comparative research also makes our conception of state collapse a potential tool for bringing together disparate fields of enquiry, such as conflict research, humanitarian aid, development studies and comparative politics. Finally, our approach can also be used to improve attempts at quantification. While data collection for our indicators was labour-intensive, this process could be automated for most primary indicators by using machine coding of event data.

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Notes

1. Call, “The Fallacy of the ‘Failed State’”; and Ulfelder, “‘State Failure’ has Failed.”
2. Eriksen, “‘State Failure’ in Theory and Practice.”
3. Goertz, *Social Science Concepts*.
4. Bueger and Bethke, “Actor-networking the ‘Failed State’.”
5. Baker, *The Conflict Assessment System Tool*; Fund for Peace, “The Failed State Index”; Carment et al., “State Fragility and Implications for Aid Allocation”; Marshall and Cole, “Global Report on Conflict”; and Rice and Patrick, *Index of State Weakness*.
6. In addition to these frequently updated indices, there are several country lists and classificatory heuristics from development agencies, such as the World Bank’s “Harmonized List of Fragile Situations”, where the classification as a fragile state is based on a threshold for the Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) country rating. See World Bank, “Information Note.” See also Weinstein et al., *On the Brink*; and DFID, *Why We Need to Work More Effectively*, for other methodologies.
7. Bethke, “Zuverlässig Invalide.” The State Failure Task Force (renamed the Political Instability Task Force in 2003) was an important precursor of these projects. Established in 1994, its original aim had been to identify the root causes of state failure. However, after preliminary research produced only 18 cases of state failure, it broadened its definition of state failure to include contentious regime transitions, genocides, revolutions and ethnic conflict. By including these different phenomena in the same category the State Failure Task Force suffered from the same methodological shortcomings as its predecessors. For a more detailed critique, see Lambach and Gamberger, “A Temporal Analysis of Political Instability.”
8. See, for example, Hill, “Challenging the Failed State Thesis”; and Veit, “Social Movements.”
9. Wilén, *Justifying Intervention in Africa*.
10. Hameiri, “Failed States or Failed Paradigm?”; Manjikian, “Diagnosis, Intervention, and Cure”; and Sidaway, “Sovereign Excesses,” 172.
11. Migdal, *State in Society*.
12. DiJohn, “The Concept, Causes and Consequences of Failed States”; Lund, *Twilight Institutions*; and Mielke et al., *Dimensions of Social Order*.
13. Boege et al., “Hybrid Political Orders.”

14. Schlichte, "Gibt es überhaupt 'Staatszerfall'?"
15. Cf. Bilgin and Morton, "From 'Rogue' to 'Failed' States?"; Hagmann and Péclard, "Negotiating Statehood"; and Wai, "Neo-patrimonialism."
16. Cf. Hansen and Stepputat, *States of Imagination*.
17. Putzel and DiJohn, *Meeting the Challenges of Crisis States*.
18. Call, "The Fallacy of the 'Failed State'"; and Ulfelder, "'State Failure' has Failed."
19. Borrowing the term from Zartman, *Collapsed States*.
20. Call, "The Fallacy of the 'Failed State,'" 1501.
21. Ulfelder, "'State Failure' has Failed."
22. Patrick, "Weak States and Global Threats."
23. Ghani et al., "An Agenda for State-building."
24. Weinstein et al., *On the Brink*, 13.
25. Call, "The Fallacy of the 'Failed State,'" 1501.
26. Grävingholt et al., "State Fragility."
27. Carment and Samy, "State Fragility," 107. For similar approaches, see Weinstein et al., *On the Brink*, 13f; and Call, "Beyond the 'Failed State,'" 310.
28. Grävingholt et al., *State Fragility*.
29. Hay and Lister, "Introduction."
30. See, for instance, Mitchell, "The Limits of the State"; Bevir and Rhodes, *The State as Cultural Practice*; Lemke, "An Indigestible Meal?"; and Passoth and Rowland, "Actor-network State."
31. Barrow, *Critical Theories of the State*, 11.
32. Eriksen, "'State Failure' in Theory and Practice."
33. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 55, emphasis in the original.
34. Recently, Putzel and DiJohn, *Meeting the Challenges of Crisis States*, 1, have pointed out the relevance of political settlements and elite bargains for the stability of the state. While we do not share their actor-centred perspective, we nonetheless follow their point that institutions are not usually the product of conscious design but more a reflection of power relationships.
35. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 54.
36. *Ibid.*, 27. We agree with Hay and Lister, "Introduction," 14, that the differences between discursive and Weberian approaches to the state are often overstated.
37. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 32.
38. *Ibid.*, 31.
39. Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, 21.
40. Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, 142. See also Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*.
41. Goertz, *Social Science Concepts*.
42. *Ibid.*, 35.
43. We used six months as a threshold to distinguish short-term political instability, for instance, during regime change or the final months of civil war, to distinguish the complete failure of state institutions from other forms of disorder.
44. Using three indicators each is a pragmatic choice, in that explaining the set of secondary indicators would have increased the amount of data to be collected without improving the measurement accuracy.
45. Using a threshold of 'two out of three' is the result of a calibration process. With a higher threshold we would have too many 'false negatives', ie cases of collapse falsely classified as non-collapsed; with a lower threshold there would be too many 'false positives', ie cases of non-collapse falsely classified as collapsed.
46. Sources are Marshall et al., "Polity IV Project"; Rice and Patrick, *Index of State Weakness*; and BTI Project, "Bertelsmann Transformation Index." The assessments by the State Failure Task Force are published in Esty et al., "The State Failure Project," 38; whereas Rotberg's data can be found in Rotberg, "The Failure and Collapse of Nation-states," 46–49.
47. We excluded Afghanistan 2001 and Iraq 2003 from our analysis. We consider these two cases to be outliers because of the strong impact of foreign military intervention on the stability of the state.
48. The remaining cases, which had not collapsed in at least one dimension, were Argentina 1976, Bangladesh 1975, Cambodia 1988–92, Comoros 1997–98, Cuba 1958, Cyprus 1963, Czechoslovakia 1968, Dominican Republic 1965, Ethiopia 1974, Haiti 1985, Haiti 1994, Lesotho 1998, Nigeria 1993, Pakistan 1969, Yugoslavia 1991, USSR 1991, and Sudan 2003.
49. Brief descriptions of individual cases are available at http://www.lehrstuhl-ibep.de/files/twq_appendix_brief_description_state_collapse_cases.pdf.
50. Buhaug, "Relative Capability and Rebel Objective."
51. Lambach and Bethke, "Ursachen von Staatskollaps"; and Lambach et al., "The Causes of State Collapse." For further information, see also <http://www.lehrstuhl-ibep.de/39-0-DFG-Projekt-Staatskollaps.html>.
52. For example, Risse, "Governance Configurations in Areas of Limited Statehood."

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