

BOOK ANNOTATIONS

How Republics Die: Creeping Authoritarianism in Ancient Rome and Beyond. Edited by Frederik Juliaan Vervaet, David Rafferty, and Christopher J. Dart. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025. Pp. xv, 540. \$109.99 (hardcover).

REVIEWED BY MARIE BREWER

How Republics Die: Creeping Authoritarianism in Ancient Rome and Beyond, edited by Frederik Juliaan Vervaet, David Rafferty, and Christopher J. Dart, is a collection of essays exploring the end of republican political orders, with a focus on the late Roman Republic as its case study. The book is divided into five sections: conceptual foundations, explanations of the fall of the Roman Republic, consequences and transformations in the late Republic, comparative studies of early modern and modern republics, and contemporary perspectives on democratic vulnerability. Each section combines essays from different authors, who analyze the fall of the Roman Republic and other republics throughout history from different perspectives. Contributors to the volume include historians of ancient Rome, political theorists, and modern historians. Some conduct in-depth analyses of particular political developments, such as enabling statutes or grain distribution policies, while others consider more general topics such as populism or polarization. The essays are tied together, however, by a common thread: the underlying assumption that the end of republics is almost always an endogenous and gradual process.

Taken together, the essays presented in this volume emphasize that the Roman Republic did not “fall” in the literal sense, but was instead transformed through strategic obstruction, legal maneuvering, elite anxiety, and contested definitions of political legitimacy. Furthermore, this process, the editors argue, is not simply a product of ancient history but speaks to broader patterns of republican and democratic politics.

The most convincing sections of the book are centered on institutional analysis rather than analogy, because they ground their arguments in concrete legal developments rather than abstract comparison. These essays illustrate how authoritarian change might have been achieved through legal continuity rather than sudden rupture. Kit Morrell’s chapter on “Enabling Laws,” for example, illustrates this point by broadening the discussion to include other failed democracies, such as Nazi Germany. Rather than viewing dictatorship and extraordinary

powers as anomalies, Morrell shows how they were embedded within recognizable legal structures. Emergency powers were framed as extraordinary yet legitimate, even when they resulted in enduring shifts in political authority. This approach avoids sensational moralizing and instead examines how constitutional limits can be pushed while still appearing to function within the law. In this way, Morrell presents a nuanced account of how republican regimes can decay without formally abandoning their foundations. Although Morrell briefly compares Rome to regimes such as Nazi Germany, this comparison functions analytically rather than rhetorically: it highlights how legally sanctioned emergency powers operate in different contexts, rather than serving as a simple historical analogy.

The editors lay out another compelling explanation in their chapter on "Reform Unwillingness." Instead of attributing Rome's collapse to generic decline or corruption, the editors argue that elite resistance to reform was strategic. Political leaders feared the loss of status and resources, and that fear produced an escalating "constitutional hardball." The chapter argues that this resistance to change was rational behavior rather than shortsightedness. Although the chapter itself discusses only evidence from the Roman elite, it situates Rome within broader debates about how democracy erodes.

The book's last section turns its focus to the modern world, finally addressing the editors' comparative ambitions explicitly. While comparative perspectives appear throughout the book, this section serves as the clearest articulation of those ambitions and relates Rome directly to the present. It is the hook that draws the reader into the collection. In a world where many are concerned with the future of modern democracies, and where populism and demagoguery are on the rise, many hope to find answers in those republics that fell. The editors shift from how republics died to lessons on how they might die going forward. Some chapters employ contemporary political science concepts such as "competitive authoritarianism" or "populism" to interpret Roman developments, and they resonate strongly with current political tendencies and academic concerns.

Despite the obvious timeliness of this comparative project, the final chapters give rise to two related problems. First, while these chapters draw attention to structural patterns like diminished competition under preserved electoral forms, they also risk obscuring the distinctiveness of Roman institutions. The Roman Republic lacked mass suffrage, formalized party systems, and many characteristics associated with modern democracies and republics. Second, although the contributors acknowledge these differences, their caution ultimately limits the strength of their conclusions and leaves readers wanting clearer

answers. At once, they seek to answer a question that is almost too ambitious, yet they fall short, as there is no clear answer.

In addition, essays in the concluding section move beyond the Roman Republic to examine how similar dynamics have appeared in later political systems. Contributors analyze themes such as Caesarism, electoral delegitimization, and the normalization of extraordinary power, all of which resonate with contemporary concerns about modern democracies. In doing so, these chapters frame that comparison in terms of broader insights about later republics and modern democracies.

The tension is most apparent in the afterword. The author, Federica Carugati, attempts to synthesize these comparative ambitions by emphasizing recurring mechanisms rather than direct historical parallels. Rather than presenting Rome as a straightforward warning for modern democracies, the afterword stresses that the book should be read as identifying structural vulnerabilities common to republican systems. These include the gradual normalization of emergency powers and the strategic use of legal frameworks to consolidate authority. By highlighting these patterns, the afterword reinforces the central argument that republics rarely collapse suddenly; instead, they tend to deteriorate gradually while maintaining the appearance of constitutional continuity.

Here lie the limits of the collection's comparative framework: while the editors successfully identify a set of recurring mechanisms, they avoid drawing firm conclusions about how directly the Roman collapse applies to modern political systems. This caution reflects the editors' awareness of the profound differences between Rome and modern democracies. While this restraint is understandable and necessary, it leaves the reader with the sense that the volume ultimately stops short of answering the question it raises. Throughout the book, the contributors suggest that the Roman Republic offers insights into the vulnerabilities of modern democracies yet stop short of presenting these insights as concrete lessons. Instead, the collection offers a series of suggestive parallels rather than a clear argument about what modern democracies should learn from Rome's experience.

Still, the afterword plays an important role in tying together the different perspectives presented throughout the volume. By emphasizing continuous themes such as class tensions and the normalization of extraordinary powers, it highlights the common threads connecting the individual essays. The editors ultimately argue that the value of studying the Roman Republic lies not in finding exact historical analogies, but in recognizing the subtle ways political systems can transform over time. Republics rarely disappear overnight. Instead, they evolve

through incremental changes that alter the meaning of existing institutions while leaving their outward forms intact. In this sense, the afterword reinforces the book's central contribution. *How Republics Die* does not provide a single theory of political collapse, nor does it offer simple historical lessons for the modern world; it provides a framework for thinking about how republican institutions can erode from within. By drawing attention to these gradual processes of institutional transformation, the volume encourages readers to reconsider how political systems change, and how easily the appearance of stability can conceal deeper structural shifts.

