

What Shapes State Form? **An evaluation of Charles Tilly's *Coercion, Capital, and European States***

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What factors shape the forms that states take? The purpose of this critical review is to highlight the answer to this question provided by Charles Tilly in his theoretically rich and historically grounded book, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*, and to conclude by offering a brief evaluation of his evolutionary argument.

Tilly explicitly seeks to move beyond dominant perspectives of state formation and state structure (namely statist¹, world system², geopolitical³, and mode of production⁴ narratives) and instead forward a theory where it is the waging of war that both incentivizes state formation and determines its form (to the point, Chapter 3 of his book is titled “How War Made States, and Vice Versa”). Indeed, Tilly writes that “[t]he central, tragic fact is simple: coercion *works*; those who apply substantial force to their fellows get compliance, and from compliance draw the multiple advantages of money, goods, deference, access to pleasures denied to less powerful people” (pg. 70). Yet Tilly does not dwell on the genesis of the state for long, for his quest is rather to explain why European states came to take different forms (territorial state, city-state, city-leagues, etc.) while ultimately converging on the model of the territorial sovereign state⁵ (referred to by Tilly as “national states”⁶). He theorizes that two factors explain state form and evolution: first, the concentration and particular combination of both *capital*⁷ and *coercion*⁸ within the state, and second, the interplay of war-waging states on the international stage.

¹ Tilly defines statist accounts as treating “political change as proceeding in partial independence of economic change, and presents it [state form] chiefly as a consequence of events within particular states” (pg. 6). For Tilly, this account ignores the interplay of states on the international stage.

² These accounts, according to Tilly, “ground the explanation of diverse paths of state formation in a characterization of the world economy” (pg. 11). For Tilly, such accounts ignore or otherwise fail to explain the emergence of particular state structures.

³ Geopolitical accounts are characterized by Tilly as claiming “that interstate relations have a logic and influence of their own, and that state formation therefore responds strongly to the current system of relations among states” (pg. 9). Tilly’s critique is that such accounts do not convincingly link state form to the state’s position within the international community of states.

⁴ Such analyses, often ground in Marxist thought, “typically spell out the logic of feudalism, capitalism, or some other organization of production, then derive the state and its changes almost entirely from that logic” (pg. 10). Tilly critiques such approaches for failing to explain differences in state form across states with similar modes of production.

⁵ Tilly explicitly writes that his purpose is to answer the following question: “What accounts for the great variation over time and space in the kinds of states that prevailed in Europe since AD 990, and why did European states eventually converge on different variants of the national state?” (pg. 32).

⁶ Note that Tilly is careful to distinguish “national states” from “nation-states,” in that the population within national states need not share a strong linguistic, religious, and symbolic identity (pg. 3). National states are defined as “states governing multiple contiguous regions and their cities by means of centralized, differentiated, and autonomous structures” (pg. 2).

⁷ Defined as “tangible mobile resources, and enforceable claims on such resources” (pg. 17).

It might be helpful to provide a stylized summary of Tilly's evolutionary model of state form: First, preparation for both defensive and offensive war induce rulers to build the infrastructure necessary for taxation, supply, and administration (in Tilly's theory, the creation of judiciaries, treasuries, regional bureaucracies, and public assemblies is therefore no more than a byproduct of preparations for war (pg. 75)). Where capital accumulation was significant but coercive authority was diffuse (as in the Italian city states of Genoa and Venice), rulers were forced to rely on compacts with capitalists to rent or purchase military force, or contract out their defense to mercenaries⁹ (Tilly labels this the *capital-intensive* state form (pg. 30)). Conversely, where capital was diffuse, rulers had to squeeze the means of war from their own population via coercion,¹⁰ as in Brandenburg and Russia (as representative of the *coercion-intensive* state form (pg. 30)). In areas where a more balanced level of both capital and coercion accumulation occurred (as in France and England), rulers were able to "play one against the other" by using purchased force to check the holders of private armies and using national armies to persuade the holders of private capital (exemplifying the *capital-coercive* state form (pg. 92)). This balance supported the creation and maintenance of large standing armies.¹¹ With time, the military superiority of war-waging capital-coercive states produced convergence towards their model of the territorial national state.¹² In short, variance in the concentration and accumulation of capital and coercion explains the emergence of divergent state forms, whereas the inter-state waging of war spurred the eventual convergence around the national state model.

