

State Formation (I)

State formation literature works with several dependent variables. Some studies explain the rise of absolutisms, some parliamentarianism, others democracy. I start the theoretical discussion with definitional issues concerning the State and mechanisms associated with its formation. I continue with the theories on its formation. I show that the lack of a generalizable scheme follows from ethnocentric theory and concept building. I argue that we could learn more about mechanisms of State formation, if we normalized Western experiences, instead of using them as benchmarks.

What is a 'formed' State?

In the variety of selected eras and geographies, existing work displays commonalities. In *Coercion, Capital and European States*, Tilly highlights three patterns: First, studies can be clustered as to whether change originates from the international or domestic structure, and the extent to which economics affect State formation. Second, scholars tend to explain what distinguishes the West, for which they generally propose a single standard path.¹ Third, “(scholars) have usually proceeded retrospectively, seeking the origins of the states as we know as Germany or Spain and ignoring states that disappeared along the way rather than trying to chart the whole as range of state formation.”²

Although I agree with all three points, I see the last two intertwined. In this essay, I discuss their methodological and theoretical implications for State formation. Also, I take Tilly’s criticism further to argue that Western specificity and retrospection have established a false hierarchy between State types –featuring ‘modern States’ with representative institutions at the top. The ranking rests on observations of Western experiences, rather than a clear standard for measuring institutional performance. The commonly used criteria, economic and/or democratic performance, are inadequate to evaluate Stateness. Further, survival is misused as if it were an intrinsic property of a certain State type. A given State type survives *only under* favorable environmental conditions. I argue that we should use institutional robustness, which captures resilience to internal and external challenges. Robustness measures Stateness better, for it is context and time-dependent.

¹ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States*. p.6.

² Ibid. p.33.

Ethnocentrism

Is there a hierarchy between State types? If yes, what is it? What are the foundations? Tilly's second critique answers the first two questions: There is a hierarchy with Western States at the top. The idea of superiority comes as natural, since Western States have surpassed others in technology, democracy, political and military power, and prosperity over the last 300 years. Superiority begets specificity, whereby most scholars work on what distinguishes the West.

The superiority-specificity idea has infused into the academic and everyday language. We describe non-Western States using expressions like 'emerging democracies/markets', 'the developing world', 'catching up', 'lagging behind', 'instability', 'web-like societies', or 'backwardness'. For the West, we employ 'advanced/developed economies/societies', 'established democracies', or 'stable societies'. The parlance is referential and evaluative. In that, something's performance on a certain dimension 'lags behind' with respect to something else that has 'advanced' to a further level.

Sometimes the superiority idea is expressed indirectly, (e.g. 'emerging markets'), but not always: "The European state building experience (is) the only case of sustained political development comparable in scale and scope to the one unleashed by the recent wave of state formation (...)."³ Ertman means the period since the decolonization. In his description, the second half of this century is characterized by "the birth of dozens of new nations in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe", and a "high incidence among these young states of dictatorship, corruption, and separatist threats to central authority".⁴ Notice the contrast between '*sustained political development*' associated with the European state building, and 'dictatorship, corruption, and separatist threats to central authority' in the new nations. These are, of course, facts. What I want to draw attention to is the ensuing inference: European experiences can "cast new light on this question".⁵ In other words, we can learn about non-Western societies and State building by looking at the West. My question is: To what extent can we do so? What similarities do we spot between the pre-modern European environment and that of post-1945 Africa and Eastern Europe that might help understand interactions between centers and centrifugal forces, States and societies, States and their neighbors in the new nations? Further, I

³ Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

would like to bring it to my readers' attention that the superiority-specificity idea has become an unquestioned assumption guiding research designs. In what follows, I want to examine its implications and operationalization.

What concept(s) do scholars use to talk about Western experiences? Which of them are associated with the superiority-specificity assumption? I have found various answers. Table I, below, samples some recurrent dependent variables in the literature.

