



Sebastián Mazzuca

Sebastián L. Mazzuca is a professor of political science specializing in comparative politics at Johns Hopkins University.^[1] He is known for his research on state formation, state capacity, regime change, political economy and Latin America.^[2]

Career

Mazzuca earned his MA in Economics and his PhD in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley. He studied with David Collier and James A. Robinson.

After teaching at Harvard University (2010-12), and the National University of General San Martín in Buenos Aires (2013-14), in 2015 he began a position as Assistant Professor at Johns Hopkins University.^[3]

Academic research

Mazzuca works in the field of comparative politics with a focus on state formation, economic development, and democracy.

Latecomer State Formation (2021)^[4]

In *Latecomer State Formation: Political Geography and Capacity Failure in Latin America*, Mazzuca argues that, in contrast to Europe, trade, not war, created the countries of Latin America. But trade created weaker countries than war. A key theoretical claim is that *state formation* (border demarcation) was incompatible with *state building* (capacity creation) in Latin America because the rush to incorporate the region into global commerce induced the emergence of countries with dysfunctional territories, i.e., combinations of subnational regions that in the long run proved economically nonviable. This claim complements and refines the usual ideas that attribute all forms of economic and social backwardness in Latin America to colonial institutions.^{[5][6]}

In the second part of the book, the focus turns from the Western Europe vs Latin America contrast to variations *within* Latin America. *Latecomer State Formation* holds that three pathways were followed in forming Latin American states. These three paths are distinguished by the key agent in the

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Mazzuca in 2023	
Born	<u>Buenos Aires, Argentina</u>
Alma mater	<u>Universidad de Buenos Aires</u> <u>University of California, Berkeley</u>
Known for	<u>Comparative Politics</u> <u>State formation</u> <u>State capacity</u> <u>Democracy</u> <u>Political Economy</u> <u>Latin America</u>
Scientific career	
Academic advisors	<u>James A. Robinson</u> <u>David Collier</u> <u>Guillermo O'Donnell</u> <u>Tulio Halperín Donghi</u> Strongly influenced by work of <u>Max Weber</u> and <u>Fernand Braudel</u>

process of state formation. (1) In the "port-driven pathway" - followed by Argentina and Brazil - territorial consolidation and violence monopolization were achieved simultaneously by a political entrepreneur deriving logistical and material resources from the main commercial port of the emerging country. The result was a "territorial colossus." (2) In the "party-driven pathway" - followed by Mexico and Colombia - there is "a temporal gap between territory consolidation and violence monopolization." However, these pathways created "states with large territories combining multiple economic regions." (3) Finally, the "lord-driven pathway" tends towards fragmentation and small states. Warlords break up large-scale territorial projects - the cases of "Antonio Páez in relation to Bolívar's Gran Colombia (Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, and Venezuela), Rafael Carrera in relation to the Central American Federation, and Ramón Castilla in relation to the Peru-Bolivian Confederation." The result was smaller splinter states like Venezuela, Guatemala, and Peru.^[7]

The book was positively reviewed in *Foreign Affairs*,^[8] and academic journals in English and Spanish, including *Governance*,^[9] *Political Studies*,^[10] *Latin American Research Review*,^[11] *Política y Gobierno*,^[12] and *Araucaria*.^[13]

A Middle-Quality Institutional Trap (2020)^[14]

In *A Middle-Quality Institutional Trap: Democracy and State Capacity in Latin America*, co-authored with Gerardo Munck, Mazzuca argues that Latin America is currently caught in a middle-quality institutional trap, combining flawed democracies and low-to-medium capacity States. Yet, contrary to conventional wisdom, the sequence of development - Latin America has democratized before building capable States - does not explain the region's quandary. States can make democracy, but so too can democracy make States. Thus, the starting point of political developments is less important than whether the State-democracy relationship is a virtuous cycle, triggering causal mechanisms that reinforce each other. However, the State-democracy interaction generates a virtuous cycle only under certain macroconditions. In Latin America, the State-democracy interaction has not generated a virtuous cycle: problems regarding the State prevent full democratization and problems of democracy prevent the development of state capacity. Moreover, multiple macroconditions provide a foundation for this distinctive pattern of State-democracy interaction. The suboptimal political equilibrium in contemporary Latin America is a robust one.

The book was reviewed by the *Bulletin of Latin American Research*,^[15] and the *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*.^[16]

Access to power vs exercise of power

Mazzuca is known for introducing the distinction between access to power and the exercise of power. He argues that the distinction between authoritarianism and democracy concerns the access to power dimension. In contrast, the distinction between patrimonialism and bureaucracy concerns the exercise of power dimension.^[17] This distinction was used in a range of works, from scholarly books like *Democrats and Autocrats* by Professor Agustina Giraudy^[18] to opinion pieces in major Spanish-speaking newspapers.^[19]

Pristine states and the origins of civilization

Together with Ernesto Dal Bó and Pablo Hernández-Lagos, in "The Origins of Civilization: Prosperity and Security in the Formation of Pristine States in Sumeria and Egypt," Mazzuca advanced a conceptual and formal model to call attention to the fact that the rise of civilizations among humans is a paradox, and how it can be solved.^[20]

The production of economic surplus, or “prosperity,” was fundamental to financing the rise of pristine civilizations. Yet, prosperity attracts predation, which discourages the investments required for civilization. To the extent that the economic footing of civilization creates existential security threats, civilization is paradoxical. The article claims that, in addition to surplus *production*, civilizations require surplus *protection*, or “security.” Drawing from archaeology and history, the article models the trade-offs facing a society on its path to civilization. It emphasizes pre-institutional forces, especially the geographical environment, that shape growth and defense capabilities and derive the conditions under which these capabilities help escape the civilizational paradox. The article was featured in *CEPR* ^[21] and was recommended as a "Must Read" by Professor Bradford DeLong for the *Washington Center for Equitable Growth*.^[22]

Critical juncture theory

Mazzuca's work on state formation and on economic development has been seen as a contribution to critical juncture theory. Mazzuca traces the origins of Latin America's weak contemporary states to the distinctive process of state formation in the nineteenth century.^[23] He also attributes Latin America's poor economic performance in the twentieth century to the distinctive way in which states were formed in the nineteenth century, combining dynamic areas and backward peripheries.^[24]

Public Impact

- *Latecomer State Formation* was featured in *The Economist*,^[25] *Foreign Affairs*,^[26] *Diario Perfil* (Argentina),^[27] and *El Comercio* (Peru).^[28]
- *A Middle-Quality Institutional Trap: Democracy and State Capacity in Latin America* (with Gerardo L. Munck; Cambridge University Press, 2020) was chosen as one of the best five books on Latin American Democracy by Prof. Joe Foweraker.^{[29][30]}
- His work and political analysis was featured in *The Economist*,^[31] *Associated Press*,^{[32][33]} *Clarín*,^[34] *La Nación*,^[35] *Revista Seúl*,^[36] among others.

Publications

Books

1. Mazzuca, Sebastián, *Latecomer State Formation: Political Geography and Capacity Failure in Latin America*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.

2. Mazzuca, Sebastián L. and Gerardo L. Munck, *A Middle-Quality Institutional Trap: Democracy and State Capacity in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Select articles

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7. Collier, Ruth Berins, and Sebastián Mazzuca. "Does History Repeat?" *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* 5 (2006): 472–489.^[43]

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7. Sebastián Mazzuca, *Latecomer State Formation: Political Geography and Capacity Failure in Latin America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021, p. 14.

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External links

- [Personal Website \(https://sebastianmazzuca.com\)](https://sebastianmazzuca.com)
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