Rethinking Domestic Arrangements in the Origins of the Modern European State

A Comment on: "Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Europe" by Thomas Ertman

(Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, 350 pp.)

*By Guzmán Castro

Understanding the origins of the modern state –and the different forms these political units eventually took- is a central enterprise in the discipline of political science. Relevant not only as a necessary first step in the development of several fields inside political science (*e.g.* how can we talk of an international, or better inter-state system, if we do not know where this concept of "inter-state" comes from?) but also for the contemporaneity of state-building in the 21st century. Pivotal as it is, the literature still has too many open-ended pathways and many more to discover. It is in this scenario that Thomas Ertman's *Birth of the Leviathan* appears as a very welcome contribution to the study of the origins of the Modern State.

The problem Ertman poses is not entirely new. In his own words: "Why had some states developed in a constitutionalist direction during the formative centuries of European state-building, while others had become absolutist? And why had military pressures driven some states to construct effective, proto-modern bureaucracies, while others remained wedded to administrative methods that seemed highly dysfunctional?" (p. xi). The resemblance to the questions in which, to take a well-known example, Charles Tilly had been working on for a long time is strong. (1) Notwithstanding, three features stand out in the *Birth of the Leviathan*: a) the *type* of intra- and inter-state changes that the author discusses along the extended process of state-building (the time frame for the study is *circa* the fall of the Roman Empire and the French Revolution), b) the complexity of the theory proposed, and c) the impressive empirical research undertaken to support his theory.

As Ertman's quote above suggests, the goal of the book is to explain why some states developed an *absolutist* regime while others came up with a *constitutional* system. Moreover, and reaching to Max Weber's thought, the author also provides an answer to the diversity (divergence??) in the paths of state infrastructure –that is: why some states ended up with a modern *bureaucratic* administration while others remained, to their own detriment, with *patrimonial* systems. Thus four variables define the typology of states presented: patrimonial absolutism (France and Spain), bureaucratic constitutionalism (Great Britain), bureaucratic absolutism (Germany), and patrimonial constitutionalism (Poland and Hungary).

There are two sets of dependent variables. The *political regime* on one side − *i.e.*absolutism and constitutionalism- respond to differences in the strength of representative institutions. *Grosso modo,* polities situated inside those territories characterized by large-scale and mostly unsuccessful experiments to install homogeneous political regimes during the Dark Ages will be more prone to an absolutist regime. (2) On the other hand, states on the periphery of these historical processes could "begin their state-building from zero" and thus were more prone to develop constitutional regimes with strong representative institutions that constrained royal power.

The other dependent variable is the one concerning *state-infrastructure.* This can take the form of patrimonialism or bureaucracy. The core of the explanatory or independent variable would be that the states involved in early conflict (3) −"early" being defined as pre-1450- tended to build state infrastructures with "outmoded and even dysfunctional" institutional arrangements (most commonly office-holding and the grant of state functions, such as taxing, to private hands). On the contrary, latecomers to war were able to take a bureaucratic path for two reasons: a) they could benefit from the know-how and learn from the errors of states which had been involved in the expansion of the state-authority for a long time, and b) the exponential increase in the supply of personnel professionally trained to run state affairs. (4)

A problem the author encounters is that this scheme cannot explain two of its four cases: bureaucratic-constitutionalism and constitutional-paternalism. Why did Great Britain follow the bureaucratic path given it was a clear case of early state-builder for war purposes? And why is it that Hungary and Poland, two cases of latecomers to war, ended up with patrimonial administrations? The explanation for this anomaly rests in the existence of strong representative institutions that influenced state infrastructure. In the case of Great Britain, redirecting the state in a bureaucratic path (against the attempts of interest groups to impose patrimonialism), in the cases of Hungary and Poland, acting as an agent of patrimonial administration.

Let me offer some final comments (in an unjustly oversimplified manner) that follow from the reading.

Ertman's book turns out to be a rigorous and intensely (with historical descriptions that might be too dense in some instances) researched study. His comprehension of the subtleties of state-building in modern Europe certainly surpass most of the work this reader has seen in the literature. While the work of a Charles Tilly analyzed the role of war, coercion, and capital in trying to explain why such different paths of state-building ended up with the same outcome *-i.e.* the nation-state- Ertman's book goes much deeper. The inclusion of the analysis of changes in the domestic structures is particularly welcome. In other words, where Tilly saw a path towards convergence in the form of the nation-state, Ertman disentangles a process that leads to the formation of critically different types of states. This divergence becomes particularly relevant when one

reflects on the contemporaneity of this work, since it was not only the convergence in the nation state form, but also the stark differences – especially in state infrastructure- that defined and continue to define the European countries studied. (5)

Some final thoughts, that would have to be more developed to do the author justice, will be irresponsibly thrown as questions for further consideration:

1. The author seems to focus too much in the methods of resource extraction (e.g. taxing) without taking seriously the given pool of resources each territory had. A better consideration of this issue – for example benefiting from Tilly's hypothesis on the importance of cities as centers of capital and their interplay with central governments- might be a good idea (Was it the same for a King to have a Madrid than a Ghent?)

2. What is the real role of war? The author measures the effectiveness of state administration by their fighting performance. But, is losing a war, let's say Jena, a valid yardstick to define efficient and inefficient administrations, or as in the case of Jena other things might be in play (Napoleon's mighty army)?

3. Is it acceptable to have such a flexible theoretical model? Are not the explanatory variables modified to fit the cases, thus incurring in a grave methodological problem? In general, how heavy are the costs in parsimony of such a detailed and complex study?

In any case, *The Birth of the Leviathan* is an essential study for anyone trying to understand where the central political unit in international relations comes from, and why has this institution differed, not only in its path –as Tilly tells us- but also in its final form. The interested reader should save some time to seriously engage in a dialogue with Ertman and his *Birth of the Leviathan*.

(1) "What accounts for the great variation over time and space in the kinds of states that have prevailed in Europe since A.D. 990, and why did European states eventually converge on different variants of the national state? Why were the directions of change so similar and the paths so different?" Tilly, Charles, "Cities and States in Europe, 1000-1800"; *Theory and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 5, Special Issue on Cities and States in Europe, 1000-1800 (September, 1989, p.565). Nevertheless, there is one important distinction between these two questions that will be discussed at the end of this essay.

(2) It is not completely clear though, at least to this reader, the logical explanation for this hypothesis. Is it that the post-Dark Ages and its failed attempts to impose working political systems (e.g. the Carolingian Empire) generated such a marked decentralization in the political landscape that the only viable solution for the Crowns was to try to impose a severe centralization over the aristocratic landlords? Or that such decentralization and the pattern of landlord aristocracy that followed were not compatible with the bicameral representative organizations (typical of constitutional regimes)? Or both? This is particularly troublesome since the author defines the variance in political regime as "a ruler who was relatively constrained (constitutionalism) or unconstrained (absolutism)" (p. 19).

(3) Here the author wisely sticks to Tilly's maxim "War made the state and the state made war."

(4) A phenomenon linked to the proliferation of the University as a social institution.

(5) As the author remarks at the end of the book: "...patrimonial institutions can also have nagging long-term consequences. Despite the reforms of the 19th century, patron-client relations, lack of clear boundaries between politics and administration, and redistribution of public funds towards political insiders remain a serious problem in Spain, Portugal, France, and Italy..." p. 322.

*Ph.D. Student
Department of Political Science
University of Pennsylvania.
Profesor Depto. Estudios Internacionales. FACS - Universidad ORT Uruguay.
MA en Estudios Internacionales, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella
E-mail: gcastro@sas.upenn.edu