

Leviathan and the Magic Bullet

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Variations in state capacity in Latin America boil down to whether state agents, charged with implementing state policy, are recruited centrally and *deployed* rather than *delegated* or recruited among local elites. This, in short, is the argument that Temple University political scientist Hillel David Soifer puts forward in *State Building in Latin America*, an ambitious, wide-ranging, and well-written book.

Soifer looks at four countries—Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Colombia—and three areas of state policy: education, taxation, and military recruitment.

He argues that in the first three countries, characterized by a dominant capital city (or what he calls “urban primacy”) and a “unified political economy,” state-building projects were initiated but had different outcomes. In Colombia, where power was dispersed among a number of regions and regional elites, no state-building project emerged. In those countries where state agents were deployed, such as Chile, state building was successful. In countries where state agents were at times deployed and at other times delegated, such as Mexico and Peru, state building was a mixed bag. Deployed state agents, in short, feature in this book as the magic bullet of state building.

The policy implication is simple: If you want state building to succeed, you should deploy state agents rather than delegate state policy to local elites. Or, as Soifer concludes, architects of the state should build “alliances through elected positions rather than through administrative appointments.”

I am less interested in whether Soifer is right or wrong about deployment being superior to delegation in accounting for successful state building. More interesting to me is what this book tells us about how a particular type of political science scholarship addresses state building and the state

more generally, the methods it uses in so doing, and in particular, the relations it establishes with another discipline, history.

HISTORY AS DATA

In developing his argument, Soifer focuses on what he calls Latin America’s “Liberal era,” which lasted from the 1840s to about the 1920s, and engages in what he calls “detailed historical study.” Yet, in my view, his engagement with history is problematic. To begin with, history, both in the sense of the past and in the sense of

the work that historians do—which is to say, historiography—is reduced in this book to “data.” Historians, this book appears to suggest, do not produce arguments but instead merely gather facts.

Moreover, Soifer’s approach is based on zero-sum logic. For his argument to be correct, Soifer believes, all other explanations of variations in state building must be wrong. However, the idea that successful or failed state building over nearly a century, or that variations among countries as different and complex as Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Colombia can be explained by a single variable, is questionable.

In developing this argument, Soifer draws primarily on secondary literature (“material”—that is, data—“in the voluminous collection of national and regional histories”) and “extensive primary source research in the archives of government ministries.” Although Soifer’s “works cited” section runs to almost 30 pages, it is striking that much of his material in fact is extracted from a rather narrow set of such sources.

Take the case of Peru. About a dozen studies, largely monographs, provide the “data” for the three chapters on education, taxation, and military conscription in that nation. Some of these are certainly relevant to the study, but the majority focus on quite different issues than those that interest Soifer. Florencia Mallon’s book on the development of capitalist relations of production

State Building in Latin America
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in the central highlands and Nils Jacobsen's book on the political economy of the southern highlands, for instance, only marginally address the issues covered in Soifer's book. Even when put together, they provide at best a partial and provisional account of, say, the development of education policy across the whole of the country in the period under review. Moreover, there are important omissions. (In the case of education, the key work of Antonio Espinoza gets no mention at all.) The primary sources that Soifer draws on (and puts to good use in several chapters) are, in fact, printed sources, namely government reports and official documents, including official newspapers.

Throughout, Soifer establishes a clear distinction between scholarship that provides arguments his book is in dialogue with and scholarship that is a source of data. The first type of scholarship consists of studies rather like his own, written by nonhistorians who draw on history as a source of data to produce "big" theories of state building that, like Soifer's, isolate a magic-bullet explanation for success and failure. This scholarship (he cites half a dozen authors) is discussed in the introduction in some detail and revisited in the conclusion.

The second type of scholarship is absent from the introduction and the conclusion but is present in the rest of the book. It is a scholarship that provides the "material" about education, taxation, and military conscription in the four countries surveyed. This literature's contributions to the history of, say, Mexico or Peru get little attention. Major debates in this literature, which impinge on the book's argument, are rarely acknowledged and when they are, they are relegated to a footnote (see, for example, the footnotes on page 92 and page 103). This constitutes, in my view, a weakness of the book: Soifer misses an opportunity to engage fully with the interpretations of state building that these studies put forward.

Soifer claims that one of his key contributions is that he takes ideas seriously. Indeed, he places much emphasis on what he terms "the ideational foundations of state-building projects." In the conclusion, he asserts that we should "consider the possibility that state leaders' decision making about how to pursue development is shaped by their ideological visions." Of course, historians have considered this possibility for many years.

Indeed, many have written extensively about it, including many of those whose work he draws on here but does not engage at the level of argument. But Soifer presents it in his conclusions as an original insight. It is an original insight to him because he is engaged in narrow dialogue with a handful of authors "who downplay the role of ideas."