Investment Protection Standards and the Rule of Law. Edited by August Reinisch and Stephan W. Schill. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. xlv, 372. \$161.70 (hardcover).

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM CROUNSE

In *Investment Protection Standards and the Rule of Law*, editors August Reinisch and Stephan W. Schill present a collection of chapters by different scholars on the relationship between international investment law (“IIL”)—particularly investor-state dispute settlement (“ISDS”)—and the rule of law. The book opens with an introduction in which the editors set out their working conceptualization of the rule of law and describe the three sections of the book. In Part I, scholars discuss how investment treaty standards reflect rule of law requirements. These include fair and equitable treatment, particularly the protection of legitimate expectations, as well as the prohibition on unlawful expropriation, full protection and security, non-discrimination provisions, and transparency. This section, particularly Sebastián Mantilla Blanco’s chapter five, also mentions the extent to which these investment standards are distinct from the rule of law. Part I also includes Manjiao Chi’s exploration of regulatory transparency in chapter seven. Part II shifts to analyzing the relationship between investment treaty standards, domestic law, and the rule of law. The latter half of this section, namely chapters ten and eleven, examines the relationship between the international and domestic versions of the rule of law. Part III then explores the rule of law problems posed by investment standards. In chapter twelve, Esmé Shirlow offers a compelling analysis of the deference investment tribunals give state actors. Later, in chapter fourteen, Steffen Hindelang, Patricia Sarah Stöbener de Mora, and Niels Lachmann analyze how ISDS can be used to enforce areas of international law that otherwise lack an adequate enforcement mechanism.

Although many chapters discuss similar subject matter—including sometimes even the same awards—the articles also cover a broad range of issues spanning both international and domestic rule of law. In terms of audience, the book is intended for academics and practitioners relatively acquainted with international law. Although the book provides basic definitions and pieces of background information, the authors generally assume familiarity with the fundamentals of IIL and ISDS. The book does not feature a conclusion section.

I. EDITORIAL DECISIONS AND THE BOOK AS A UNIFIED WORK

Although this book brings together many individually valuable and well-argued chapters, its arbitrary structure, inconsistent use of conceptual terms, and minimal editorial analysis render it less effective when analyzed as a single body of work. First, separating the chapters into three categories does more to obscure their arguments than it does to clarify them. Structurally, Part I lays out an explanation of how each common protection standard found in investment treaties reflects the rule of law, after which scholars can explore the connection of these protection standards to the rule of law in a more thematic way. Chapter nine, found in Part II, specifically explores how umbrella clauses in investment treaties reflect rule of law values, such that it would arguably be more logically placed in Part I, rather than Part II, as it has much more to do with specific treaty protections than domestic law. An even greater flaw in the book's organization is the decision to differentiate between "positive" articles that argue that IIL reflects the rule of law in Parts I and II, and "negative" articles that point out the rule of law shortcomings of the IIL system in Part III. Not only does this oversimplify the findings of the different articles—chapter eleven, which is placed in Part II, is rather critical of the current state of IIL, while many articles in Part III observe ways in which IIL advances the rule of law—but it also separates articles that could otherwise be read alongside each other. For instance, chapters six and sixteen both discuss how most-favored-nation and national treatment clauses relate to rule of law concerns with equality, yet they are placed in completely different sections. Admittedly, this has a minimal effect on the book's practical usefulness, as an academic, student, or legal practitioner may only seek to use the chapters they find most relevant. Furthermore, such a lack of cohesion is more common than not in such multi-author volumes.

Second, looking beyond the structure to the text of the individual chapters themselves, another factor that weakens the book is inconsistency in its use of key terms. In particular, the various chapters lack a unified conception of the rule of law. The editors start the book by

noting that the rule of law is a “vague and ambiguous, some even say essentially contested, concept.” Although the editors nominally adopt the U.N. definition of rule of law as a working definition, more often, authors choose to refer either to the thin and thick conceptions of the rule of law, where the former describes only formal or procedural aspects, and the latter encompasses normative and substantive ideas of fairness and equality. The U.N. definition represents a moderately thick conception, though the editors identify it as a compromise between the two camps. While some chapters, such as chapters thirteen and sixteen, extensively compare different conceptions of the rule of law and even incorporate multiple precise definitions, others, such as chapters five, seven, and fourteen, do not engage in a discussion of thin and thick conceptions of the rule of law. Specifying the precise conception of the rule of law in question—or when possible, comparing multiple conceptions—is highly effective when it is used, and chapters without clear terms would benefit from it. Furthermore, while some chapters discuss one conception of the rule of law or the other (or both) when relevant, others, such as chapter three, which advocates for Joseph Raz’s conception of the rule of law, actively endorse a particular definition and provide a cursory argument for why it is the best definition of the rule of law. While this approach may serve individual authors’ arguments, it widens the scope of the book by placing not just the rule of law’s relationship with investment protection standards into question, but the nature of the rule of law itself. Such argumentation further contributes to the lack of clarity in terms. Conceptual confusion is further heightened by the differences between the common law conception of the rule of law and its civil law counterpart, *Rechtsstaat*, which are sometimes used interchangeably but also contrasted as reflections of similar but distinct values. The distinction is addressed directly only twice, but given its abstract nature, this treatment may be sufficient. Similarly, the rule of law may be divided into the international rule of law, particularly as it applies to ISDS, and the domestic rule of law. In most cases, the relevant conception can be inferred from context; when authors discuss state action, they generally refer to the domestic rule of law, whereas when they discuss ISDS outcomes, they are principally concerned with the international rule of law. However, sometimes these two are mixed in a confusing way, as in chapter twelve, when Julian Arato pivots without a clear transition from a discussion of the lack of consistent outcomes in ISDS to concerns about over-consistency in domestic law posed by the *Tecmed v. Mexico* decision.

Nonetheless, the lack of unified terms and conceptions also presents some notable advantages. Some chapters benefit from focusing on a particularly thin or thick conception of the rule of law; while

chapter three, with its focus on legitimate exceptions, endorses a formal conception of the rule of law, chapter sixteen, with its focus on equality values, necessarily requires a discussion of more substantive rule of law requirements. Some of the conceptual confusion is not so much a feature of the book as a feature of international law and the rule of law themselves. Many chapters discuss in detail where conceptual debates lie, and in doing so, effectively untangle the web of similar but distinct terms of art. Furthermore, the occasional use of more specific rule of law conceptual frameworks helps to clarify the analyses. For example, in chapter twelve, Arato applies the work of legal philosopher Lon Fuller to compare how different and at times opposing rule of law values might be balanced on the international level in order to meet minimal requirements. The use of the Fullerian conception provides a helpful mechanism to identify the benefits and shortcomings of ISDS from a rule of law perspective.

