

New Perspectives on State Formation

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The Founding of Modern States. By Richard Franklin Bensel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 568p. \$120.00 cloth, 39.99 paper.

Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State. By Anna M. Grzymała-Busse. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. 256p. \$99.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

The Politics of Succession: Forging Stable Monarchies in Europe, AD 1000–1800. By Andrej Kokkonen, Jørgen Møller, and Anders Sundell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 272p. \$90.00 cloth.

The Catholic Church and European State Formation, AD 1000–1500. By Jørgen Møller and Jonathan Stavnskær Doucette. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 240p. \$90.00 cloth.

Governments in developed nations today collect high tax revenues and spend vast amounts on security, regulation, infrastructure, and social programs. Yet developed nations were in no way born with effective state institutions. What explains the emergence of the modern state? And, why did capable states first form historically in Western Europe? Proper answers to these questions are key to our understanding of modern forms of governance, including parliamentary democracy.

Arguably the most common explanation for historical state making involves interstate military competition and warfare (e.g., Tilly 1992). To adequately defend against foreign rivals, states required military might. To achieve this, states needed enough funds, which called for new tax administrations and debt instruments, as well as political bargains that compelled rulers to grant partial control over public policy to taxpaying elites. In time, the fiscal and political innovations induced by recurrent interstate military competition mounted. As their fiscal and military strength grew, moreover, states were better able to impose domestic security and stability.

Another common explanation concerns geographic endowments (e.g., Rokkan 1975). To adequately support a nonfarming population, the agricultural sector needed to produce a surfeit of food. High-quality soil promoted agricultural productivity and spurred urbanization, fostering entrepreneurial activity. Access to waterway transportation further boosted commerce. Over time, towns built on their early economic success via agglomeration effects.

As urban merchants became more prosperous, political leaders were willing to grant them important political freedoms in exchange for new tax funds.

While highly influential, both explanations generally overlook the roles of culture and religion. Building on Max Weber's famed study of the Protestant ethic, a recent body of research highlights the implications of the Reformation era for governance outcomes, whether for parliamentary practices or public goods provision (see Becker, Pfaff, and Rubin 2016). Recent research by Avner Greif and Guido Tabellini (2017), as well as Guido Tabellini's work with Joel Mokyr (Mokyr and Tabellini 2023), meanwhile, emphasize the development of generalized morality in medieval Europe, which in their telling enabled individuals to rely on the rule of law (versus blood oaths) for dispute resolution, as well as to show newfound trust for nonkin. This promoted urbanization and public goods provision, and provided an impetus for the establishment of parliaments.

What the current literature on long-run state formation typically neglects—even the part that analyzes culture and religion—is the role of the Catholic Church. When mentioned, the Church is typically portrayed as a conservative political force, a medieval monopolist in the religious marketplace that blocked attempts at institutional reform. What the first two books reviewed here do, by contrast, is place the medieval Church front and center in explanations of early state formation. Rather than obstructing political development, they argue, the Church

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was actually a galvanizing force for the bedrock features of European state making.

The Early Importance of the Church

In her remarkable book *Sacred Foundations*, Anna Grzymała-Busse highlights the unique power of the Church in medieval Europe. Not only was the Church a centralized hierarchy led by the pope, but it wielded unrivaled spiritual authority, human capital, and material resources. Grzymała-Busse argues that the Church's influence explains medieval political fragmentation, which in her view was a deliberate consequence of the Church's policy to counteract the threat of the Holy Roman Empire and demarcate distinct spheres of geopolitical influence. In this competitive interstate system, the Church's administration provided the templates for the key instruments of governance—tax collection, court organization, and petitions—that European sovereigns later emulated. In addition, this interstate competition drove the development of the rule of law, a system in which evidence and precedent took priority over promises and status to resolve disputes. This primacy of law engendered an ethos of learning and the emergence of medieval universities. Finally, governance concepts of consent and representation, including the summoning of parliamentary bodies and majority decision rules, were first developed by the Church. Overall, this is a fascinating and learned account of the roots of early state formation in Europe.