Table I

Term Employed	Reference Work
'The modern State' (includes versions where the modern state also connotes 'secular States', nation States, or both)	Badie and Birnbaum 1983; Badie 1992, 1997; Bendix 1980; Gellner 2006; Greenfeld 1992; Gorski 2013; Gorski 2003; Poggi 1978; Reus-Smit 1999; Rodinson 1987; Spruyt 1996; Van Zanden and Prak 2006...
Democratic State, also called 'representative institutions', 'liberal democracies'	Downing 1992; Ertman 1997; Moore 1967; Hoffman and Norberg 2002; Skocpol 1979...
National States	Tilly 1992; Tilly et al. 1975; Samuel E. Finer 1975...
Institutions making credible commitments with respect to property rights, the rule of law, (includes self-reinforcing institutions, and limited government)	Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Barzel 2002; Centola, Willer, and Macy 2005; Greif 2006; Hui 2005; Levi 1989; North and Weingast 1989; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009; North, Summerhill, and Weingast 2000; North 1990; North 1981; Olson 1982; Stasavage 2002; Weingast 1997; Williamson 2013...
Territorial sovereign State	Spruyt 1996...
Absolutism	Anderson 1974a; Anderson 1974b; Knight 1992...
Western States, societies or civilizations (with an emphasis on prosperity and stable democracy)	The 'Great Divergence' School: Ferguson 2008, 2011; Fukuyama 2006; Pomeranz 2000; van Zanden 2008; Vries 2002
Centralized bureaucratic structures with taxation capacity	Brake 1998; Herbst 2011; Hui 2005; Tilly 1985; Samuel Edward Finer 2002; Rosenthal 1998; Dincecco 2011; Dincecco 2009

In its incompleteness, the list provides evidence to Tilly's point: All terms pertain to some or all characteristics of today's Western States, regardless of whether the reference work elaborates on the contemporary era. Retrospection and Western specificity encourage scholars to investigate how the West has got to where it is now. Rosenthal voices retrospection as follows: "(...) representative institutions (were) often viewed as socially superior, those countries where kings were able to impose absolutist regimes are perceived as having failed".⁶ Findings from other centuries are projected to today, directly (e.g. Badie 1997; van Zanden 2008; Vries 2002) or indirectly (e.g. Ertman 1997; North and Weingast 1989).

Second, some categories overlap (e.g. democracy, institutions making credible commitments); others share properties (e.g. absolutism, centralized effective structures with taxation capacity, the Modern state). The lack of mutual exclusiveness portends imprecision in concept building.⁷ Let us examine properties to decide whether these categories are proper concepts or definitions specific to Western States: The extensive list contains (1) bureaucratic centralization, (2) effective taxation capacity, (3) sovereignty on a definite territory and people, (4) democracy or stable representative institutions, (5) economic development, (6) secularism. A shortened version involves 'democracy, centralization, development'; secularism is optional. Empirically, most Western States display these features to a certain extent.⁸ I would like to draw attention on the following:

(a) Democracy is a regime type. Hence, 'democratic State' qualifies a certain State with democratic government.

(b) 'Institutions making credible commitments' means stable political order capable of sustaining growth. Institutional economics is a middle range theory. Hence, institutions have replaced the higher-level variable 'State'. This school aims to understand sociopolitical foundations of development. Attributes associated with institutions reflect the outcomes they need to produce to

⁶ Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, "The Political Economy of Absolutism Reconsidered," in *Analytic Narratives*, ed. Robert H. Bates, Margaret Levi, and Avner Grief (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 64–108.

⁷ Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics"; Collier and Mahon, "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited"; Collier and Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives."