Finally, the editors do not provide an extensive discussion of the other chapters beyond transitioning between their summaries in the introduction. As a result, the relationship between different contributors' scholarship is not fully clear. Several chapters cite the editors' previous scholarship (see, e.g., chapter nine). However, because the editors provide relatively little commentary, and the chapters are often based upon slightly different bodies of scholarship, such references are insufficient to clarify the central areas of academic debate. Better explanations of the scholarship in either individual chapters, or in the introductory or concluding text of the book would have clarified the relationships between different arguments. Furthermore, because the book lacks a conclusion, the whole work feels incomplete. While readers may only use one or several articles rather than the book as a whole body of work, this lack of synthesis makes tracing how the authors' arguments relate to one another a difficult exercise.

II. ADDRESSING CRITICISMS OF IIL

The book's content provides relatively little reflection on the implications of the existence of investment treaty standards for the rule of law. Normative concerns about the exceptional protection given to foreign investors by international investment law are largely relegated to the final two chapters. Although the book is admittedly focused on protective standards of IIL, rather than all of IIL itself, such concepts are difficult to separate, and some chapters that are more critical of the state of IIL certainly wade into this territory. Given that the rule of law means that like cases should be treated alike and unlike cases should be treated differently, the discussion of the equality aspect of the rule of law is insufficient. These later chapters do address these concerns.

Krista Nadakavukaren Schefer notes in the conclusion to chapter sixteen that “a fuller investigation of the relationship between the rule of law and equality—egalitarianism in investment law would be welcome.” Given that the creation of a parallel system of justice for international investors—namely, ISDS—has significant implications for the rule of law, the absence of a more robust discussion of this aspect of IIL earlier in the book is striking. This is especially surprising given that editor Stephan Schill has, in the past, written extensively on the legitimacy of ISDS. Similar concerns are also discussed in chapter two, where Caroline Henkels discusses the concern of overly substantive conceptualizations of the rule of law being imposed by capital-exporting countries on capital-importing. Although this does not pertain directly to preferential treatment, it also connects to broader debates around sovereignty and power dynamics in international arbitration that are relevant to conceptualizations of the rule of law.

The various chapters of the book also provide relatively little commentary on the fact that the impact of IIL on domestic rule of law is fundamentally ancillary. This may be definitional—IIL has generally been conceived as a means of incentivizing cross-border investment—and perhaps even obvious, but it is not explicitly explored until the final chapter. Given that most of the book discusses the relationship between IIL and domestic rule of law, it is surprising that the actual function of IIL is not addressed as frequently.

In sum, this book provides many compelling chapters that explore and connect a variety of areas and a variety of perspectives about the rule of law and IIL. The contributing scholars provide new insights into the relationships between these concepts that span from a more practical analysis of the state of specific questions in ISDS to much more abstract questions about the function of law and dispute resolution in general. Although the argumentation is at times difficult to follow and the book pays inadequate attention to some normative rule of law concerns, it is, overall, a valuable contribution to the existing academic literature on IIL, and many of the ideas explored within are worthy of further exploration.

International Criminal Law—A Counter-Hegemonic Project?. Edited by Florian Jeßberger, Leonie Steinl & Kalika Mehta. The Hague, The Netherlands: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2023. Pp. x, 280. \$ \$169.74 (paperback).

REVIEWED BY FALYN DWYER

In twelve contributing chapters, editors Florian Jeßberger, Leonie Steinl, and Kalika Mehta seek to discern whether international criminal

law can be viewed as a “counter-hegemonic” project, and if so, under what conditions. Recognizing that the character of the hegemon depends on whether it is situated in a particular state, institution, race, class, or structure, the editors left it to the contributing authors to determine which of the hegemon’s many forms their chapter would address. The book itself contributes to a counter-hegemonic exercise within academia by highlighting the scholarship of scholars and practitioners from the Global South, as well as early-career scholars. It also foregrounds themes that have hitherto received little to no attention in international criminal legal scholarship, including *inter alia* grassroots accountability efforts in Ukraine and Syria, as well as minority experiences in South Asia. The contributions collectively reveal a dual potential of international criminal law—a double-edged sword that can be wielded either by the hegemon in facilitating oppressive power dynamics, or against the hegemon in resisting such oppression. Importantly, and without explicitly so doing, the book showcases legal empowerment as a counter-hegemonic methodology with which international criminal law can challenge global power imbalances and their attendant injustices.

The book is divided into three parts: Part I covers theoretical engagements with (counter-) hegemonic perspectives on international criminal law; Part II provides case studies to analyze what (counter-)hegemonic international criminal law looks like in practice; and Part III hones in on what (counter-)hegemony could imply for the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In Chapter 2, “Is International Criminal Justice the Handmaiden of the Contemporary Imperial Project? A TWAAIL Perspective on Some Arenas of Contestations,” John-Mark Iyi argues that international criminal justice remains an imperial ideal intolerant of a plurality of visions of justice. Adopting TWAAIL (Third World Approaches to International Law) as an analytical framework, Iyi argues that through four arenas of contestation—international criminal enforcement institutions, the selectivity of international criminal prosecutions, the ostensible universality of international criminal legal norms, and the categories of international crimes—international criminal justice remains a mode of colonial continuity in service of hegemonic international law.

In Chapter 3, “Violence in International Criminal Law and Beyond,” Anastasiya Kotova explains that criminal law not only reflects which conduct society deems condemnatory, but constitutes that very condemnation, with international criminal law performing this function with regard to the global community. Kotova argues that international criminal law produces, or even reproduces, a vision of violence that is large-scale, spectacular, and racialized, legitimizing the “mission

of civilizing” Global South communities while invisibilizing the violence of states in the Global North. As international criminal law targets primarily personal and spectacular violence—and ignores the “impersonal,” “high-tech” violence of the “civilized states”—Kotova argues that instances of structural violence, such as poverty and destitution, marginalization, racism, and discrimination, are not recognized as violence, but rather made to “appear both natural and inevitable, insofar as they randomly occur.”¹

Finally, in Chapter 4, “A Marxist Analysis of International Criminal Law and Its Potential as a Counter-Hegemonic Project,” Valeria Vegh Weis analyzes international criminal law as an iteration of the tension between, on the one hand, formal equality—established in the 18th century by the bourgeois within Western nation-states—and, on the other hand, a persisting triple material inequality—consisting of inequality in the foundations of international criminal law, inequality in the drafting of this normative framework, and inequality in its enforcement. Vegh Weis argues that a counter-hegemonic project can overturn this triple layered inequality, rendering formal equality substantive by (i) addressing the historical conditions that shaped current inequalities and introducing positive regulations to overturn them by strengthening the South and marginalized subsets within each country; (ii) transforming power relations and fostering a legal framework that focuses on the most damaging social harms, despite the consequences for capitalist accumulation; and (iii) including the global South and vulnerable populations in international organizations which enforce the law, as a path to change existing selective practice.

