PhD Seminar on State Formation

David Stasavage, Wilf Family Department of Politics, NYU

Spring 2015

Tuesdays 2:00pm-4:00pm

Description: This is a seminar about why states form, what types of states form, and what they do. Over the course of the semester we will review what both current and classic work has to say about state formation. The first requirement for this course is that students do the reading and participate actively in class discussion. The second requirement is that by the end of the semester students prepare two paper proposals. One of these proposals will be presented in class. The third requirement is that students serve as “discussion initiators” each week.

Class Format: Expect me to present for about forty minutes on average at the beginning of each class, interspersed with interruptions for discussion. Then we will shift into a more freewheeling discussion for the remainder of each session.

Readings: All reading will be made available electronically. Readings come in two categories: required readings, indicated by a star, and recommended readings. Expect my presentation to cover material from both required and recommended readings, though our discussion will focus primarily on the former group.
Session One - January 27th – Introduction to the Debates

In this course we will cover three questions. As you will see, these questions are very broad, and so rather than seeking to answer them, the goal will be to familiarize you with existing ideas and to stimulate thinking about how new research might be conducted that advances our knowledge in this area.

The first question is why states form, or more specifically which factors favor their formation? Today we take the existence of a state for granted, but for most of human history there were no states. Even in recent centuries many areas of the globe have remained stateless. Thinking about this question isn’t only of historical interest. It helps us to better understand the evolution of states today.

The second question is what types of states form and why? Why do large nation-states characterized by direct rule and high state capacity emerge in some cases while in other instances states have weak capacity, they leave parts of their territory ungoverned, and they adopt forms of indirect rule.

The third question is what determines what states do? Do they protect property rights (and for whom?), or do they engage in predation? Do they levy significant taxes, and are they able to borrow? Do they provide public goods?

In this introductory session we will introduce five different perspectives that can help us to gain some bearing on the above issues

(1) Geography  
(2) Technology  
(3) Institutions  
(4) Distributive conflict  
(5) The External Environment


**Session Two - February 3rd – Nation States and Artificial States**

Today we live in a world dominated by nation states. However, this has not always been the case, nor is it the predominant pattern in some areas of the globe today. In this session we will first ask why nation-states came to dominate over other state forms including city-states, empires, or more complex forms of governance. The received wisdom is that warfare was the primary factor leading to the creation of large nation-states, but some question this notion, and there are alternative theories. In this session we will also ask whether some states today can be considered to be “artificial” and what this implies for their functioning.


Christopher Clapham (2001) “War and State Formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea”
Session Three - February 10th –Ungoverned Spaces and Indirect Rule

Throughout history many societies and groups have remained outside of any state control. This is an interesting phenomenon to explain. Doing so also helps us learn something about those areas where states do prevail. Was it just too costly to govern in such places? Was this an inefficient outcome in which individuals failed to develop a state they would have otherwise wanted? Is the absence of a state an indication that people were just avoiding predation? As a final part of this session we will also confront the issue of indirect rule. Much governance throughout history has taken through by having a state exercise indirect control over some local group. How can we understand when and why indirect control takes place rather than direct rule?


Session Four – February 17th – The Monopoly of Violence

Max Weber defined a state as a “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force.” Throughout history many states have claimed this monopoly, but they have been unsuccessful in maintaining it. We will ask why. Throughout history many states have also departed from this principle by outsourcing violence. We will ask when and why this occurs.


Session Five - February 24th – State Capacity

No one doubts that many things states do require capacity – the ability to implement a policy. In fact, only the simplest of state activities can be implemented directly without an extensive bureaucracy. But there are two major questions. First of all, how do we measure state capacity given that it is a latent feature of a state. Second, what factors determine a state’s level of capacity?


Timothy Besley and Torsten Persson (2011) Pillars of Prosperity. Ch.1


Session Six – March 3rd – The Emergence of Property Rights

Provision of property rights is a crucial thing that states do. But sometimes states fail to assure this function, or worse yet, they themselves engage in predation. In this session we will review a number of different alternative interpretations for why property rights emerge.


**Session Seven - March 10th – Foundations of Popular Rule**

We know that government by popular control has been rare historically and remains incomplete in many places today. Explaining when and why various forms of popular rule emerge is a critical subject in the field of state formation.


Session Eight - March 24th – Taxation and Borrowing

To be able to function states need revenue. For those states not blessed (or cursed) by natural resource rents this means that they need to be able to tax. There is tremendous variation across countries and over time in how much states tax. In this session we will consider readings that may help us explain that variation. We will also briefly consider the closely related issue of sovereign borrowing.

Aside from providing property rights and external security, states can also provide an array of public goods. They also provide certain goods that are commonly described in political science as being “public”, but which are better described as private goods that are privately provided. Education is a good example here. In this session we will ask when states do this and why.


Session Ten – April 14th – The External Environment

It should be evident from the previous weekly readings that the international environment can have a very substantial impact on state formation and development. War has had an obvious impact. Over the last few centuries, the other obvious and dramatic way this has happened has been through colonialism, the direct transplantation or imposed creation of new institutions. In this final session we will take a step back and think about broad features of the international environment that may influence the way states develop. There is no doubt that the international environment matters; the question is whether we can take steps toward building a theory suggesting when and how it matters.


*Nikhar Gaikwad (2014) “East India Companies and Long-Term Economic Change in India”*


Crawford Young (1994) *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective.* pp.43-140
April 21st – Student presentations

April 28th – Student presentations

May 5th – Student Presentations