

Contributors

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1. Introduction: de-centering state making

Jens Bartelson, Martin Hall and Jan Teorell

INTRODUCTION

The overarching ambition of this volume is to bring about a de-centering of state making by shifting the focus beyond the emergence of states in early modern Western Europe. This dual focus has been pervasive among scholars of international relations, comparative politics and historical sociology. Students of international relations have long located the origin of the modern state and the international system to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and although this once widespread view has been thoroughly criticized and even relegated to the realm of myth, those who debate the issue of *when* states emerged nevertheless still agree that this happened in Western Europe before it could happen elsewhere (Ruggie 1993; Spruyt 1994; Croxton 1999; Oslander 2001; Teschke 2003; Philpott 2001; Beaulac 2004; Nexon 2009). Such a focus on early modern Western Europe has been equally pervasive among historical sociologists, many of whom have traced the emergence of states to the self-reinforcing confluence of warfare, the centralization of authority and fiscal capacity from the late Middle Ages to the modern period (Tilly 1975, 1985, 1992; Hintze 1975). Scholars of comparative politics have not deviated far from this general picture (Rokkan 1973, 1975; Downing 1992; Ertman 1997).

Given their common historical and geographical focus, scholars of international relations have portrayed the spread of the sovereign state as an unintended outcome of European expansion on other continents, while scholars of comparative politics and historical sociologists have assumed or implied that a similar confluence of social and political factors that once led to the formation of states in Western Europe will produce similar results in other geographic contexts. Our ambition is to de-center these accounts of state making by focusing on developments in other historical and geographic contexts in order to generate new insights about the nature and causes of state making. But rather than trying to refute the above-mentioned theories, we want to challenge their claims to validity

by probing their scope conditions and inquire into how well their core assumptions travel into other historical and geographical contexts. It is our belief that in order to add fresh insights into the nature and causes of state making, such a de-centering has to address its conceptual, theoretical and empirical aspects simultaneously.

First, it is necessary to unpack and sometimes modify standard definitions of the concept of the state in order to make it better fit with other experiences of statehood. Second, it is necessary to revise conventional explanations of state making in order to make sense of cases that otherwise would appear idiosyncratic or anomalous. Third, it is necessary to use insights from such idiosyncratic and anomalous cases in order to identify alternative paths to statehood and more general explanations of state making. In sum, we cannot hope to make new sense of anomalous cases unless we are prepared to revise standard assumptions about the causes of state making, and we cannot revise these assumptions unless we first probe into definitions of the state concept.

Such questioning has to take the historical meanings of the state concept into consideration, but also strike a balance between historically sensitive uses of this concept and more generic ones. An inquiry into the changing meaning of the concept of the state gives us a first inroad to a historical de-centering. Although some preconditions of sovereign statehood were present in Europe well before the seventeenth century, such as claims to supreme authority, another typical characteristic of the modern state – its territorial boundedness – had to wait until the following century before it was translated into facts on the ground and entrenched in legal definitions of the state (Branch 2013; Elden 2013; Maier 2016). Still other characteristics of the modern state are of an even more recent vintage: the rise and spread of the notion that political authority ought to be externally independent and later also congruent with a people or nation in order to be internally legitimate is something we owe to the Age of Revolutions and its aftermath (Armitage 2007; Armitage and Subrahmanyam 2009). Only after these requirements had been fulfilled and sedimented into lexical definitions of the concepts of sovereignty and state did it become possible to ask how and why this peculiar form of political association had come into being, and to trace the processes through which political authority had been centralized, territorially demarcated and eventually merged with that of a bounded community backwards in time. Given these background conditions, the historical and geographical limits of modern theories of state making are hardly surprising and all the more revealing. From this it follows that the first step toward a conceptual de-centering of the state would be to unpack those components before we use the state concept in a generic or transhistorical sense to understand and explain experiences of statehood in other times and places.

Thus, it is fully possible to use the concept of the state in a meaningful and coherent way without implying that political authority and community are territorially congruent. Even if such creative uses amount to stretching the concept of the state beyond established connotations, such stretching can indeed be productive when undertaken for the purpose of capturing cases of political rule that would otherwise fall outside the scope of analysis. Several chapters in this volume capitalize on this possibility, by inquiring into political institutions and modes of governance that have little to do with what allegedly happened in Westphalia or during the Age of Revolutions, but all the more to do with how political and social forces produced altogether different constellations of political authority and community outside the Western European core, and at other points in time.

What goes for the historical context of state theorizing also goes for its geographical context. Theories of state making not only reflect the fact that the concept of the state has a distinct pedigree that reflects unique European experiences of statehood, but also the fact that most empirical studies of state formation have been firmly centered on the European context. But although there is no shortage of studies that criticize the Eurocentric tendencies of academic international relations and historical sociology, there have been few attempts to date to bring such criticism to bear on theories of state making in ways that would help to revise them accordingly (Thies 2004; Bhambra 2007; Jones 2006; Taylor and Botea 2008; Kayaoglu 2010; Hobson 2012; Kaspersen and Strandsbjerg 2017). This volume responds to such criticism not by debunking existing theories of state making on grounds of their Eurocentrism, but instead by exploring why some assumptions about state making travel to other geographical contexts with no apparent loss of explanatory power, while others seem to lose their bite as soon as they are removed from their context of origin. Inquiring into the preconditions of state making in other geographical contexts can not only help us expose the limits of extant theorizing, but also contribute to general insights about the causes of state making. The contributions to this volume are guided by the general assumption that the more or less exclusive focus on Western European state making has introduced a strong bias into theories of state making, which in turn has had profound and detrimental effects on the field of inquiry as a whole. From this follows an ambition to question the received view according to which the emergence of states outside Europe was the result of the diffusion of sovereign statehood through the practices of imperialism and colonialism, and instead to emphasize the *sui generis* character of these processes by situating them in a wider context of different and competing forms of human association.

Taken together, the historical and geographical de-centering of state making makes the contingency of the modern state apparent. Although the state remains the predominant locus of political authority and community in the modern world, this predominance is relatively recent and, arguably, also increasingly precarious, given that many of the preconditions behind its rise to prominence are being challenged by global and transnational forces (Sassen 2008; Ferguson and Mansbach 2004; Agnew 2009). But rather than pondering whether the state is here to stay or will fade away, we would instead like to emphasize the fact that for most of its history in Europe and elsewhere, states have coexisted with other and sometimes rival forms of political authority. This makes it imperative to understand how and explain why the state once rose to prominence in competition with its most obvious contenders such as empires and city-states, but also how the transition from empires to states often made a detour through hybrid forms characterized by divided sovereignty, plural and overlapping jurisdictions, and fuzzy boundaries (Benton 2002; Adelman 2006; Benton 2009).

Hence, and in contrast to those accounts of state making that portray state making as a series of interlocking causal mechanisms and processes, sometimes to the point of making the triumph of the state over alternative forms of political rule look inevitable, contributors to this volume emphasize the historical and geographical contingency of these mechanisms and processes. Although contributors to this volume do not doubt that the making of states elsewhere might owe much to the same interlocking causes that drove European state making, rather than trying to identify a single pathway to statehood by assuming that these causes constitute a coherent package, they take their disentangling to be necessary in order to overcome the Eurocentrism of conventional accounts.

The question of war and its role in state making is especially pertinent in this regard: if war between groups gives rise to states in some contexts but not in others, how is this pattern of variation to be accounted for? Conversely, how are we to understand those instances in which states did emerge without being accompanied by warfare? The fact that similar processes sometimes produce different results under different conditions, and that different processes sometimes produce similar results, is a strong reason in favor of contextualizing such assumptions.