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Trial-and-error can transform the state. So argues Mark Shirk in *Making War on the World*, a svelte monograph on state transformation in response to transnational violence. Rather than dealing in causal theory, it emphasizes historical contingency and agency, reminding us that states could have responded to pirates, anarchists, and terrorists in a variety of ways. Examining the golden age of piracy during the early 18th century, anarchist assassinations and bombings around the turn of the 20th century, and al-Qaida’s jihadist terrorism at the turn of the 21st century, the book explores how prevailing worldviews shaped states’ initial responses, how their failures opened the door to creative practices, and how those practices ended up transforming the state. Primarily aimed at scholars of state transformation, it is an ambitious study that pushes the field forward and draws attention to understudied cases.

The book’s central argument holds that “transboundary processes drive state transformation when they are illegible... when the boundary-drawing practices that construct the state do not help state agents make sense of what is happening” (pp. 12-13). Threats that state agents find illegible “shatter” their prevailing worldviews, prompting them to develop creative solutions that “reinscribe” the boundaries of the state. Central to this argument is its conceptualization of states not as relatively fixed institutions that endure until a revolution or some other critical juncture, but as patterns of action that impose boundaries of exclusive political authority on the world’s countless unbounded flows. As such, states are continually subject to reconstitution by not only political leaders but the full spectrum of agents who act in their name. This perspective offers an opportunity to observe subtle shifts in the forms and extent of state authority over time, an important rejoinder to a field often blinded by spotlights on major wars and their aftermath. It prompts us to observe that transformation can occur not just through interstate competition but through collusion against common threats and diffusion of best practices,
as well as “from below” when state agents assert authority over subject populations at the margins of political order.

The meat of the book consists of three richly-detailed case studies of state interactions with pirates, anarchists, and terrorists, peppering macro-level narratives with individual vignettes. In each case, aspects of the contemporary global order facilitated the emergence of transnational violence threatening state legitimacy. Relying on their existing “conceptual maps,” state agents misdiagnosed the problem and adopted counterproductive policy responses, initial failures that eventually gave way to new approaches that ended up transforming the state. The piracy case is likely to be of particular interest to many U.S. and European scholars of international relations, who have tended to focus on the northeast side of “the line” that divided European politics from Atlantic colonial competition. England initially offered pardons—which held little appeal to pirates seeking a life free from organized society—and patrolled sea lanes with naval vessels too cumbersome for the nimble raiders who sold stolen trade goods to eager colonial markets. Eventually, the crown cracked down on lenient colonial governors, extended vice-admiralty courts directly into the colonies, recognized universal jurisdiction authorizing any state to prosecute pirates, and launched a propaganda campaign to stifle their support among the colonists.

Two centuries later, the anarchist movement inspired a rash of high-profile political assassinations and bombings. State agents responded with broad-based repression and public executions (often inspiring revenge attacks) as well as deportations and secret agent operations that caused more problems than they solved. Success came later as states learned to live with peaceful anarchist ideologues, focused their efforts on the perpetrators of violence, centralized policing in ways that promoted international cooperation, and developed methods like fingerprinting and universal passports for tracking individuals across borders. Finally, U.S. policymakers responded to al-Qaida’s 9/11 attacks with counterproductive black site torture programs, border exclusion, and regime-change wars. Although the scope of state transformation resulting from the War on Terror remains to be determined, the book identifies drone strikes and metadata-based surveillance as key ingredients likely to redraw boundaries of national security, cyberspace, and citizenship.
These case studies are generally insightful, identifying decentralized and incremental processes that have transformed states. One missed opportunity is the lack of engagement with scholarship on terrorism beyond the third case—both others also highlight themes relevant to the subject, and more explicit discussion of patterns and lessons would have offered more for those interested in intelligence or counterterrorism. Some readers are also likely to push back on aspects of the third case study, which blames the “War on Terror” narrative on U.S. officials’ inability to “make sense of” al-Qaeda (p. 115), portrays post-9/11 airline security measures as “attempts to reinforce the boundaries that made al-Qaeda impossible to combat” (p. 115), and argues that torture and regime change had to fail before the idea of drone strikes could “take hold” (p. 117). While 9/11 obviously facilitated these policy shifts, critics might respond that the “War on Terror” narrative served U.S. officials’ broader goals, airline security reflected common-sense measures to prevent similar attacks, and presidents prior to George W. Bush lacked the capability to employ drone strikes simply because the technology had not yet been developed.

The larger question of the book’s contribution concerns its central concept of “legibility.” On one hand, it fits well within the tradition of research on state agents interpreting new phenomena based on their preexisting mental frameworks (which are subject to various forms of bias). Yet the book elides that psychological constraint with two distinct dynamics—tactical/technological mismatches and threats to state legitimacy—rendering it something of a catch-all for strategic failure. For instance, it describes one of the Boston Marathon bombers as illegible to police because he had hidden outside the area they cordoned off (p. 28), labels anarchists’ use of dynamite illegible “as it had not been seen before” (p. 83), claims that armed drones “made al-Qaeda legible” (p. 102), and argues that granting universal jurisdiction made piracy “legible to the state” (p. 57), each of which reflects tactics or technology rather than state agents’ ability to comprehend the threats they faced. Similarly, the case studies treat state agents’ recognition that their legitimacy was threatened as evidence of their failure to understand transnational threats, but the former may reflect reasonable assessments of domestic political, normative, or ontological insecurity, not legibility.

Overall, there is much to appreciate in *Making War on the World*’s pursuit of nuanced and contextualized historical understanding, though the
modesty of its conclusion that transnational violence has played a role alongside war, economics, and ideas in reshaping state practices may leave some readers wanting more direct assessment of how much they changed the course of history. The book lights the way for further research on the role of legitimacy in threat perception, policymaking, and state transformation, with the conceptual caveats noted above. It also indicates further opportunities to explore variations in threat legibility, such as comparing perceptions of piracy from colonial and imperial perspectives or exploring how racial hierarchy narratives shaped the legibility of anticolonial and nationalist terrorism. Scholars interested in transnational violence and state transformation will find this book a stimulating read.