

Latecomer state formation: Political geography and capacity failure in Latin America

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It is not easy to do justice to a book as ambitious and rich as *Latecomer State Formation*. Both scholars of global political development and specialists in Latin America will find much to admire. It offers a sweeping and general theory of state formation and detailed historical reconstruction of essential events in Latin American political development. It combines structural elements with a novel emphasis on the political incentives and bargaining that shaped the map we have today.

The book departs from existing scholarship in two ways that underpin its core analytical contribution. First, it draws an important distinction between state formation—determining which territorial units are aggregated into a polity—and state-building or constructing state capacity. Mazzuca criticizes existing scholarship on the state for being overly focused on capacity while ignoring how boundaries are drawn and territories are distributed in the first place.

Second, current scholarship on the state either focuses on a single region or demonstrates that region-specific theories do not travel well. In a crucial analytical move, Mazzuca provides a framework for generalizing across these bodies of scholarship. He argues that state formation takes different paths depending on the nature of the international state system and the international economy. For example, in early modern Europe, the absence of a global hegemon and the mercantilist economic model meant that wars drove state formation. In 19th century Latin America, state formation was caused by trade under international hierarchy and global capitalism. It is conventional wisdom (though not undisputed) that war made states in early modern Europe and that global trade was crucial to Latin American state development. The novelty in Mazzuca's work is the provision of a set of scope conditions that synthesize these divergent regional experiences into a theoretical *explanation* for why war made European states and trade made those in Latin America.

The book focuses on the trade-led model and Latin America. It provides a general theory of the process and distinguishes three paths, determined by the nature of the political actors leading state formation. The general account unfolds as follows: given the rise of global demand for primary products from Latin America in the mid-19th century, politicians sought to create conditions for trade as they simultaneously pursued career incentives. Increased trade flows developed domestic markets for imports, which facilitated state finance via tariffs. This strategy required the incorporation of peripheral regions, whether because they were economically productive or to preclude their emergence as spoilers; however, these regions were not 'transformed' but instead retained patrimonial control. The result is that state formation worked *against* the development of state capacity. Mazzuca argues that not only have scholars of state-

building ignored the question of state formation but that in doing so, they have omitted an important cause of state-building outcomes. Thus he challenges our current understanding of contemporary state weakness in Latin America.

Of course, this account cannot explain the specific configurations of regions incorporated by a given center. To fill this void, Part 2 of the book argues that three types of political actors (lords, ports, and parties) each produce a distinct territorial configuration when they control an economically vibrant economic center and lead the process of state formation. The theoretical innovation here treats the actors involved in state-making as politicians prioritizing their career motives rather than as representatives of a particular class or social group—or simply assuming that state formation entails territory maximization subject to constraints. The empirical innovation takes what Charles Tilly called a ‘prospective’ perspective on state formation and explains why counterfactual arrangements of countries did not solidify, rather than tracing history backward from the outcomes that did. The historical reconstruction of the rise and fall of secessions and unifications in many parts of Latin America is valuable in and of itself.

The lord-driven path is perhaps the most straightforward: a caudillo controls a potentially economically vibrant territory and enjoys political power. Thus, his incentive is to break away from other, larger political entities and not to seek the incorporation of additional regions that would dilute his political influence. This results in states that often break away from larger entities and remain small, consisting of a port and a single associated productive economic region. The emergence of five separate states in Central America is the most apparent historical case, though Mazzuca also cites larger countries like Peru and Venezuela.

The port-driven path creates large countries, bringing many regions under the governance of a commercially vibrant port city, including economically backward peripheries. Despite the economic costs of inclusion, they serve a purpose for the political leader, who hedges against declining support in his home region by using financial gains to buy support from caudillos in these newly incorporated regions. The logic of the bargain here, and its consequence of producing large but economically inefficient and politically unwieldy political units, is well-developed and nicely illustrated in the cases of Argentina and Brazil in Chapters 5–7. I wonder, however, whether the political entrepreneur at the heart of this path might have other potential strategies to play. Mazzuca traces one way a politician concerned with his survival could manipulate the territorial configuration. But politicians may have also tried stitching together alternative coalitions with the attendant territorial consequences. These counterfactuals, too, might be profitably explored alongside those that Mazzuca illuminates.

The party-driven path is the most interesting and counter-intuitive. Political parties and the competitive political arena typically emerge only after a state has been formed. But Mazzuca argues that struggles over municipal control (often between Conservatives and Liberals) brought the formation of alliances between local proto-parties across towns which extended overtime in the service of local political advantage to cover greater territory. These eventually created a national political arena, erasing regional divisions and creating state territories coincident with the extent of these partisan networks. State formation becomes an unintentional byproduct of political competition in a setting where economic returns are insufficient to support the emergence of a single oligarch. Compared to the other two paths, it generates the most negative medium-term outcomes - the deep partisan divisions that extend across communities remain after state formation concludes. Thus, endemic internal conflict continues long after borders are determined, as we see in Mexico, Colombia, and Uruguay. The irony of this path for Mazzuca’s account is that it is the one least tied to trade. Both Colombia and Mexico were regional outliers in their limited integration into the global economy before 1880, and

Uruguay's emergence and territorial consolidation is as much a product of geo-politics as anything else. This was, in other words, a path to state formation that emerged in the 19th century in Latin America, but the fit between this path and the broader account of trade-led development is a bit more tenuous.

Crucial to the long-term outcomes of all three paths is that central politicians establishing states have powerful incentives not to engage in the process of peripheral transformation or the removal of patrimonial structures of regional power and their replacement with central state institutions. This difference between trade-led and war-led state development, Mazzuca argues, produces weaker states in Latin America. But the historical narratives in Chapters 5–10 of the book do not extend to this step: they are focused instead on processes that produced different kinds of political entrepreneurs in the center and the means by which states were produced in the process of establishing their political careers. They conclude when borders are defined and regions incorporated without showing how the concessions made to peripheral patrimonial leaders (p. 390) “became insurmountable obstacles to state capacity.” The link to long-term consequences is thus not fully developed. Its exploration, and detailed investigation of the implications of state formation for state-building, is but one of the fruitful lines of inquiry offered by this provocative book.

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