Part II begins with Ishita Chakrabarty and Guneet Kaur’s contribution in Chapter 5, “Double Whammy: Targeted Minorities in South-Asian States.” The authors argue that both international criminal law and TWAIL scholarship fail to address the remedial needs of violently targeted minorities in South-Asia. The chapter explores the politicization of international criminal law, arguing that powerful perpetrators in Western-allied regimes in South Asia are shielded from international scrutiny for mass crimes against minority populations due to their appearance as electoral democracies, strategic geopolitical location, and substantial market opportunities of the region. The authors further conclude that current TWAIL scholarship blocks effective engagement and articulation of minorities’ pleas for accountability, restricting its

1. ANASTASIYA KOTOVA, *Violence in International Criminal Law and Beyond, in INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW—A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PROJECT?* 56 (Florian Jeßberger, Leonie Steinl & Kalika Mehta eds., 2023).

lens to the interests of third-world nation-states rather than the needs of their people.

In Chapter 6, “States of Criminality: International (Criminal) Law, Palestine, and the Sovereignty Trap,” Michelle Burgis-Kasthala, Nahed Samour, and Christine Schwöbel-Patel focus on the ICC’s investigations into the situation in Palestine. First, the authors argue that ICC investigations must take longer histories of oppression into account to understand “both Jews as experiencing the violence of states of criminality (in the mid twentieth century in particular), as well as the Palestinians since the early twentieth century.”² Second, they argue that the question of self-determination as liberation through statehood, as evinced by the episode of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) at the UN General Assembly, has not always been fixed. Noting that the “question of statehood before the ICC puts Palestine in ‘the sovereignty trap’, which means that it must act as though it were equal and thereby erasing the very basis of its domination,” the authors conclude that self-determination must be separated from the strictures of statehood while individual criminality must be amended to account for the domination of states of criminality.³

In Chapter 7, “The Counter-Hegemonic Turn to ‘Entrepreneurial Justice’ in International Criminal Investigations and Prosecutions Relating to the Crimes Committed in Syria and Eastern Ukraine,”⁴ Karolina Aksamitowska argues that, in the wake of the UN Security Council’s inaction regarding the situations in Syria and Ukraine, grassroots accountability initiatives—also known as “Entrepreneurial Justice”—have proliferated. In other words, private criminal investigations by civil society actors play an increasingly central role in counter-hegemonic accountability settings, actively supporting domestic investigations and prosecutions where international criminal justice mechanisms fall short. Such actors include the Commission for International Justice and Accountability in Syria as well as the Truth Hounds, the Center of Civil Liberties, the Coalition for Justice for Peace in Donbas, and the Eastern-Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives in Ukraine.

Finally, in Chapter 8, “NGOs and the Legitimacy of International Criminal Justice: The Case of Uganda,” Tonny Raymond Kirabira contends that NGOs in Uganda both legitimize a liberal culture of Western

2. Michelle Burgis-Kasthala, Nahed Samour & Christine Schwöbel-Patel, *States of Criminality: International (Criminal) Law, Palestine, and the Sovereignty Trap*, in *International Criminal Law—A Counter-Hegemonic Project?*, *supra* note 1, at 115.

3. *Id.* at 129.

4. This piece was completed before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the ICC’s 2023 warrants of arrest for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova.

hegemony through engagement with the ICC and the International Crimes Division (ICD) of Uganda and counter these hegemonic structures through preference for alternative dispute resolution and victim empowerment.

In a sense, Part III builds upon Part II's various assessments of (counter-)hegemonic international criminal law in practice by turning specifically to (counter-)hegemony at the ICC. With Taxiarchis Fiskatoris's focus on the subject-matter jurisdiction of the ICC, Fajri Matahati Muhammadin and Ahmad Sadzali's interrogation of the congruence between Islamic law and the ICC Statute, Angie K. García Atehortúa's elucidation of the ICC's role in countering states' patriarchal attempts to limit the right to reproductive self-determination, Leigh Swigart's assessment of English language hegemony at the ICC and its detrimental impact on the Court's efficiency and status as a global institution, and Angela Mudukuti's critique of gender imbalance at the ICC and its role in perpetuating unacceptable conduct like sexual harassment, Part III comprehensively analyzes the myriad ways hegemony is produced, along with points of counter-hegemonic entry, at the world's first permanent international criminal court.

Moving through its three parts, the book emphasizes that international criminal law straddles an inconsistency: while international criminal law itself is considered a product and process of hegemony, perpetuating inegalitarian structures of the legal order, international criminal law also holds strategic importance in challenging impunity and offering redress to those directly impacted by human rights violations, evincing its counter-hegemonic capacities. Yet, without explicitly using the language of "legal empowerment," the book's contributions emphasize the importance of legal empowerment as a counter-hegemonic methodology in not only effecting meaningful accountability for international wrongdoing, but also in redistributing power—thereby transforming systems of oppression. In effect, the book exemplifies that the most impactful counter-hegemonic engagements with international criminal law unfold when a legal empowerment approach is consciously and conscientiously centered.

As defined by Sukti Dhital, Lam Nguyen Ho, and Margaret Satterthwaite in their forward, *Critical Legal Empowerment*, "legal empowerment is a rights-based methodology that democratizes laws and centers people in their own fight for justice by creating opportunities for people to 'know, use, and shape' the laws that impact their lives."⁵ Legal empowerment emphasizes that those who are closest to the

5. Sukti Dhital, Lam Nguyen Ho & Margaret Satterthwaite, *Foreword: Critical Legal Empowerment*, 97 N.Y.U. L. Rev. 1547, 1550 (2022).

problem—here, those directly victimized by, or otherwise experiencing injustices stemming from, violations of international criminal law—are also closest to the solution. To uplift such solutions, legal empowerment emphasizes collaborative problem solving that places directly impacted individuals and communities in the driver’s seat, while redistributing power to these groups such that they may become “the authors of their own liberation.”⁶ Moreover, by redistributing power to directly impacted groups, legal empowerment facilitates the transformation of oppressive power dynamics that give rise to injustice and impunity in the first place.

