Jans Bartelson, Martin Hall and Jan Teorell, De-Centering State Making: Comparative and International Perspectives

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Why do we have states and where do they come from? For many social scientists brought up on a steady diet of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Charles Tilly, Peter Evans, Theda Skocpol, Peter Katzenstein, Gianfranco Poggi, Atul Kohli, Meredith Woo Cummings etc., there would be a litany of different ways to respond to these questions, referring to what we habitually call, however clumsily, the developed and developing worlds.

The premise of this collected volume, however, is that neither comparativists nor international relations scholars have sufficient answers, and that accordingly we need to ‘de-center’ our perspectives to overcome two limitations on our understanding. First, we need to rid ourselves of a ‘Eurocentric’ focus (for which the Weberian tradition seems to be responsible) and second we have to break away from Charles Tilly’s association of the origins of the state with war – the so-called ‘bello-centric’ approach. In addition, as the editors claim, we need to cross some sub-disciplinary boundaries. A first step is to reconcile the IR focus on the state’s external relations with the comparativists’ focus on its internal constitution (e.g. by using two-level games à la Putnam, or by thinking about the historical ‘co-constitution of states and the international system’). A second is to bring together ideational and materialist approaches – a sensible but unlikely idea given the rigidity of academic silos.

Reading the articles in this volume, the first overall impression is that there is a missed opportunity here. For anyone replete with their fill of Marx, Weber, Tilly etc. (see above) it is somewhat mystifying that much of the canon is neglected, and that when it is invoked it is done so only partially. Weber and Tilly are referred to repeatedly, but really only to set them up as straw men. Weber is brought in to argue that his focus on the state’s monopoly of the means of violence needs revision, while his related work on power and authority (in Europe and beyond) is ignored. Tilly’s argument that states are closely connected with the conduct of war is used to advocate a greater attention to other variables that he neglects – even though Tilly himself never used a ‘bellicist’ argument in isolation from others. Similarly, there has been much work already using Putnam and intergovernmental theory (just to mention two approaches by political scientists) to link internal with external state activity, but it is never referred to, in this book, except in passing in the case of Putnam. The misleading claim that there is little comparative work on the state outside of
Europe (reinforced by a breathtakingly inaccurate blurb from Ayşə Zarakol of the University of Cambridge on the book’s back cover) left me marvelling at the capacity of academics to elevate their own work by relegating or ignoring that of others. The missed opportunity, then, was that of truly investigating the extensive canon of work on the state and building on its foundations, rather than making inaccurate claims about its lacunae.

That major gripe aside, however, this book has very many positive features. I found Martin Hall’s contrast of state making in Europe with that of the Eurasian steppe interesting, especially the argument that the search for sovereignty and territoriality ‘shaped’ or ‘shoved’ state making in Europe but not on the steppe. But I wondered why work on Europe is characterised almost entirely as ‘bello-centric’ in order to differentiate it from the importance of trade on the steppe. Both trade and war characterise the constitution of European states of different kinds after the fall of the Roman Empire – itself driven by trade and conquest, with the creation of varied forms and degrees of extractive authority within it.1 Similarly, I found Ted Svensson’s study of the federal origins of India to be quite fascinating, especially his focus on the ‘princely states’ and the complications their quasi-independence from British India created for post-colonial state and nation building. I also appreciated his reference to the work of Daniel Ziblatt and Alfred Stepan, among others, to locate his analysis in the general literature. But I suspect that a greater focus on trade (as in Hall) would have brought further insights to the India case and greater unity of purpose to the book as a whole. After all, as Rupali Mishra has recently demonstrated, state and commerce were inseparable in the constitution of India, and the conflict which that relationship generated between public purpose and private markets is important for understanding India’s peculiar process of state formation.2

For this reader, among the most important chapters in the book (in terms of theory building and linking together a wide variety of causal arguments) is that on the ‘current developing state’ by Jonathan Hanson. Demonstrating the utility of a rigorous positivist framework, with a strong foundation in data analysis, Hanson creates some intriguing arguments regarding which factors seem to be more important that others in state formation and the creation of state capacity. The key findings of his quantitative work (which indicate directions for further qualitative enquiry) is that post-World War II social diversity and democracy are most closely linked with changing state capacity and that external rivalries (if not war as such) are also important for building political community. His reference to the complexities of legitimacy formation, and the importance of representation for preventing the rise of patrimonialism and fostering the rise of the modern bureaucratic state is also useful – and points to the more general applicability of state formation theory. To some extent Hanson’s analysis contradicts the notion presented by the editors of this volume that Eurocentrism and ‘bellicist’ notions of state formation are to be avoided. Rather he argues for the investigation of a series of multiple variables (including those related to conflict, war and the emergence of European states) that have universal applicability, though in differing degrees. This squares more neatly than the rest of