In their equally astute book *The Catholic Church and European State Formation*, Jørgen Møller and Jonathan Stavnskær Doucette emphasize the Church's pivotal role in the early development of both representative government and the competitive interstate system. Møller and Doucette take as their starting point the Investiture Controversy of the late eleventh century, which they view as a critical juncture in European state formation that, exceptionally, pitted the Church against the state. Reform popes (e.g., Gregory VII) began to develop doctrines to challenge secular rulers, who then fought back, creating the geopolitical upheaval that drove later institutional change. Møller and Doucette argue that the Church exploited its spiritual and organizational power to limit the ambitions of secular rulers by supporting urban self-governance and medieval parliaments, as well as by promoting a foreign policy of divide and rule. In their view, the Church was the key instigator of the political balancing acts that would characterize long-run state making in Europe, between the state and powerful social groups, on the one hand, and between states themselves, on the other. This is a novel and important perspective on the state formation process.

Taken together, the books by Grzymała-Busse and Møller and Doucette advance our knowledge of long-run state development in several ways. First, both books shed new light on the vital role of the Church in early European state formation. As described above, this has

been an underanalyzed part of the state development process. Similarly, both books highlight the medieval—versus the early modern—foundations of modern states. Many works emphasize the importance of political fragmentation to long-run development in Europe (e.g., Jones [1981] 2003). By pinpointing the role of the Church, however, both books provide new explanations of not only the roots but also the maintenance of the competitive states system. In contrast to Tilly, in fact, Grzymała-Busse views early modern warfare as an effect, rather than as a driver, of the medieval state making prompted by the Church. Second, both books bring important new quantitative data to bear. Grzymała-Busse introduces panel data on papal excommunications, the spatial distributions of medieval monasteries and universities, and papal participation in medieval conflicts and university foundings, while Møller and Doucette provide data on medieval urban religious and secular institutions. Finally, by putting the Church front and center, both books cast new light on the uniqueness of the European historical development experience. Unlike most other religious organizations in Eurasia, the Church grew to become a centralized hierarchy, with a powerful papal ruler, enabling it to strongly influence geopolitics. The lasting rivalry between religious and state authority in Europe helped to block the spread of empire and promoted representative governance. In such ways, both books flesh out the religious foundations of what Joseph Henrich (2020) labels WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) society.

How to Effectively Transfer Power

While the above two works focus on the medieval roots of state formation, the excellent book *The Politics of Succession* by Andrej Kokkonen, Jørgen Møller, and Anders Sundell highlights the historical importance of state continuity. To sustain improvements in administrative, fiscal, and military capacity over time, the state must be able to effectively transfer political power from one ruler to the next. That is, the state must become a “perpetually lived organization” (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009).

Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell identify two basic challenges that any (autocratic) transfer-of-power mechanism must address. First, there is a coordination problem. To thwart a coup, the ruler must designate a credible heir who will prolong the regime and thereby satisfy elites. There is also a crown prince problem, because the heir apparent may be impatient and thus tempted to rally elites to oppose the incumbent leader. Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell argue that the medieval European invention of primogeniture—hereditary succession whereby the oldest son inherited the kingdom—enabled the state to tackle both challenges, by clearly identifying a legitimate young heir willing to bide his time. As they put it, the ingenuity of the primogeniture mechanism was to take the discretion of deciding the successor away from the monarch, without

yielding such discretion to anyone else. This made transfers of autocratic power significantly more predictable, extending the time horizons of rulers and enhancing state durability. By promoting the nuclear family and the inheritance rights of the oldest son, the medieval Church played an integral role in the development of primogeniture. A related innovation was the role of female inheritance in case a male heir was lacking. This enabled the peaceful transfer of territorial realms via dynastic marriages. Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell argue that, by leaving the ruler's lands intact to a single heir, primogeniture promoted territorial consolidation and paved the way for larger early modern states.

Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell's book provides a compelling account that further improves our understanding of historical state development in Europe. The authors cast light on another underanalyzed aspect of the state formation process: the challenge of effective transfers of power across generations. In their view, primogeniture was an elegant solution to this difficult problem. By reducing political risks and expanding time horizons, the primogeniture mechanism arguably improved the incentives of rulers to invest in administrative and fiscal capacity. To make their case, Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell provide new biographical data spanning several hundred rulers in Europe between the medieval period and the French Revolution.

Furthermore, Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell bring an insightful historical perspective to debates about modern transfers of political power. They document the enduring challenge that succession still poses, and how modern autocratic regimes attempt to mitigate this political risk via monarchy (e.g., in the Middle East), constitutions with (imperfect) term limits, and the establishment of political parties to address intraregime conflicts (e.g., the Chinese Communist Party). Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell remind us, moreover, that a key strength of modern democracy has been—at least on average—its ability to determine new political leaders nonviolently via regular rotations in office.

Finally, like the books by Grzymała-Busse and Møller and Doucette above, Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell shed further light on Europe's unique historical developmental path. They explain that the primogeniture mechanism was specific to Europe. This was partly due to changes in family structures and inheritance rights promoted by the medieval Church. Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell make the case that primogeniture helps to account for improvements in political stability in Europe relative to other parts of Eurasia. While primogeniture did not exist in China, there was a somewhat similar father-to-son mechanism that improved regime durability. According to Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell, this practice was effective enough to obstruct the development of power-sharing structures in China. This was in contrast to Europe, in which

succession disputes (e.g., due to poor biological luck and a lack of a male heir) prompted parliamentary activity to legitimize new leaders and avert civil conflict.

The Paradox of Modern State Foundings

While Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell emphasize the challenge of state continuity, *The Founding of Modern States* by Richard Franklin Bensel highlights the importance of state ruptures and new starts. This sweeping book takes us into the modern era and spans parts of the Middle East and North America as well as Europe. Bensel focuses on yet another underanalyzed feature of state formation: the political process that underpins the foundings of new states. Here, Bensel argues that revolutionary elites must confront a fundamental dilemma. This occurs when the high-minded “will of the people” collides with the practical matter that elites must first identify who the “people” actually are. Furthermore, elites must determine how the people will provide consent and devise a process by which such consent will transform into a constitution.

To resolve this dilemma, revolutionary elites must take key opening decisions by fiat, short-circuiting the people's will. This undemocratic first move, moreover, helps to determine the end results of the constitutional process. Bensel argues that this logical contradiction stands at the heart of modern state foundings. To help reconcile the need for state authority with the will of the people, revolutionary elites shroud their opening decisions in symbolic founding acts and rituals that themselves rely on mythological imaginations of historical destiny.

Bensel qualitatively documents six foundings in total, three each for democratic and nondemocratic states: the (unwritten) English constitution, the American Constitution, and the French Revolution; as well as the Soviet dictatorship following the Russian Revolution, the fascist regime of the Third Reich, and the Islamic Republic after the Iranian Revolution. In the founding of the United States, for example, the people in question were the American colonialists, the transcendent social purpose was the will of the people, the key founding events were the Declaration of Independence and the ratification of the Constitution, prominent gentlemen made up the revolutionary elite, and the opening dilemma was resolved via decree that the political elite were representative of the will of the people (plus retrospective ritual ratification). In the Soviet Union, by contrast, the people in question were the proletariats, the transcendent social purpose was a communist revolution, the key founding event was the Second All-Russia Congress, the leadership of the Bolshevik Party made up the revolutionary elite, and the opening dilemma was resolved in line with Marxist thought that placed the Bolsheviks at the vanguard of the proletariat.

