



# Commissioned Book Review

**Latecomer State Formation: Political Geography and Capacity Failure in Latin America** by Sebastián Mazzuca.  
Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2021 xii + 448 pp., US \$50, ISBN 9780300248911.

This book is a sweeping analysis of state formation in Latin America. Mazzuca is motivated by what he sees as the under-performance of the region's states and finds an explanation in the original process of state formation. The argument is rich and multifaceted. As with many impressive comparative historical works, one can remember a one-line summary, in this case: war made strong European states, but trade made weak latecomer states in Latin America. The analysis employs deep historical accounts to explain this regional contrast and explain patterns within Latin America.

Mazzuca makes an important contribution to empirics, theory, and conceptualization. The study is deeply and critically embedded in social theory, including Weberian and Marxist perspectives. It is methodologically sophisticated in its attention to causal assessment of historical material, analysis of counterfactuals, and the avoidance of retrospective determinism. It is a superb example of historical comparisons of macro structures at the same time that it is firmly rooted in the logic of micro-foundational mechanisms.

The analysis starts with a distinction between state formation and state building. The conceptualizations are Weberian. *State formation* is defined as territorial consolidation with violence monopolization. *State building* is the transition from patrimonialism to bureaucratic administration across the territory. Analysts have tended to conflate these concepts, because, Mazzuca argues, the influential European model involved state building as part of the process of state formation, whereas in latecomer Latin America not only did state formation

occur without state building, but in a way that was antithetical to state building, a "birth defect" that has crippled Latin American states ever since.

The explanation of the contrast between the two regional modal patterns lies in economic and political factors that relate to world historic time. For Europe, the conditions were pre-capitalist mercantilism and war making in a context of international anarchy. For Latin America, these international conditions had changed with the second industrial revolution and the international hierarchy enforced by the *Pax Britannica*, which largely imposed peace among Latin American neighbors. Latecomer state makers were thus incentivized to promote trade, rather than prepare for war.

In the war-led European pattern, the state maker incorporated those territories where he was able to establish extractive institutions to obtain money and soldiers. In the latecomer trade-led pattern, the Latin American state maker required only pacification, which was compatible with negotiations, bargains, and coalitions with peripheral rulers. Thus, in Europe territorial consolidation involved transforming institutions in the periphery; in Latin American it preserved patrimonial institutions in the periphery.

Having laid out these two contrasting patterns, Mazzuca devotes the second part of the book to analyzing differences within Latin America. Three patterns are distinguished by the nature of the state-making agents and of their resources for striking bargains in the periphery. In the port-driven pattern (Brazil and Argentina), the agent is a political entrepreneur based in an economically dynamic port, thereby accruing the revenue to buy the support of peripheral oligarchies. The party-driven pattern (Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Central America) occurs where early proto-parties compete. Territorial consolidation is not based on material resources for buying support but rather is based on, and limited by, the ability to expand a

partisan network and increase electoral support. In the lord-driven pattern (Venezuela, Peru, Guatemala), a *caudillo* expands his patrimonial network to the extent he can strike bargains through clientelistic exchange.

For Mazzuca, the Latin American pattern of state formation without state building leaves a legacy of limited stated capacity. However, his argument that this outcome is enduring may be claiming too much. More than a century and a half has lapsed, during which world historic time has again changed and with it the international economy and the structure of power in the international system, not to mention sequences of profound internal changes in class structure, economic models, and political regimes. The analysis does yeoman's work in making the argument that Latin American states were born weak. It is less convincing in making the claim of institutional stickiness that therefore they have remained weak.

The scope and depth of this book are impressive. It presents a multifaceted argument with stunning historiographic, analytic, and theoretical erudition and sophistication. A reader may be challenged to follow its many moving parts. In this sense, the book will perhaps have an impact like that of Barrington Moore or Alexander Gerschenkron: a vast and important piece of analysis with a clear take-away. And for the serious student of state formation, especially, but not only in Latin America, it will become a post-Tilly point of reference as well as an exemplar of comparative historical analysis.

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