⁸ I do not discuss the validity of these categories, by raising the issue of cross-sectional variation based on the 2011 Greek debt scandal, Muslim immigrants and laïcité in France, or the Northern Ireland problem... They serve as ideal-types.

generate growth. In other words, the definition is functionalist; the content is unessential. As such, various polities fit to the description, e.g. Saddam's Iraq, modern day Korea and Singapore... Scholars add secure & enforceable property rights, and the rule of law so as to exclude arbitrariness. Absent arbitrariness, this category approximates to democracy -without saying it. Such a concern springs out in the work of the credible commitment school; the limitation of arbitrariness explains Western rises and non-Western declines (like Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2002, North, Summerhill, and Weingast 2000). Similarly, constitutions are frequently mentioned (e.g. North and Weingast 1989; Stasavage 2002).

However, the criteria do not quite prove the point. Some pre-modern non-Western states were lawful. Take early Islamic States, and the Islamic gunpowder empires (i.e. the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Empires): The legitimacy of an Islamic ruler depended on his adherence to sharia, including both enforcing it and obeying it himself. Failure to uphold Islamic law meant deposition; this principle, central to Islamic political thought, limited government arbitrariness, well before Magna Carta.⁹ The same principle found expression in the theory of the circle of justice in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ Unlike in European feudalism, the blend of religion and the State allowed sharia to penetrate deep into daily life.¹¹ Similarly, in Korea and China, law incarnated the order of the king; obeying the law meant obeying the king.¹² In the light of historical evidence, it can hardly be argued that pre-modern European States made a breakthrough by centralizing and standardizing laws on their lands. Rather, "(...) laws existed not as a means of regulating private economic activity or resolving disputes between individuals but as an instrument of administrative power and public order, equated with the command of the sovereign".¹³ Hence, the difference between Europe and elsewhere pertained to the scope of law enforcement. European feudalism relied on separate

⁹ Timur Kuran, "The Rule of Law in Islamic Thought and Practice: A Historical Perspective," *Global Perspectives on the Rule of Law* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010) 71 (2008): 3, <http://yale.edu/macmillan/ruleoflaw/papers/Kuran09.pdf>.

¹⁰ Norman Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (Chicago [u.a.: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1980), 55; Hüseyin Gündoğdu, *The Circle of Justice: Theory & Practice in the Ottoman Politics* (LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011).

¹¹ Gerhard Bowering et al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 355–356; James Patrick, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Marshall Cavendish, 2007), 612–614; Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), 263.

¹² Marie Seong-Hak Kim, "Law and Custom under the Chosŏn Dynasty and Colonial Korea: A Comparative Perspective," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 04 (October 29, 2007): 1072, doi:10.1017/S0021911807001295.

¹³ Ibid.

contracts between king, lords, vassals and fiefs.¹⁴ In East Asian and Muslim States, law laid the foundations of the State, and was omnipresent.

I finish off this point by referencing Rawls. In *The Law of Peoples*, the Ottoman Empire exemplifies ‘decent societies’ defined as societies whose their systems of law satisfy a common conception of good, because rulers take interests of all citizens into account.¹⁵ Rawls contends the credible commitment school’s conflation of democracy and Statehood; democracy is not a necessary condition for lawful orderly States and societies. Overall, lawfulness may be a necessary criterion for Stateness, but regime type is not. Also, lawfulness is not an exclusive property of Western States, let alone being an intrinsic feature of some State type. This category is not a proper concept for defining State type. What is more, it does not uphold the superiority-specificity assumption.

(c) Absolutism describes a form of government with an unconstrained executive power and centralized bureaucracy. In terms of the organization of sovereignty, it is the opposite of limited government, where sovereignty belongs to people and the executive exercises it under defined conditions. Given this distinction, absolutism frequently appears in works by the credible commitments school. Absolutism may have positive connotations for those that see it as a prototype of the MS or a stage preparing its emergence (e.g. Anderson 1974a; Poggi 1978; Barzel 2002). The scholarship also sees it crystallized in Louis XIV’s France, and his famous phrase, ‘l’Etat, c’est moi’, (I am the State).

