STATES AND WAR IN LATIN AMERICA: A REVIEW ESSAY

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ABSTRACT:

State capacity has far-reaching implications for the national politics of developing countries. Scholars have identified state weakness as an important cause of civil war, revolution, underdevelopment and authoritarianism. Yet, despite the obvious importance of the state to national and international politics, few political scientists have seriously studied the Latin Leviathan or attempted to determine what factors influence state strength and weakness in the region. Miguel Angel Centeno's *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* and Fernando Lopez-Alves' *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America, 1810-1900* seek to remedy this failing by offering two disparate theories of state weakness in Latin America. These books constitute significant additions to contemporary scholarship on the state, as each provides a thoughtful and well-researched approach to this difficult question. Furthermore, these books are at the forefront of a more general project that hopes to "bring the state back in" to the study of Latin American politics.

Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America.
Miguel Angel Centeno
(2002. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press), 344 Pages.

State Formation and Democracy in Latin America, 1810-1900.
Fernando Lopez-Alves
(2000. Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 312 Pages.

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INTRODUCTION

State capacity has far-reaching implications for the national politics of developing countries. Scholars have identified state weakness as an important cause of civil war (Byman and Van Evera 1998, Walters 1997), revolution (see Skocpol 1979, Tilly 1978, Wickham-Crowley 1992), underdevelopment (North 1990), and authoritarianism (Stepan and Linz 1996, O'Donnell 1999). Yet, despite the obvious importance of the state to national and international politics, few political scientists have seriously studied the Latin Leviathan or attempted to determine what factors influence state strength and weakness in the region (O'Donnell 2001). Miguel Angel Centeno's *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* and Fernando Lopez-Alves' *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America, 1810-1900* seek to remedy this failing by offering two disparate theories of state weakness in Latin America. These books constitute

significant additions to contemporary scholarship on the state, as each provides a thoughtful and well researched approach to this difficult question. Furthermore, these books are at the forefront of a more general project that hopes to "bring the state back in" to the study of Latin American politics (O'Donnell 1999).

Still, as this review seeks to show, each book is not without problems: First, *Blood and Debt* provides a somewhat limited and overly deterministic explanation of state weakness in Latin America. Second, while *State Formation and Democracy* offers a richer account of state formation, it suffers from a problematic, indeterminate research design. Finally, both books fail to adequately define and measure the variable 'state power.' Despite these difficulties, each book provides a strong foundation for an integrated theory of state weakness in Latin America. This essay concludes by making some suggestions for further research on this important topic.

Blood and Debt and *State Formation and Democracy* begin with the observation that Latin American states do not resemble the Weberian ideal. Many continue to experience violent challenges to state authority, have difficultly collecting taxes, and have consistently failed to provide security and services to their populations. Centeno points out that Latin American states have "failed to establish their institutional autonomy," and notes that many do not have "the required institutional capacity to perform even a limited set of tasks" (Centeno 2002, 3). Similarly, Lopez-Alvez notes that many Latin American states "remain weak and maintain only a feeble presence in the countryside" (Lopez-Alves 2000, 2). In this respect, both authors seek to address the same set of research problems. What factors determine why some states are weak and others are strong? Why are Latin American states weaker than their European and North American counterparts? Which societal forces and actors serve to either promote or hinder political development in this direction? However, as this essay shows, while the authors share common analytical objectives, their conclusions are quite different.

WAR AND THE LATIN LEVIATHAN

Blood and Debt seeks to determine why Latin American states do not resemble their European counterparts, and it does this by examining the effect of war on Latin American political development. In doing so, Centeno draws upon Charles Tilly's (1975, 1985, 1992) famous thesis on the origin of European states: "states made war, and war made states" (Tilly 1992, 3). Indeed, Tilly argues that geopolitical competition in Europe forced state-builders to levy taxes and create bureaucracies in order to finance armies, while at the same time weeding out weaker political entities. If war made the state in Europe, Centeno asks, what effect did it have on the Latin American state?

The basic argument of *Blood and Debt* is that limited war produced limited states. War did not make the state because Latin American states fought wars less frequently and less intensely than did European states (Centeno 2002). According to Centeno, while Europeans fought total wars, Latin American states fought limited wars. The former involved large amounts of personnel and material, covered thousands of miles, utilized nationalism and ideology, convinced people to accept military authority, and transformed entire societies to meet the challenges of war. The latter involved small armies, limited civilian engagement, short overall durations, and were restricted to small geographic areas. Limited wars are relatively minor political events, but a society faced with total war is confronted with an existential challenge to its very survival, where defeat could mean subjugation or annihilation. Without the pressures of war, Latin American political elites were not forced to tax their populations, build efficient,

modern state institutions, nor were the weaker states weeded out by stronger ones (Centeno 2002).

Closely adhering to Tilly's logic, Centeno suggests that the war-making/state-making equation runs in both directions: limited states were forced to fight limited wars (Centeno 2002). Centeno demonstrates through an analysis of Latin American tax revenue structures that states in the region lacked the capacity to mobilize resources for large scale warfare. Similarly, these states did not spend heavily on their militaries, did not purchase sophisticated combat equipment, and were unable to mobilize populations or recruit enough soldiers to consider engaging in total war (Centeno 2002, 102).