This narrow engagement is equally problematic when it comes to the issue at hand: the state. Soifer pays no attention to state theory beyond the work of Max Weber and Michael Mann (with an occasional reference to James Scott). Extensive scholarship on the cultural formation of the state and on the anthropology of the state, some of which deals with the countries he examines, is ignored. As a consequence, the state is never properly theorized or unpacked in this book.

DEPLOYED RULE

In developing his argument, Soifer tosses aside a series of "alternative explanations" put forward by those scholars he does engage with—who, for the most part, approach the issue of state building in a similar way, by isolating a key variable that they believe explains variations across several countries. None of these explanations are acceptable to Soifer or deemed in any way compatible with his own explanation. Geography plays no role in state-building outcomes, Soifer suggests. No other historical periods—neither the colonial period nor the wars of independence—can account for variations in state building among countries. Federalism is not an important factor in accounting for the ability of the state to tax the population. And so forth.

Instead, Soifer stresses the unique importance of what he terms deployed rule. In Colombia, where no single city dominated, he argues there were no national elites, only regional elites, and so there could be no state-building project, and no one to deploy state administrators. Thus, in Colombia, he traces "state weakness to the absence of a state-building project": Colombian elites did not develop an education policy, and they were unable, indeed reluctant, to tax the population, or to raise a national army.

In the other three countries, by contrast, the existence of urban primacy (big capital cities like Santiago, Mexico City, and Lima) and elites who

*State-building projects
emanated from the periphery
as well as from the center.*

avored national development efforts based on expanding state capacity produced state-building projects. These projects were more successful in Chile, where state administrators in charge of education policy, tax collecting, or military conscription were deployed at the regional level; they met little resistance and even a degree of acceptance from local elites.

In the Mexican and Peruvian cases, success varied over time and across space. In Peru, Soifer contrasts the guano era (1840s–1870s), characterized by delegated state agents and unsuccessful state building, with the Aristocratic Republic (1895–1919), which had deployed state agents and more successful state building. In Mexico, Soifer contrasts the experience of two states, Sonora and Michoacán. In Sonora, conflict between local elites and state officials resulted in relatively successful implementation, from the outside, of an education policy. In Michoacán, local elites captured state roles; consequently, education reform made little progress.

ANOTHER COUNTRY

There are several problems with this argument. To begin with, Soifer's own data show that even in Chile, deployed state agents were a minority—less than 20 percent of all appointments. So this is not so much a story about deployed versus delegated state agents, but rather about the impact of minorities of deployed state agents on the course of state-building projects in these countries. What proportion of successful state building in Chile, we could reasonably ask, should be attributed to the 80 percent of delegated state agents?

More generally, the case for state weakness or strength that Soifer develops in each case is often circular, as should already be evident from the brief discussion of the Colombian case above (the argument being that the state in Colombia was weak because there was no state building). Was the Peruvian state's weakness a cause of its inability to raise taxes or a consequence? Was Chile's successful military conscription the reason for the strength of its state or a consequence? This is not clarified in the text. The analysis never quite probes deep enough—we never hear the voices of those whose lives were affected by such processes. At best, their motivations are inferred and generalized.

My main criticism of Soifer's book, however, is that in failing to engage with the arguments

put forward by historians of state building in Latin America, or with the extensive literature on the cultural formation and the anthropology of the state, he never really goes beyond a partial understanding of the development of the state in the four countries he surveys. Soifer fails to ask what the state in fact is (he assumes that it is a Weberian-style bureaucracy) and how different conceptions of the state might produce different readings of the material he draws on.

Nor does he ask how the state is understood and experienced and, in turn, constituted by the people who are its agents or its objects. He never really inquires whether the meaning of the state varies from one locality to another or whether there are differences in how the state operates in the center and at its margins. In his vision, Peru, to take one case, was populated by central elites who wanted to build the state and local elites who wanted to resist it. But he never really stops to think about how the Peruvian state was also being built as those peripheral elites—and indeed non-elites, too—engaged with it. State-building projects emanated from the periphery as well as from the center in Peru in the Liberal era, as historians and anthropologists, including several cited by Soifer, have shown.

In the end, my reservations about the book could be explained by the differences that exist between our disciplines' approaches to engaging with the past and between our own approaches to the study of the state, a topic which was the focus of my book *The Allure of Labor: Workers, Race, and the Making of the Peruvian State*, published in 2011. As the glowing blurbs on the back of Soifer's book suggest, it will find an audience among political scientists and political sociologists.

Historians of Latin America may share my sense of frustration at the way in which historical scholarship on the region is reduced to data in this book. Students of the state, particularly those who draw on the literature about the cultural formation of the state and on anthropological studies, may be disappointed by the ways in which this book fails to move beyond a Weberian understanding of the state or to recognize that other conceptions of the state exist and provide useful insight into state building. In this sense, perhaps, Soifer's book illustrates the limits of current celebrations of interdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinary theoretical engagement. Political science is another country; they do things differently there. ■