Bensel sheds important new light on both the nondemocratic and chimerical features that shape the contours of modern states. As described above, the politics of state

founding has been yet another underanalyzed part of the state formation process. While there is no overt focus on religion in Bensel's book, his emphasis on symbolic founding acts and rituals as well as the mythological imaginations of historical destiny is reminiscent of the folklore of the medieval Church. In *Sacred Foundations*, Grzymała-Busse writes: "Beyond its wealth and human capital, the medieval Church's power derived from its spiritual authority. Popes and priests anointed emperors, baptized children, buried the dead, forgave sins, and condemned entire communities to damnation" (p. 4). Whether in the medieval or modern worlds, mythmaking appears vital to political authority and legitimacy. While Bensel's book is about modern state foundings, he clearly recognizes the importance of the shadow of history—or at least the preferred narrative of history that revolutionary elites opt to popularize. This insight echoes the now-mature literature on long-run persistence in political and/or economic outcomes (Cirone and Pepinsky 2022). In contrast to much of this literature, however, Bensel highlights the role of mythical, rather than material, historical antecedents.

Whither War

All four of the books reviewed here challenge—whether explicitly or implicitly—the most common explanation for historical state development involving interstate military competition and warfare. Both Grzymała-Busse and Møller and Doucette allow for a historical relationship between geopolitical rivalry and state making. In the view of Møller and Doucette, however, war-centered arguments cannot account for either the initial establishment of local self-governance or the competitive interstate system. Grzymała-Busse rightfully points to the roles of culture and ideology in historical state formation. There was even a cultural component to European war making, which in the words of Galileo Galilei was a "royal sport." Grzymała-Busse further argues that military competition was neither necessary nor sufficient for the state formation process in Europe. Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell, meanwhile, call attention to the fact that medieval European polities subject to similar levels of military competition (and having relatively similar geographical endowments) nevertheless experienced different patterns of early state development. Finally, themes of war, violence, and rivalry do not play any (explicit) role in Bensel's account of modern state foundings.

The Church was both part and parcel of the territorial fragmentation present in medieval Europe after the ninth-century fall of the Carolingian Empire (and prior to that, the fall of the Roman Empire). Even without the shrewd geopolitical dealings of the Church, however, the establishment of a dominant pan-European state (e.g., the Holy Roman Empire) was by no means inevitable. While the

Church may have played a pivotal role in prolonging territorial fragmentation, it is not clear that, in its absence, interstate competition—and its consequences for key political, administrative, and fiscal developments—would have come to a halt. Other political actors may have still been incentivized to play their geopolitical rivals off each other, potentially *ad infinitum*. Furthermore, factor endowments themselves may have favored a geopolitical ecology in Europe that reduced the need for a strong hegemonic authority and promoted fragmented governance (see Haber, Elis, and Horrillo 2022). Recently, Jesús Fernández-Villaverde and colleagues (2023) have put forth new evidence for the argument that Europe's particular topographic features (dense forests, indented coastlines, mountain barriers, rugged terrain) prevented the development of major empires there.

Both Grzymała-Busse and Møller and Doucette portray external threats and military competition as an early modern (versus a medieval) phenomenon. It is likely true that the military revolution drove greater geopolitical rivalry in Europe after 1500. The perspective of Grzymała-Busse and Møller and Doucette, however, tends to discount the importance of interstate competition to institutional change in the medieval period itself. In a recent article, Gary Cox, Mark Dincecco, and Massimiliano Onorato (2023) show evidence that medieval European polities that experienced greater external military pressures were significantly more likely to establish parliamentary governance. The main dynamic in play here was that, after the fall of the Carolingian (and prior to that, the Roman) Empire, rulers in Europe could no longer rely on centralized administrations to collect taxes, thus forcing them to enlist the help of local intermediaries (i.e., tax farmers). In related work, Sascha Becker and colleagues (2020) document the positive impact of military conflict on representative governance and fiscal capacity across more than 2,300 towns in the German lands from the late medieval era onward.

