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## Book Review by John Gale: Invited review of "Free Burma: Transnational Legal Action for Corporate Social Accountability" in the book of Perspectives on Politics

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**Free Burma: Transnational Legal Action and Corporate Accountability.** By John G. Dale. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 296p. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.  
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— Tun Myint, *Carleton College*

In his book, John G. Dale has brought the Free Burma movement to the intellectual spotlight of social science by arguing that the Free Burma activists led the way in creating what can now be called transnational legal and political discourse, which moves beyond state-centric analytical approaches. Part I presents the conceptual framework of analysis and introduces Burma's democracy movement to readers. Before Part I, the Introduction provides the conceptual background to theorize the Free Burma movement.

A key observation put forth in the Introduction is that the scholarly analyses passed on the Free Burma movement are based on two analytical lenses. The first lens is the "state-centered social movement framework" (p. 7), which treats social movements that occur inside or outside of a country as "determined on the basis of collective action taking place within the territorial boundaries of the state" (p. 7). The author reports that this lens has "heavily influenced Burma experts' analysis of the prospects for democratic change in the country" (p. 7). Analyzed through this lens, it is conceivable why Burma experts concluded that the movement that started in 1988 has "become an ultimately marginal factor" (p. 8) or "ultimate failure" (p. 64) in a political process dominated by international economic interests and regional power rivalries. The second lens is the "transnational social movement" (p. 9) framework. In this lens, the analytical context of social movements such as Free Burma inside or outside of a country is that of transnational networks of "actors that have common purposes linked across nation-state boundaries, and that demonstrate a capacity to generate coordinated social mobilization in more than one country" (p. 9). This analytical framework focuses on the

transnational discourse of a social movement that blurs boundaries between national and international actions. The author employs the second analytical lens to analyze three cases, each presented in later chapters in Part II of the book.

Chapter 1 presents a brief history of the Free Burma movement inside the country before the 1988 people's uprising that ended the era of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party and introduced a more oppressive military regime by the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Then Chapter 2 locates the power of the Free Burma movement in transnational discourse and actions. The main point made in this chapter is that the power of the Free Burma movement cannot be conceived of by applying a state-centric approach or national discourse about the Myanmar government's oppression and crimes against its citizens; it has to be situated in the transnational space outside and inside Burma where multinational corporations and foreign states are self-implicated in the Myanmar government's oppression. In Chapter 2, the author effectively argues that the power of the Free Burma movement has to be situated in the transnationalist discourse of corporate accountability, which was deployed as a tool to influence regime change in Burma. The author then declares that the remainder of the book will explain "exactly how the movement does" (p. 97) transnationalist discourse.

One of the central puzzles of the Free Burma movement has to do with the questions of who benefits most from the presence of the oppressive military government in Burma and how these actors sustain the regime and its ongoing oppression of the democracy movement. The book partially answers these questions by pointing to multinational corporations such as Unocal that operate under constructive engagement policies informed by neoliberal logics embedded in the foreign policy of home states toward Burma. In this sense, the author argues that foreign states and multinational corporations operating under the neoliberal logic of social change—that economic development leads to democracy, a thesis articulated by Samuel P. Huntington in his *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968)—are more or less responsible for the longevity of the military oppression in Burma.

At the empirical level, the discourse applied by the Free Burma movement produced several research questions regarding how global cosmopolitan societies may move beyond state-centric legal and political discourse toward transnational discourse in order to create a more just world. The book is important in that the questions it raises pertain to the future of transnational discourse and corporate accountability. It gives empirical ammunition to the intellectual tradition of Alexis de Tocqueville, John S. Furnivall, Vincent Ostrom, James C. Scott, and scholars who are critical of state-centric approaches in the disciplines of political and social science. The subject of transnational

discourse itself is a fascinating one, with the rise of non-state actors in world affairs and the blurriness of political and juridical borders across states.

The author acknowledges that his role in the book “has been not so much as an activist but more as a scholar and advocate” (p. xviii) for the Free Burma movement. In this sense, the book is less rigorous in its critical analysis of actors and their linkages to the movement’s transnationalist legal discourse than the author promised. If the readers are looking for more field-based evidence and critical presentation of the cases with detailed narratives, they will find the book less satisfying. For instance, the author did not delve into presenting and interpreting the relationships, activities, and linkages among actors and their campaigns sketched in Figures 12 and 13 in Chapter 4. At the same time, there are several areas in the book where the author has not carefully checked the validity of the historical facts of the Free Burma movement. For instance, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was described as the “elected prime minister in a landslide democratic election in 1990” (p. 42). However, she was never allowed to be a candidate in either of the two elections orchestrated, respectively, in 1990 and 2010, under the military regime.

As a result, readers will have to search for more details about the linkages and relations among actors in the case studies. For instance, three pages of history on the Massachusetts Burma Law (MA Burma Law) (pp. 104–7) miss a significant amount of information on the Free Burma campaigns in the United States that led to the enactment of the law in 1996, which is the case of Chapter 3. The brief history described in the chapter is devoted to mentioning a Massachusetts activist and a campus campaign to have the state pass the Burma law. Burmese activists in exile and American Free Burma activists, such as Synapses project leader Donald F. Erickson, had already influenced the withdrawal of the Amoco Oil Company in 1994, two years before the author’s claim that the MA Burma Law influenced Amoco’s decision (p. 111). These activists spent time campaigning at high schools, college campuses, and community churches around the United States using early Internet prototypes like Gopher and Mosaic gateways, and started a transnational movement that pushed companies like Levi-Strauss, Eddie Bauer, Pizza Hut, Pepsi Cola, Taco Bell, and Amoco to withdraw their investments from Burma before 1996. The cases of these companies inspired a generation of Free Burma activists such as Simon Billenness to pursue divestment campaigns, whose work is mentioned in Chapter 3.

All of this is to say that Dale provides an insightful analytical lens for theorizing and assessing the Free Burma movement. At the very least, this book hails these activists and their impact on the intellectual discourse of the political and social sciences.