One should not let the parsimony of Tilly's theory mask how nuanced and historically grounded his argument really is. To his credit, Tilly acknowledges that he merely seeks to complement, rather than to refute, pre-existing theories of state formation and evolution. His purpose is not to provide a comprehensive theory, but rather to provide an alternative narrative,

⁸ Defined as "concerted application, threatened or actual, of action that commonly causes loss or damage to the persons or possessions of individuals or groups who are aware of both the action and the potential damage" (pg. 19).

⁹ More specifically, Tilly paints a picture of capital-intensive states as characterized by "the interaction between substantial, increasing concentrations of capital and weak, fragmented concentrations of coercion; the profound influence of capitalists over any attempt to create autonomous coercive power; the emergence of sleek, efficient, rapacious, protection-oriented seafaring state [...]" (pg. 144).

¹⁰ Tilly indeed notes that "[a]ll of Europe's areas of high coercion began with some combination of two conditions: (1) a major effort to expel a tribute-taking power, and (2) few cities and little concentrated capital" (pg. 143).

¹¹ Using the British state as an example, Tilly writes that it was built "on a conjunction of capital and coercion that from very early on gave any monarch access to immense warmaking, but only at the price of large concessions to the country's merchants and bankers. The uneasy alliance between landlords and merchants constrained royal autonomy, but fortified state power" (pg. 159).

¹² Though Tilly is quick to acknowledge that the convergence far from perfect, for "[e]ven after convergence, states retained some features – for example, the character of their representative institutions – that clearly reflected their earlier historical experiences" (pg. 31).

one that might *better* explain state form, even if it does not *fully* resolve the puzzle at hand.¹³ In this light, it is quite possible that Tilly might have considered the following critiques and ultimately privileged coherence over a more bullet proof, but otherwise more chaotic, theoretical framework. But others might have made a different choice, so it is worthwhile to consider them.

First, by arguing that war is foundational and primary, Tilly comes perilously close to arguing that war is an end in and of itself. His brief acknowledgement on page 70 that war is waged for access to “advantages of money, goods, deference” is elsewhere lost. Yet if war is a means to another end, it would seem that a more balanced account of state formation would more closely consider how economic variables, including the emergence of market exchange and the pressures to minimize transaction costs, provided the forces of centralization and the motive for waging of war. Second, and on a similar narrative, if the minimization of transaction costs and the ability to build an institutionally efficient apparatus for market exchange matters, then it might explain not only the evolution of state form, but also the ability of states to wage war. Hendrik Spruyt makes just such an argument in his article “Institutional Selection in International Relations”: he writes that “[t]o argue that a particular institutional form [the national state] was superior at war begs the question: Why was it superior? Most accounts [including Tilly’s] imply that military superiority was largely a function of size, and in so doing, they neglect the consequences of institutional characteristics.”¹⁴ Spruyt posits that it is the institutional efficiency of states that explains why city-states in Italy took so long to disappear, while the more internally inefficient city-leagues in present-day Germany were absorbed by territorial states much earlier in European history. Of course, the argument does return to the question of military might, but it suggests that Tilly’s exclusive focus on war may mask the economic and institutional dynamics that underlie both the ability to wage war and the evolution of state forms. Finally, Tilly occasionally contradicts his aforementioned modesty with grand claims like “The dominant political fact of the last thousand years is the formation and extension of a European state system consisting largely of national states rather than empires, city-states, or other variants of coercive power” (pg. 162). By offering an evolutionary theory of the formation of European national states and then claiming that convergence around said model is the dominant political fact of modern history, Tilly places his own theory on a pedestal, underplays alternative forms of organization outside of Europe, and contradicts his own narrative, which

¹³ Tilly expands on this point, and even provides us with the criteria to judge his work, on pages 35 to 36 of his book.

¹⁴ Spruyt, Hendrik. 1994. “Institutional Selection in International Relations: State Anarchy as Order.” *International Organization* 48 (4): 551.

emphasizes the importance and resilience of alternatives to the territorial state within Europe and problematizes the notion of a linear process of converge around a single model. Nuance and modesty are thus briefly discarded in favor of a Eurocentric (one might say ‘Tilly-centric’) and grandiose generalization of world political history.

Thankfully, such lapses are few and far between; by in large, *Coercion, Capital, and European States* provides a compelling theory, and judged by the more modest metrics that Tilly set for himself, is clearly a successful contribution to the literature on the evolution of state forms.