PARTIES, MILITARIES, AND LATIN AMERICAN STATES

Instead of asking why Latin American state formation diverged from the European experience *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America* seeks to determine why some Latin American polities developed weak state institutions while others have managed to produce stronger, centralized governments. In doing so, Lopez-Alves organizes his study around three highly detailed case studies of Latin American states during the 19th century, namely, Argentina, Uruguay, and Colombia. He selects these cases in order to maximize variation in the dependent variable: Argentina is a strong state; Colombia is a weak state; while Uruguay falls somewhere in between. The author employs these cases to illustrate a basic thesis:

> "When either political parties or armies took the more active role in institution building during the process of state formation, the resulting regimes were more or less democratic. As a consequence, states also differed in their degree of power centralization, the strength of their bureaucracies and the scope of their capacity" (Lopez-Alves 2000, 4).

In other words, party-led state formation produced weak states and military-led state development produced strong states.

State Formation and Democracy in Latin America explores this argument through detailed historical narrative. Lopez-Alves traces the evolution of each state during the 19th century, while paying careful attention to the complexities of each case. The result is a rich empirical analysis that illuminates how unique political landscapes shaped diverging trajectories of state growth. For example, in Colombia, rivalries between the Liberal and Conservative parties kept the state weak and decentralized. Indeed, each party feared the potential consequences of a strong state and preferred to acquire political power via the creation of informal clientelistic networks – which was done at the expense of state institutions (Lopez-Alves 2000). In Colombia, as in Uruguay, party antagonisms frequently resulted in civil wars that further fragmented state power. It is interesting to note that this type of 'warlord politics' has hindered state growth in African states as well (Reno 1998). Making reference to Tilly, Lopez-Alves concludes that Latin American states "fought the wrong kind of wars" (Lopez-Alves 2000, 23). In contrast to Colombia and Uruguay, the military played a key role in centralizing political power in Argentina. Argentine political parties were much weaker than those in Colombia and Uruguay, and the more unified elites saw the military as a vehicle through which to incorporate the rural poor into politics and crush provincial rebellions. As a result, Argentina's state institutions grew strong, but civil-military relations proved to be a major barrier to democratization.

THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

Both *State formation and Democracy* and *Blood and Debt* make important contributions to the literature on Latin American political development. Each author applies European literature on state formation to the Latin American context, which serves to enhance contemporary knowledge on the origins and growth of state in the non-West. In these ways, each book provides a strong foundation for future scholarship in this field of research. However, despite these notable achievements, each book suffers from analytical, methodological, and empirical difficulties.

The major analytical problem with *Blood and Debt* is that the author offers an extremely limited explanation of the possible sources of state weakness in Latin America. As discussed above, Centeno argues that the absence of large scale interstate warfare produced weak states in Latin America. The notion that Latin American elites were deterred from state building because of the absence of geopolitical pressure and because of resource constraints is convincing, but it begs the question of why leaders consistently failed to allocate resources to this activity in the first place (Fitzsimmons 2005). Centeno's model postulates that political elites have only one motivation for state building: the existential fear of conquest or annihilation that comes with total war. While it is difficult to dispute the relative importance of this factor, there are likely other reasons why political elites might choose to expand state power. Likewise, there are surely reasons why leaders might not respond predictably to the threat of war. These could include ideology, domestic politics, or the influence of representative institutions as intervening variables. In other words, *Blood and Debt* has nothing to say about the influence of regimes, politics, and agency on state development.

When viewed in this light, Centeno's account is somewhat narrow. The literature on state development in Europe and Africa is replete with examples of political elites driving or hindering state development in accordance with strategic political objectives. A state with plentiful resources may choose not to spend tax money on building state institutions, choosing instead to waste funds on political patronage. For example, Ertman (1997) documents the ways in which legislative politics in Poland and Hungry prevented statesmen from constructing bureaucracies in response to threats of total war (Ertman 1997). Conversely, a poor state with limited resources may choose to spend its revenue on expanding state infrastructure. Indeed, countries in Africa such as Mozambique and Ghana have returned from the brink of state failure through the prudent policies of their leaders (Herbst 2001). Although Herbst's basic argument about state power is not much different from Centeno's, namely that African states are generally weak because they did not have to fight wars where state survival was at stake, his analysis points out that geopolitics is not destiny and that political factors may enable rulers to build states even where conditions are not favourable. War may provide state leaders with one reason to build states, but there can be no doubt that this decision is affected by a much wider range of factors. In this respect, the analytical strength of *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America* is that it focuses on regime-level variables and emphasizes how the unique context of each case shaped the political decisions of would-be state builders. As Lopez-Alves notes, "while it stands to reason that higher state revenues tend to speed up the process of power centralization, it is also true that this depends on whether state makers (…) choose to invest their income (in state-building activities)" (Lopez-Alves 2000, 43).