Understanding the counter-hegemonic potential of legal empowerment in the context of the book’s Part II case studies helps to frame the issues presented in Part I’s theoretical engagements with (counter-)hegemonic perspectives on international criminal law—from disrupting international criminal justice as a mode of colonial continuity (see Iyi, Chapter 2), to grounding conceptions of violence in lived experience (see Kotova, Chapter 3), to effectuating substantive equality (see Vegh Weis, Chapter 4). Moreover, Part II’s case studies provide guidance for legal empowerment to counter the hegemonic tendencies of the ICC observed in Part III—the ICC itself being a case study of what (counter-)hegemonic international criminal law looks like in practice.

In perhaps the book’s most direct articulation of the demands of legal empowerment, Vegh Weis asserts that “true empowerment can only be achieved when unequal power relations are challenged,” a task that involves transforming “existing power structures responsible for exclusion, poverty and disenfranchisement” and providing the space for vulnerable populations to “become decisive actors in decision-making processes, recognizing their agency and choice-making capacity.”⁷ The case studies in Part II can—and in their most counter-hegemonic reading, must—be read with these demands of legal empowerment in mind. Chakrabarty and Kaur’s analysis of powerful perpetrators in South Asia being largely exempt from the gaze of international criminal legal enforcement despite their continued violence against South-Asian minority groups—an exemption the authors attribute to western states’ critical interest in protecting allied regimes in South Asia as ideological alternatives to China—illustrates the necessity of looking behind the veil of sovereignty to uplift the justice needs of directly impacted communities.

6. *Id.* at 1565.

7. VALERIA VEGH WEIS, *A Marxist Analysis of International Criminal Law and Its Potential as a Counter-Hegemonic Project*, in *INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW—A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PROJECT?*, *supra* note 1, at 79.

Similarly, Burgis-Kasthala, Samour, and Schwöbel-Patel's exploration of accountability for violations of international criminal law in Palestine argues for the need to disaggregate sovereignty from statehood, uplifting community experiences and grounding solutions in the grassroots, regardless of how the international community defines a people's political status. In turn, the contributions by Aksamitowska and Kirabira gesture toward actionable legal empowerment solutions to hegemonic international criminal law. Whether taking the form of "entrepreneurial justice" in Ukraine and Syria, or victim empowerment by Ugandan NGOs, both authors recognize that the counter-hegemonic potential of international criminal law requires the legal empowerment of directly impacted communities. According to Aksamitowska, against the victors' justice that has characterized international criminal prosecutions, locally embedded justice initiatives by civil society actors contribute towards a counter-hegemonic "enforcement of international humanitarian law and international criminal law on the ground."⁸ Kirabira echoes that the "legitimacy of international criminal justice mechanisms is dependent on NGO discourses with the affected communities."⁹ Thus, without explicitly acknowledging the framework of legal empowerment, the book's Part II case studies imply that the promise of dismantling the hegemonic tendencies of international criminal law reside in "challenging the presumption that only state authorities know the law," uplifting justice efforts led by the grassroots, and reimagining accountability as defined by the redistribution of power from offenders to impacted communities, thereby breaking cycles of vulnerability that have perpetuated violations of international criminal law while imagining a more just global order.¹⁰

Recentering the World: China and the Transformation of International Law. By Ryan Martínez Mitchell. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2022. Pp. xviii, 221. \$29.99 (paperback).

REVIEWED BY MASHA GALAY

Ryan Martinez Mitchell's *Recentering the World: China and the Transformation of International Law* explores the development of

8. KAROLINA AKSAMITOWSKA, The Counter-Hegemonic Turn to 'Entrepreneurial Justice' in International Criminal Investigations and Prosecutions Relating to the Crimes Committed in Syria and Eastern Ukraine, in *INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW—A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PROJECT?*, supra note 1, at 148.

9. TONNY RAYMOND KIRABIRA, NGOs and the Legitimacy of International Criminal Justice: The Case of Uganda, in *INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW—A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PROJECT?*, supra note 1, at 170.

10. AKSAMITOWSKA, supra note 8, at 148.

international law in China between 1850 and 2001. Mitchell begins by discussing the Western economic imperialism that marked the beginning of China's 'modern' history. He traces how China, initially subject to the international legal order as a 'civilizing' project, gradually evolved in its approach to and relationship with international law. He explains how "a body of law that China first encountered as a system of imposed norms . . . gradually, over roughly a century, became a space for the projects of its own people." Mitchell also seeks to challenge certain prevalent and pervasive notions about the history of international law, particularly highlighting the important, yet oft-overlooked, contributions of Chinese jurists. Notably, he urges international lawyers to engage with China's legal history as "important to the origins of our current legal, geopolitical, and economic architecture."

The book is organized into three chronological parts: first, "Preserving Stateliness" (1850–94), second, "Asserting Sovereignty" (1895–1921), and last, "Internationalisms" (1922–2001). "Preserving Stateliness" focuses on China's initial experiences with international law following the Opium Wars and, crucially, introduces one of the key legal concepts explored throughout the book: the notion of sovereignty and China's evolving understanding of the term. The Chinese concept of *guoti* (國體), translated loosely as "state form" or "stateliness," was the dominant frame through which China initially interacted with other nations. Foreign deference to China's 'stateliness' was prioritized even where important substantive concessions were made (such as the waiving of all tariffs upon all Western trade). The gradual emergence and adoption of the term *zhuquan* (主權) or *guojia zhuquan* (國家主權), translated as "sovereignty," reflect the way in which Western ideas of 'sovereignty,' including *dominium eminens* and *imperium*, gradually embedded themselves into China's legal framework and tradition.

Part II, "Asserting Sovereignty," begins by discussing the Qing defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War and the corresponding shift in China's domestic intellectual climate and position in global hierarchies. Mitchell then delves into China's experience at the First and Second Hague Conferences, which marked China's first engagement with international law on the world stage. At the First Hague Conference in 1899, little attempt was made by the Western delegates to include China's representatives in substantive conversation, and China lacked expertise in international law. In contrast, by the time the Second Conference took place in 1907, China was able to send a delegation conversant in Western law. The Chinese government had begun to dispatch high-performing students overseas to study constitutional and international law to contribute to China's legal development. Mitchell devotes significant time to introducing this bright new corps of

Chinese legal scholars, tracking their studies, thesis topics, and academic influences. The international framework of the era, which emphasized a formalized legal hegemony, placed China firmly in the third-class state category, and this in turn filtered back into domestic legal developments. The Qing Court seized upon this pejorative third-class state designation to call for domestic constitutional law reform to preserve its sovereignty, recognizing that China's global standing hinged on foreign perceptions of its legal system.