Whether interstate military competition and warfare were technically necessary or sufficient for historical state development in Europe, they do appear to have been quite relevant. A host of new research attests to this (see Becker et al. 2020; Cantoni, Mohr, and Weigand 2019; Cederman et al. 2023; Cox, Onorato, and Dincecco 2023; Feinstein and Wimmer 2023). At an abstract level, external security threats serve as powerful coordination devices that enable society—or at least rival political elites—to surmount difficult collective action problems. While centralized tax administrations may have been more efficient than tax farming, the political power of incumbent local elites first needed to be overcome to establish them (Besley and Persson 2011). Similarly, while long-term public debt could foster new public and private investments, the problem of credible commitment first needed to be

resolved (Stasavage 2011). Finally, while rural–urban migration could promote economic agglomeration effects and technological innovations, individuals in a traditional agricultural economy first needed to be willing to accept the costs of relocation (Dincecco and Onorato 2017). In each case, the historical evidence indicates that external security pressures and interstate military competition helped to induce premodern European society to undertake such major changes.

Geopolitical threats and warfare remain important drivers of policy change in the modern world. Thomas Piketty (2014) documents significant reductions in economic inequality in the United States and Western Europe in the decades following World War II (1939–45). Kenneth Scheve and David Stasavage (2016) explain this phenomenon in terms of the state’s inability to ensure equal treatment across citizens during the mass mobilizations for the world wars, thus spawning a new compensatory rationale for the higher taxation of elites. Today, the Veterans Health Administration runs the largest hospital network in the United States, providing healthcare for more than nine million military veterans. At the supranational level, the European Union (EU) was established in the aftermath of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War (1947–91). The EU remains relatively weak today (Kelemen and McNamara 2022). This is in part a function of the centrifugal geopolitical dynamics still present in Europe. In response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, the EU has undertaken unprecedented collective action, providing nearly 70 billion euros’ worth of economic, humanitarian, and military support in the first year of the war (EU Directorate-General for Communication 2023).

There are links, moreover, between interstate military competition and warfare and nearly all the modern state foundings that Bensel examines. The Glorious Revolution in England, for example, took place in the context of the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–97). The United States Constitution was put forth in the aftermath of the War of the American Revolution (1775–83), supplanting the Articles of Confederation of 1781. The French Revolution was preceded by the convocation of the Estates General by Louis XVI for the first time in more than 170 years, due in large part to fiscal troubles related to previous war spending (Sargent and Velde 1995; White 1995). The Soviet dictatorship was established during World War I (1914–18), in which Russia was an active combatant. The fascist regime of the Third Reich came to power in the aftermath of World War I and the Great Depression. While the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran was the result of civil war rather than interstate conflict, it did take place in the context of the Cold War.

Finally, the mythological imaginations of historical destiny and inevitability that Bensel emphasizes sometimes draw on belligerent imagery. For example, the Great

Seal of the United States, approved in 1782 (during the War of the American Revolution), features a bald eagle with arrows symbolizing war in the left talon, and an olive branch symbolizing peace in the right. The national motto *e pluribus unum* (“out of one, many”) appearing on this seal further speaks to the close relationship between geopolitics and collective action that the elite founders wanted to popularize.

The State of the Art

What explains the emergence of the modern state, and why did capable states first form historically in Western Europe? By highlighting the medieval role of the Church, the primogeniture mechanism and effective transfers of political power, and the politics of modern state foundings, each of the four books reviewed here advances our knowledge of the state formation process.

Taking stock, I agree with the points made by Grzymała-Busse, Møller and Doucette, and Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell that a constellation of factors, rather than any single determinant, best explains Europe’s unique path of long-run political and economic development. Such factors include the interplay of particular geographic endowments, a tendency toward territorial fragmentation, interstate military competition and warfare, the Commercial Revolution, the geopolitical maneuverings and administrative developments of the Church, a cultural emphasis on the nuclear family and generalized morality, local self-government and urban public goods provision, parliamentary governance and fiscal supremacy, the innovation of primogeniture, the invention of long-term public debt, the ramifications of the Black Death, post-1500 improvements in military technology, transatlantic trade, the impacts of the Protestant Reformation, the emergence of scientific culture, effective mythmaking by elites, and the establishment of the income tax. Future work should continue to pin down the exact nature of the interactions between these factors, with attention to new quantitative data as well as explicit comparisons with China, India, and other parts of Eurasia.

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