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Blood and Debt provides a striking comparison of European and Latin American states. However, the 'large comparison' approach suffers from an important methodological weakness, namely, an inability to account for intraregional variation. Indeed, asking what factors made Latin America different from Europe is problematic because there is great variation within Latin America with regard to state development. There are important differences and outlying cases that need to be explained. While Centeno is correct in his assertion that Latin American states are generally weak compared to their European counterparts, it is not clear whether the limited-war hypothesis explains why some states are strong and others weak within Latin America itself. At first glance, differences in exposure to geopolitical competition might explain why, for example, Chile developed stronger state institutions than Colombia. Indeed, Chile fought several international wars throughout the nineteenth century and its borders were highly contested by its neighbors. This was not the case in Colombia or most other Latin American countries. But there are reasons to doubt whether this explanation is complete. First, Chile fought two wars against Bolivia and Peru, but of these three countries only Chile developed strong state institutions. This comparison leads one to ask what effect losing a war has on state development, or whether the pre-existence of strong state institutions led to Chilean expansionism in the late 19th century. Second, as Centeno himself argues, the roots of Chilean state power predate even the First War of the Pacific. He concludes that for war to produce institutional change, a minimum threshold of organizational sophistication must first exist. This was true in Chile, Centeno suggests, but not in Bolivia or Peru. However, this notion that institutions beget institutions is not entirely satisfying from an analytical perspective. While the Chilean exception does not seem to refute the limited-war argument, it raises a number of questions that remain throughout *Blood and Debt* and that would be best resolved through detailed comparative case analysis.

State Formation and Democracy employs J.S. Mill's comparative methods specifically to address this issue of intraregional variation. However, Lopez-Alves overemphasizes the uniqueness of each case and employs what political scientists call an 'indeterminate research design' (King et al., 1993). Lopez-Alves' model contains far more independent variables than cases. In fact, the extremely complex theory outlined in the book consists of six independent variables: war, patterns of conflict, degrees of mobilization of the rural poor, evolution of the military, rise of new social classes, and growth of political elite; and five intervening variables: integration into the world economy, class structure, the nature of the agrarian economy, and cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. *State Formation and Democracy* shows that these variables converge in different ways, and to different degrees, in shaping Latin American states and regimes; but in doing so, the core argument gets lost in this sea of contingency and indeterminism. To make matters worse, Lopez-Alves employs many ordinal variables in his model. All eleven factors are at least partially supported as contributing causes of state weakness. The result is a high degree of causal indeterminism and a loss of theoretical parsimony. While *State Formation and Democracy* is filled with rich description and provides excellent historical accounts of state development Latin America, virtually nothing can be learnt about the interesting hypothesis Lopez-Alves puts forward; ultimately, the author is unable to produce any firm conclusions about what makes some states strong and others weak.

One final issue is that neither author clearly defines or measures the main dependent variable: state power. Lopez-Alves, for example, separates military development from state development, treating the former as a major independent variable. However, military power is a generally accepted indicator of state power (Tilly 1975, Mann 1982). As a result, Lopez-Alves's thesis is open to charges of circularity, namely, that strong militaries produce strong states by definition. Centeno employs two conventional measures of state development: military power and tax revenue. However, he does not describe what constitutes military power. For example, Colombia's military is larger than Chile's in terms of manpower, but smaller in terms of equipment and technology. A country such as Colombia might keep a large standing army in response to an internal security threat such as insurgency or rebellion – in other words, precisely because it is a weak state. Indeed, from this alone, it is not clear which country has the stronger military or state. Both books highlight the need for a more robust and thorough measure of state power.

LOOKING FORWARD: SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Taken together, the strengths of each book help redeem the flaws of the other. Centeno has produced a compelling, transferable, parsimonious theory of state weakness but this theory is too general and does not account for regional variation or the complexities of local-level politics. Lopez-Alves has produced a detailed history of state development in Latin America which highlights the unique experiences of various countries; however the book does not yield any firm conclusions or shed light on any single hypothesis. Advancing and expanding the analyses contained in these books requires several key revisions.

First, these limited theories of state formation should be integrated into a single theory of state formation that highlights connections between international factors and the complex internal political dynamics of state building. Indeed, the compelling state-level theory put forward by Centeno could provide direction for the more detailed case study analysis that Lopez-Alves employs and in doing so, complement the argument. It is entirely plausible, for instance, that militaries lead state development efforts when faced with geopolitical competition. Furthermore, it is equally plausible that democratic and authoritarian governments respond differently to the pressures of warfare. It will fall to future scholars to elaborate on these sorts of possible connections.

Second, future scholarship should follow Lopez-Alves comparative model and strive to explain intraregional variation. However, future scholarship should strive for some theoretical parsimony as well. Indeed, despite the fact that *Blood and Debt* does not explore whether war explains patterns of state development within Latin America, this is still a fruitful avenue for future case study research. For instance, it is plausible that weaker Latin American states were less exposed to external threats than stronger states. It will fall to future scholars to conduct detailed case studies of the effect of war on state development in Latin America to explore the hypothesis definitively.

Finally, scholars should clearly define and measure state power in order to avoid empirical ambiguities. *Blood and Debt* provides a foundation through its emphasis on taxation and military power. However, future work should consider other possible measurements of state capacity such as transportation infrastructure and police presence.

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