Empirically, most pre-modern sedentary non-Western societies formed empires, city-States, kingdoms, or ‘tribe-States’.¹⁶ However, as discussed above, pre-modern East Asian and Islamic States, and the gunpowder empires relied on the principle that ‘law incarnated the order of the king; obeying the law meant obeying the king’. This principle draws similarities to the order of unconstrained absolutist rulers of Europe. Moreover, some of these States, be territorial empires (e.g. the Aztec Empire, Byzantium) or feudalism (e.g. Japan) or States (e.g. Qin), developed highly

¹⁴ Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State: A Sociological Introduction* (Stanford University Press, 1978), Chapter 2.

¹⁵ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*. (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*.

distinct autonomous centers, and sophisticated bureaucracies.¹⁷ Such evidence blurs the line between non-Western States and European absolutisms, which were technically kingdoms –a noteworthy detail...

The case of Japan is particularly interesting. Unlike in Europe, feudal Japan *was* centralized. Notice that scholars conceptualize pre-modern European absolutisms as a preparatory stage towards the modern State. Propelling political centralization constitutes a huge contribution, if the starting point is highly decentralized European feudalisms. On the other hand, if we placed pre-modern Europe within the global sample, we would conclude that European States were catching up with centralized bureaucratized non-Western ones. In sum, the similarities between European absolutisms and other non-Western State types put the concept of absolutism to a robustness test. Centralization is a mechanism to achieve Statehood, while unlimited government is a way of organizing sovereignty. These features fail to single out European absolutism, which forces us to rethink (1) our definitions of the State, (2) that of the modern State, (3) the notion of Western-specificity.

(d) Similarly, centralized bureaucratic structure is a State feature, while taxation is a capacity. Western or non-Western, some States collect taxes more effectively than others. Scholars often employ to mean sharing fiscal power. As Tilly has shown, sharing fiscal powers is associated with the transition to limited government. I discuss these mechanisms later, in detail. For now, suffice to say that this process differs from *military centralization*, i.e. political center defeating centrifugal rivals, and *bureaucratic centralization*, which means standardizing and universalizing laws, currencies, and jurisdiction across territories. The nuance is fundamental; military and bureaucratic centralizations are preconditions for Statehood. The Asian examples convey that military and bureaucratic centralizations might happen without the third one setting in. As I show later, the confusion between the three *is* the very reason why non-West appears as a deviation from the West where the taxation for representation mechanism formed States with limited governments. The third mechanism pertains to a particular State type, limited government, given that it affects the distribution of sovereignty. Limited government can be associated with the superiority-specificity assumption. However, the conceptualization would greatly benefit from conceptual clarifications.

¹⁷ See Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, for a detailed survey. See Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*, for a comparison of institutional structures in pre-modern Europe and China.

(e) The Great Divergence school talks about the West, or Western States/societies/civilizations. Affiliated scholars trace Western pathways to high development in comparison to the rest's decline. Development may be political, economic, societal, and even civilizational, depending on the author's focus. The core theme motive remains prosperity; the gist of the argument is capital accumulation. The superiority-specificity idea finds its expression in the way these works offer guidelines to the rest of the world. This school is selective when sampling: They pick over-achievers from the 'West' class (e.g. Portugal is unpopular), and 'over-achievers' from the non-West class (e.g. China, Japan...). The comparison between great powers of the history 'establishes' how best development can be achieved. Considering the themes and the style of the argument, this school seems to further the modernization school's agenda, without calling it so. On the other hand, the affiliated concepts are more observation-driven than theory driven. I come back the connection to modernization when I discuss the modern State.

(f) I discuss Tilly's and Spruyt's definitions together. Tilly defines national States as "States governing multiple contiguous regions and their cities by means of centralized, differentiated, and autonomous structures".¹⁸ Spruyt's territorial sovereign State differs from city-states, city leagues, empires and the Roman Catholic Church, by mutually recognized territory-based sovereignty, economic and legal standardization (i.e. building national market, uniform universal law), and institutions capable of making credible commitments and offering territorial jurisdiction.¹⁹

Tilly's definition is compact. It captures military and bureaucratic centralizations. These two properties distinguish national States from city-States and cities. The definition avoids retrospection, by excluding regime type and economy. It is applicable to both Western and non-Western cases. It should be noted that the definition does not contain any feature that links to the coercion-extraction mechanism.