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the book with the ways in which work by Atul Kohli, for example, deals with the
time to examine the equation between state making, revenue extraction and war. Like Hanson, the authors (Goenaga and von Hagen-Jamar) find that the ‘bellicist’
argument has to be nuanced, identifying different time periods and different scope
conditions under which the relationship between war and state building holds. As in
Hanson, the ‘bellicist’ argument for state formation is therefore relativised among
others rather than rejected. But one wonders again why Charles Tilly is identified
as the culprit in bequeathing a ‘transhistorical’ bellicist theory of state formation’,
when his own arguments in this regard were quite nuanced. His statement that “war
made the state and the state made war” is often taken out of context from the rest of
his work, especially the careful argumentation found in his Coercion, Capital and
European States that class structures, commercial systems and markets all factor
into an explanation of variable forms and levels of state formation and ‘filter’ the role
played by militarism therein. In my view, the nuance that Goenaga and von Hagen-
Jamar argue for in the conclusion of their chapter is already prefigured in the work
of Tilly himself, for which he should be given credit

Also valuable in the same way as Hanson and Goenaga and von Hagen-Jamar
is Butcher and Griffiths’ chapter on ‘war and variation in the structure of historical
international systems’. They present a formal model which aims to conceptualise
‘sovereign bargains between imperial and peripheral states from tributary empire
to modern centralized states’. Again, rather than rejecting ‘Eurocentrism’ and
neo-Weberianism in their analysis, Butcher and Griffiths use insights from the
conventional state formation literature to create an ‘acultural and transportable’
definition of the state ‘by formalizing some of the key dilemmas that state builders
face across history – in Europe and elsewhere’ (p. 128). Where they do meet the
objectives of the editors is in exploring the relationship between domestic factors and
external ones in state formation – which they define as interaction between polities
and aspiring imperial power, in which interaction capacity (domestic organizational
strengths) and international competition (as in the work of Tilly) play important roles.

Compressing the analyses of the remaining chapters, without wishing to detract
from their importance, there is a constructivist analysis of ‘imagined states’ and
clashing state-building processes in Bosnia by Annika Björkdahl; an analysis of
Egypt as a ‘semi-sovereign’ state by Arthur Learoyd, which uses the interaction
between managerial, legal, suzerainty and cultural factors to demonstrate the diversity
of circumstances that give rise to different forms of semi-sovereign entity; and a
thought-provoking piece by Ellen Ravndal on the role of international organizations
(IOs) and international society as an important context for shaping states, not in
the post-World War II era, but in the nineteenth century. I found the latter to be
particularly informative, and one that truly merits the claim made on the book’s
cover that it will ‘greatly benefit those teaching advanced undergraduate courses’. Ravndal’s careful argument about the importance of international organisation before
the age of contemporary IOs (the IMF, World Bank etc.) in creating an international

system with important implications for state development has already guaranteed her chapter a prominent position in my syllabus on the political economy of globalisation.

I want to sum up this review with a short discussion of the first of two concluding chapters, Janis Grzybowski’s ‘aporias of de-centering state making in time and space’ (the second concluding chapter is more of a summary of the book’s chapters, albeit a very useful one). Mirriam-Webster’s dictionary defines ‘aporia’ in two senses: (1) ‘a logical impasse or contradiction’ and (2) ‘an expression of real or pretended doubt or uncertainty especially for rhetorical effect’. In my view, both come together in Grzybowski’s chapter. While it advances a critique (though not dismissal) of attempts to ‘de-centre’ analysis of the state away from its neo-Weberian ‘presumptions’ (because, according to Grzybowski, even while attempting to escape from it the conventional notion of the state keeps rearing its ugly neo-Weberian head), much of the argument is precisely an expression of pretended doubt regarding the book’s supposed ‘logical contradiction’, and one designed largely (in this reviewer’s mind) for rhetorical effect. I admit that my hackles are all too readily raised by any article that deploys pretentious pseudo-philosophical formulations such as “presentist assumptions” or refers to the state as a “social and epistemic entity” as well as an “ontologically presupposed entity”. But the main problem with this kind of conclusion is that it gratuitously contradicts the quite apposite epistemological bases of many of the book’s chapters while not actually communicating with them.

In this respect, both the ‘aporia’ chapter and the editors’ insistence on the importance of combatting ‘Eurocentrism’ and the straw man of dominant ‘bellicist’ accounts fail to convey the rich and nuanced complexity of the book’s many fine contributions. If one should never judge a book by its cover, another useful maxim is to never judge an edited volume by its introduction and conclusion.