Mitchell then addresses the Boxer Rebellion of 1899¹¹ and the resulting Boxer Protocol,¹² both of which he regards as highly significant international legal precedents providing foreign powers with expansive administrative control. This treaty helped develop an important principle of international law doctrine: the extent to which a justified international intervention could be undertaken against a state without turning into a condition of 'war' with corresponding rights and duties between the belligerents. This experience brought to the fore the illusory character of China's state authority. To a greater degree than ever before, powers of dominium, including control over tariffs and public finance in general, were "internationalized" in foreign-dominated structures.

Part III, "Internationalisms," focuses on China's experience with the international institutions created in the wake of the Treaty of Versailles, noting the involvement of Chinese jurists in organizations such as the Permanent Court of International Justice (the PCIJ, the precursor to the ICJ), and later the United Nations and the International Law Commission (ILC). Mitchell notes that in the 1920s, China was still not recognized as a co-equal sovereign state deserving of full autonomy. He then traces how China's diplomats and jurists attempted to increase China's agency and consolidate its status independent of management by foreign powers, in large part by trying to shift the discourse on issues of state sovereignty. The section provides an overview of the role China's delegates played in negotiations over the UN Charter, emphasizing that their proposals (rejected by the US and Great Britain) were informed by their experiences in the second half of the 19th century. China argued for the inclusion of elements such as a clear definition of "aggression" and an explicit commitment to member states' "political independence and territorial integrity." This focus on restricting the use of force reflected China's position as a weaker state in the global

11. The Boxer Rebellion was an uprising in North China against foreigners, initiated by peasants but eventually supported by the government.

12. The Boxer Protocol was a markedly unequal peace treaty which forced China to pay a crippling indemnity and allowed foreign troops to permanently occupy Beijing.

world order; China's delegates wanted to "build in true legal safeguards against aggression by strong states against their weaker peers."

Finally, Mitchell touches on the ways in which China's jurists responded to China's Civil War years and to the establishment of the new Communist regime as the Cold War world order came into shape, from the PRC's long period of ostracism by the UN to its entry into the organization in 1971. Mitchell concludes by briefly looking at how China rose economically and geopolitically to the top of the world order, exploiting existing forms of authority and abandoning efforts to push against these structures of global governance.

Mitchell utilizes a close reading of archival documents, some of which have only been made available in recent years, and existing studies of China's social, diplomatic, and legal history from the Late Qing through the modern era. The result is a work where important legal figures and other officials are treated akin to a cast of characters in a novel, who drive the historical narrative being presented and ground the legal, cultural, and social developments that took place during this hugely eventful period. This approach makes for an engaging reading experience and, in particular, helps Mitchell advance his aim of shedding greater light on specific Chinese legal figures. Chinese jurists like Liang Yunli, who was deeply involved in the ILC and the UN's codification efforts, and Wellington Koo, former vice president of the ICJ, are brought to the fore, and readers are given a full account of them as people, as well as scholars in a changing world. As Mitchell points out, at the time of writing, there was no reference to Liang Yunli on the ILC website, and Wellington Koo's Shanghainese given name is misspelled on the ICJ website. The lack of respect afforded to these influential figures underscores the importance of Mitchell's efforts to shed light on their contributions. Mitchell successfully grounds the broad shifts in legal thinking, political realities, and the international world order into the specific experiences of Chinese jurists and diplomats, using their PhD thesis topics, textbooks, and accounts of conferences and treaty negotiations to illustrate changing times and ideologies. His use of these individuals' experiences renders his work uniquely impactful and indispensable in this developing field.

Notably, Mitchell places particular emphasis on specific international legal terms, the texts that brought these terms to China, and the evolving use of these terms. For instance, he highlights how the term *zhuquan* was used or consciously avoided. The 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki was the very first international treaty or public law authority of any kind in which the Qing were forced to agree to a clause concerning *zhuquan*. Less than twenty years after this treaty, the term underwent major changes: it was incorporated into the Constitution of the

Republic of China and was invoked in 1912 in negotiations with Russian representatives over a new agreement regarding Mongolia. The choice of legal terms became crucial, as the Chinese side argued for the need to insist on full territorial control—framed as either territorial *zhuquan* (sovereignty) or *tongzhiquan* (imperium, or *souveraineté*)—whilst the Russian side was insistent on prohibiting any use of that specific term. The ultimate term used was the vague *zhuguo* (主國), translated as “ruling state,” which lacked any foreign equivalent or clear meaning in Chinese. As this passage exemplifies, the book is most compelling when Mitchell digs into the nuances of these legal contexts and tracks the ways in which China grappled with these terms as it increasingly invoked international legal concepts in its own diplomatic dealings.

However, in part because the project Mitchell undertakes is so sprawling, the book at times suffers from a lack of clarity and structure. The work covers a multitude of distinct topics: China’s internal understanding of international law and its corresponding impact on domestic law; the way in which China was understood by Western international law scholars; and the individualized educational, diplomatic, and legal experiences of specific Chinese jurists. It also addresses China’s relationship—first via treaties, conflicts, and imposed foreign control and later within the framework of international organizations—with other nations. While organizing the book chronologically is a sensible choice, the project would have benefited from a clearer delineation between these themes, and a tighter throughline connecting certain topics across time. Ultimately, however, the book still makes for a stimulating and informative read, especially for those seeking a richer understanding of international law and history.

Russia Reverts to Muscovy: What If We Simply Drop “Russia” from the Discourse?. By Stefan Hedlund. Abingdon, England; New York, NY: Routledge, 2025. Pp. xiii, 152. \$200.00 (hardcover).

REVIEWED BY ELLIOTT LANCRY

Stefan Hedlund, a Swedish scholar of Soviet and Russian politics at Uppsala University, advances a sweeping, brilliant reinterpretation of Russia’s political trajectory in *Russia Reverts to Muscovy: What If We Simply Drop “Russia” from the Discourse?* Muscovy was a late medieval principality centered in Moscow that preceded the Russian Empire and helped establish many of the political habits that Hedlund argues endure in Russian governance. In Hedlund’s view, Russia continues to operate through patterns of autocracy, imperial expansion, elite dependence on the state, and weak legal constraints on power that

were forged in Muscovy. Reframing today's Russia as "Muscovy," he contends, helps explain behaviors such as its authoritarian domestic governance and persistent drive to dominate neighboring states, as in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Hedlund's theoretical reorientation is highly compelling. It is historically rigorous, offers a plausible account of Russia's behavior domestically and abroad, and highlights an interpretive framework that contemporary policymakers too often ignore or underplay. However, a notable limitation is the lack of a practical roadmap for how the West should respond to the dynamics he identifies. This omission is especially consequential given Hedlund's claim that the West's inaccurate understanding of Russia helped cause and exacerbate the Russo-Ukrainian War, the War's devastating human cost, and the deeply entrenched nature of the Muscovite logic that, in his account, continues to shape Russian conduct.