Essentially, economic and legal standardization falls under bureaucratic centralization. European feudalism is misleading for dividing these functions between levels. Cenghis Khan's Mongolian

¹⁸ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States*, 2.

¹⁹ Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*, 1, and chapter 3.

Empire featured a uniform market, currency well before 15th and 16th century rulers of Europe.²⁰ As mentioned earlier, various Asian States ruled with uniform universal laws. These features cannot explain why sovereign territorial States survived and others died; they preceded it. They are mechanisms of State building.

Overall, the thesis hardly lives up to historical evidence. Spruyt's concepts and definitions seem to be crafted to prove the point. In contrast, Tilly's definition is not dependent-variable specific; the argument builds on the definition and comes as a result of the coercion-extraction mechanism.

(g) The modern State (MS) overlaps with all categories, except absolutism. I have not been able to find one generally accepted definition in the sampled work or within the broader literature. Scholars attribute some or all of the following characteristics: Secularization, democracy, economic development (including the specific form capitalism), bureaucratization, territoriality, nationhood, sovereignty, the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, and external autonomy. This should not come as a surprise; the concept roots in 'modernity', hence the adjective. The connection explains the recurrence of secularization, democracy, and development themes. Except for Japan, no non-Western State scores high on all three dimensions. The MS mirrors the specificity-superiority idea. Let us focus on methodological implications.

Notice the similarities with the existing definitions of the State. To give an idea, Weber defines it as a political organization that claims to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order.²¹ We learn from Mann that Weber served as the foundation to various schools.²² The variations consist of specifications regarding State functions, State-society relations, or relaxing the monopoly of violence condition.²³ Both the earlier and later definitions ground on observations of Western cases. In my survey of the literature, I have not been able to find a definition of the State dissociated from the MS. The absence is significant! The MS concept serves as a standard

²⁰ J. McIver Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Crown, 2004); Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*.

²¹ Max Weber, *Max Weber's complete writings on academic and political vocations*, trans. C. Gordon Wells (New York: Algora Pub., 2008).

²² Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²³ Ibid., Chapter 3; Karen Barkey and Sunita Parikh, "Comparative Perspectives on The State," *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (January 1, 1991): 523–549.

for evaluating Stateness. Apart from feudalism, almost all other State forms have been defined with respect to the MS. In other words, we have been working with an ethnocentric typology of State. The issue of ethnocentrism has been raised earlier.²⁴ My contribution lies in the methodological and theoretical implications.

One, the theories on Western State formations are the most elaborated ones. They work well on their cases. Studies of non-West States work with theories, definitions, and measurements developed based on Western experiences. The latter identify ‘deviations’, ‘incompleteness’ and ‘failures’. Putting the two groups of findings together, the literature concludes that there is not a general scheme for State formations.

Second, scholars evaluate past experiences as to whether they have led to the MS.²⁵ The MS serving as a benchmark, city-states, kingdoms, and others diminish to lower ranks. The overarching theme of studies becomes the decline of some State form and the rise of another. Sociopolitical or economic underperformance, or both, account for demise. Rises in power are attributed to survival in some conditions that others could not, or sociopolitical or economic overachievement. It should be noted that ranking concepts is passing normative judgment. How do we know that kingdoms be a bad State type for the conditions of the 1400s? Measuring State types by the MS mirrors a progressive understanding of history and society. How could one think of the periods preceding the modernity as ‘backward’ or inferior? How can we claim to make objective research if we pass normative judgments?

²⁴ Tuong Vu, “Studying the State through State Formation,” *World Politics* 62, no. 01 (2010): 148–175, doi:10.1017/S0043887109990244; Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*.

²⁵ Some exceptions are Avner Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Wayne Ph Te Brake, *Shaping History: Ordinary People in European Politics, 1500-1700* (University of California Press, 1998).