Admittedly, offering a functional blueprint was likely not Stefan Hedlund's aim in writing *Russia Reverts to Muscovy*. His central ambition appears theoretical: to advance a model of Muscovite institutional logic that better explains Russia's actions, including its aggression in Ukraine, than prevailing Western frameworks have been able to do. Such an aim, to explain or contextualize phenomena rather than prescribe specific policy solutions, is not uncommon in the social sciences. Many influential works have shaped debate primarily by defining a phenomenon rather than outlining a concrete course of action, as seen in *The Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel P. Huntington and in *Making Democracy Work* by Robert D. Putnam.¹³ Furthermore, while Hedlund stops short of a practical foreign policy blueprint, he does offer a few valuable ideas on how to advance his proposed theoretical reorientation. For instance, he calls for the dismantling of the "Russia First" paradigm that has long shaped Western scholarship and policymaking, urging a shift away from Moscow-centered analysis toward a more pluralistic understanding of Eurasia. In particular, he advocates strengthening Ukrainian studies and other regional programs that treat post-Soviet states as independent historical and political actors rather than as peripheral extensions of Russia. This is a clear, actionable step in the right direction.

However, two considerations suggest that in *Russia Reverts to Muscovy*, the absence of more in-depth, foreign-policy-specific recommendations is uniquely consequential. First, Hedlund's key claim that the West bears some responsibility for enabling the Russo-Ukrainian

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996); Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993).

War, coupled with the ongoing human cost of it, warrants some practical guidance for how the West can modify its approach to remedy its errors. Hedlund argues that the West's deep economic ties with Russia, along with its inclination to attribute Russian aggression to NATO expansion, played a key role both in discouraging efforts to strengthen Ukraine's military and in failing to deter Putin from launching an invasion before 2022. Hedlund compares these dynamics to Neville Chamberlain's infamous pre-WWII "appeasement" strategy: Britain's effort to avoid war with Nazi Germany by making concessions to Hitler, most notably through the 1938 Munich Agreement, which permitted Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland but ultimately failed to prevent further aggression. During the Russo-Ukrainian War, Hedlund argues that some Western countries, including Austria and Hungary, worsened the conflict by insisting on continuing to purchase Russian energy, thereby helping to sustain Russia's war effort. If a central element of Hedlund's argument is that the West has enabled and exacerbated the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, and if he provides the tools to better understand Russia, then more concrete guidance on how the West should reorient its foreign policy seems necessary. Perhaps, however, Hedlund's claim that the West bears responsibility for Russia's initiation of the war, along with his provision of an analytical toolkit, is not in itself sufficient to justify a demand for more implementable solutions in a primarily theoretical work. Even so, the urgency of ending the conflict, given its immense human toll, with casualties projected to approach two million, according to *The New York Times*, underscores the need for more concrete recommendations.¹⁴ Unlike comparable theoretical works, *Russia Reverts to Muscovy* is written in the shadow of an ongoing and devastating war.

Second, the deeply entrenched nature of the Muscovite logic guiding Russia's conduct underscores the need for practical guidance on how the West should approach Russia. On Hedlund's own account, Russia's Muscovite institutional logic is not a temporary distortion or the product of a particular leader like Stalin or Putin, but a political pattern that has endured for centuries, surviving tsarism, Soviet communism, and post-Soviet transition alike. It is not episodic but systemic. It follows that in modifying its foreign policy approach to align with Hedlund's conception of Russia, the West would need to devise a complex, long-term, and enduring plan. Given the enormity of devising such a plan, there remain many open questions over how the West

¹⁴ Helene Cooper, *Troop Casualties in Ukraine War Near 2 Million, Study Finds*, *THE NEW YORK TIMES* (Jan. 27, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/27/us/politics/russia-ukraine-casualties.html>.

might proceed. For instance, what is the goal? Is it a durable transformation in Russia away from Muscovite institutional logic? If so, how should such a transformation be achieved? Is sustained external pressure the best option, or perhaps military defeat? If transformation turns out not to be feasible, is containment then desirable? What are the various containment strategies? Given Hedlund's expert understanding of Russia's Muscovite identity, a more tangible direction for Western engagement with Russia feels warranted. The obvious counterargument is that the mere depth of the problem and Hedlund's unique expertise are insufficient to warrant realistic foreign policy, especially as this work appears to be more theoretical in scope. However, the demonstrated and profound open-endedness involved in broadly reorienting Western foreign policy toward Russia, combined with the West's past failures in Russian diplomacy, such as its apparent "appeasement" in the lead-up to the Russo-Ukrainian War, reinforce the need for more policy suggestions.

To reiterate, *Russia Reverts to Muscovy* is persuasive and thought-provoking as a theoretical reorientation on Russia, compelling Western scholars and policymakers to reconsider prevailing assumptions about Russia. However, the relative absence of a clearly articulated path forward for the West is more striking here than in comparable works, given the centrality of the claim that the West has in part caused and exacerbated the Russo-Ukrainian War, the human cost of the ongoing conflict, and the entrenched nature of the Muscovite logic guiding Russia today. The result is a work that succeeds as a diagnosis but consequently feels incomplete as a prescription.

The International Politics of an Embodied God: Nationalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. By Stephen Chan, OBE. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2025. Pp. v, 227. \$29.40 (paperback).

REVIEWED BY ARIEL SIGAL

The intersection between religion and political conflict is well-trodden academic ground; however, Stephen Chan attempts to breathe new life into the subject in *The International Politics of an Embodied God: Nationalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. The book's central tenet is that "God provides validation of the state, but also achieves His modern form by association with the state,"¹⁵ highlighting the reciprocal nature of this religio-political relationship. While Chan's historical and modern analysis of the three "Book" religions offers a new

¹⁵ Stephen Chan, *The International Politics of an Embodied God: Nationalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* 14 (2025).

lens through which to view the dynamics between state and God, the writing falls flat in offering an analysis that connects to a clearly defined thesis or central idea and leaves readers unsure of what impact the book is attempting to make. This lack of cohesion unfortunately overshadows what is otherwise a compelling and thoughtful survey of the development of the three major world religions, and their role in shaping our modern geopolitical reality.

Chan provides an overview of the three religions of the “Book”: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His analysis of these three religions traces historical developments of religious identities and concepts of God, as well as how those identities are influenced by modern-day needs and national projects. He begins with an overview of the development of Jewish nationalist identity, from its biblical origins through the Jewish diaspora to its reinvigoration in the twentieth century and the subsequent formation of the modern state of Israel. Ultimately, Chan argues this path has culminated in a militarized conception of Jewish identity, predicated on protecting this centuries-old birthright from outside forces. The following chapter on Christianity focuses on how formulations of God emerged to support the development of the modern Western state. States strategically conflated Christian morality and financial maximization, whereby political and economic success is viewed as a “divine” reward for followers of the faith. This reductionism of God was facilitated by Christianity’s literal, humanistic conception of God, making it easier to map Christian morality onto a new secular society. Chan then pivots to an overview of Islamic nationalism, analyzing the theocratic approaches of Iran and Saudi Arabia. This chapter also focuses on the stress of modernization and secularity on Pan-Arab efforts, shaping how these countries engage with the Western political system.

Chan emphasizes the fact that all three religions have had to adjust to understandings of independent statehood and self-determination while still maintaining their historic anchors to “carry history into the future.”¹⁶ The challenge for political leaders, whether or not they associate with the religious state, is authoritatively transmitting this history, whereby the state can become an “embodiment of godly purpose.”¹⁷ The book then takes a brief detour to acknowledge religious-based nationalist projects outside of the three “Book” religions, highlighting how these regimes utilize similar tactics to connect religious imagery and politics to the group’s purposes and rationales for control.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 132.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 133.

The book covers myriad interesting topics, whether an analysis of the role of fear in Israeli state actions or an overview of the strategic alliances that promoted clerical influence following the 1979 Siege of Mecca. However, Chan often fails to connect these topics in a meaningful way, depriving the narrative of context and flow. Every “point” is buried in philosophical discussions and political backstory. While these factors are essential for understanding the modern political world, the discursive narrative creates confusion and whiplash as the writing jumps from topic to topic, often without definitive conclusions. For example, “Chapter Two: The Religions of the Book: Embodied Christ” pivots from literal interpretations of Christ in the United States to the ideology of luminosity (which is never fully defined), followed by a discussion on the development of Protestantism and the role of religion following the Treaty of Westphalia. This comprises only the first half of the chapter, which continues in a similarly fragmented manner. The rapid-fire covering of topics may not cause as much confusion to one with more exposure to each doctrine; however, in a text offering an analysis of the three “Book” religions, a reader should be able to absorb discussions of each, even without the advantage of an intimate knowledge of the faith.

The disjointed nature of the text is heightened by the absence of an overarching thesis throughout most of the book. The Foreword suggests the book will center on how people manipulate their conceptions of religion, and more specifically God, to fit their nationalist agenda and authoritative desires. While there are several portions of the book that speak to this central point, it is often woven between efforts to contextualize the case studies in question, and the thesis is lost as the analysis dips between this central idea and broader historical and political analysis. This is not to say such context is not helpful or needed; on the contrary, it would be nearly impossible, and arguably irresponsible, to omit explanation of the multitude of factors contributing to these conflicts. Yet often the analyses of these conflicts fail to tie back to the central theme beyond highlighting the fact that religion has played a role. Perhaps this is due to the fact that each religion is tied to the nationalist project in such varying ways. The Jewish conceptualization of religion is tied to modern-day Israel and the trauma of spending centuries as the “Wandering Jew.” Similarly, Islam’s co-optation of what it means to practice the religion has been so directly absorbed into the politics and governance of certain Arab nations that the connection requires little elaboration. In contrast, the mapping of the Christian God onto a nation is a more abstract endeavor, given the lack of a self-proclaimed “Christian” state to which to tie their own literal embodiment of God, Jesus Christ. Thus, the byproducts of these

varying nationalist projects, and the projects themselves, differ in ways that limit a unifying theme beyond the utilization of religious imagery to support national agendas and projects. The overarching thesis necessarily has to be broad to cover these differing expressions of the religio-nationalist project, but such a broad thesis demands constant re-centering for readers as the book covers such a breadth of topics, and on this, the book fails to deliver.

The book's faults are exacerbated by the unsatisfying "what now?" conclusion of the book. Chan does not appear to be advocating for a complete separation of church and state; the issue does not seem to be the commingling of politics and religion per se, but rather the clashing perceptions amongst national projects that believe they are formed in God's image and that their embodied God is superior to all others. Chan does not mention any explicit theoretical consequences beyond the implied continuation of current religio-political violence, underscored by the added afterword following the Oct 7 attacks on Israel and their subsequent violent response. He cites religio-historical grievances as a major hurdle, pointing to the trajectory of modern-day Israel. He analyzes two possible approaches to alleviate the underlying tensions between the religio-political regimes, both of which address the need to reduce the embodiments of God in nationalist projects and work to dismantle the superiority complexes fueling political agendas and interstate religious conflicts. He briefly considers and quickly rejects approaches that merely look to common ethics in the language of the Books and instead advances an approach based on hermeneutics.

Despite a lack of formal definition, the reader understands hermeneutics to mean an approach that prioritizes spiritual introspection – on both a personal and national level – over instructive literal guidance, as Chan frames it. While this is an intriguing approach, Chan fails to outline how such a tactic would work in practice; though, he does at least acknowledge that it would be difficult for authorities to suddenly make this pivot. This approach would undermine current tactics of nationalists, who rely on readings of scripture that create a binary universe, and thus a sense of superiority. While the idea of "superiority" fueling these tensions is crucial, it is unclear how the suggested methodology will work to cure the literalism, materialism, and national parochiality underlying current nationalist agendas, and an expansion of this idea could help tie the thesis together in the book's conclusion.

Despite the above critique, there are intriguing and important messages throughout Chan's book that anyone concerned about the rise of religious nationalism would be interested to dissect. Readers may gain a deeper appreciation for how conceptions of God have shifted to fit the needs of the modern nation-state, which can assist in

contextualizing and interpreting some of today's largest political conflicts; however, such appreciations may be lost to the book's larger structural issues. Further, without a clear way forward to combat these co-optations of religion, it is unknown what impact this book can have on current religious (and political) tensions worldwide.