The Challenge of State Building in Historical Perspective

Coercion, Compromise and Cooptation in the Making of Modern States

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From the third wave and the end of the Cold War to the democratic peace and regime change, for two decades scholars and practitioners have been obsessed with how democracy emerges, what its consequences are, and what outsiders can do to promote it. Increasingly, however, it is clear that crucial questions of comparative politics and international relations involve not merely the “form of government but also the degree of government.” Indeed most of today’s crises—from Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan to Congo, Sudan, or Somalia—are caused not just by the nature of states but by the weakness of them.

After years of relative neglect, state building has come to be recognized by growing numbers of observers as the essential prerequisite for both political and economic development. During the past years a chorus of voices both inside the academy and out has proclaimed that without strong, effective states such goals as the establishment of order, the overcoming of deep socioeconomic inequality and communal divisions, the consolidation of democracy, and the emergence of well-functioning economies is impossible. Yet despite this growing recognition, our understanding of the process of state building has lagged far beyond our recognition of its

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1 Samuel Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies
importance. Many recent studies show why strong, effective states are good; few tell us how they can be acquired. Indeed, the most influential literature on state building is over a generation old. This literature, in turn, while rich and valuable leaves a number of key questions unanswered.

In general, the existing literature focuses on broad structural trends as the key factors promoting state-building. Some analysts, for example, argue that the development of trade and the concomitant emergence of a merchant class whose flourishing depended on centralized, stable political authority capable of enforcing law and contracts were the key factors promoting state-building in the past. Other analysts focus on the dynamics of capitalism itself, arguing that its destruction of the social relationships, institutions, and mores of traditional societies is the necessary pre-requisite for the emergence of national states. Others, often working in the Marxist tradition, provide a somewhat different variation on this theme, arguing that there is a “functional” relationship between different forms of production and types of political regimes. The development of modern states, in this view, is a “process whereby the political environment of society [is] restructured in order to make it (and then keep it) compatible with, and indeed as

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6 E.g. Ernst Gellner, Nationalism (NY: NYU Press, 1997),
far as possible conducive to, the orderly functioning of [capitalism].”\(^7\) State development has also been linked to geography: here things like the nature of the terrain and population densities determine the ease with which state building occurs.\(^8\) And yet other analysts emphasize the role of ideas, viewing modern states as emerging out of the ferment of the Enlightenment, the Reformation and/or other great ideological movements which delegitimized pre-modern and religious sources of political authority and supported the development of the modern, secular forms of authority that took their place.\(^9\)

But probably the most influential strain of thought in the existing state building literature focuses on the “beneficial” effects of war. The most important modern exponent of this view is Charles Tilly,\(^10\) whose basic argument is encapsulated in his well-known statement that “war made the state and the state made war.”\(^11\) By this he simply means that state building is the by-product of a society’s basic need to defend itself from its enemies. “War and the preparation for

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10 Tilly was not, of course, the first to argue along these lines, but his remains the most influential formulation of this view in the contemporary literature. See, for example, Otto Hintze, "Military Organization and the Organization of the State," in Felix Gilbert, ed., The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze.
war involved rulers in extracting the means of war from others who held the essential resources"\(^{12}\) and such extraction requires building centralized institutions for tax collection, population surveillance, law enforcement, etc.—i.e., the basic infrastructure of modern states.

Tilly’s emphasis on warfare has a number of advantages: not only is it linked with the most basic attribute of the modern state—its “monopoly of the legitimate use of violence” within a clearly defined set of borders\(^{13}\)—it is also backed by strong empirical evidence. Historically, the growth of states, warfare and increased military expenditures are strongly correlated.\(^{14}\) Yet, like almost all structural explanations of state-building, the war-based one leaves several crucial questions unanswered.

For example, why, when faced with the same broad pressures (e.g. increased warfare, the growth of trade, the “functional needs” of capitalism) do strong states develop in some places but not others? Or to put it another way, structural explanations tend to do a better job of explaining success than failure: they may be useful in identifying forces that have promoted or accompanied state building in the past, but they are less useful in accounting for the myriad cases where state-building failed or was never even attempted.\(^{15}\) With regard to war, for example, most of the political units that existed at the time of the great era of war-making in Europe (approx. 1500-

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\(^{12}\) Tilly, Coercion, Capital and European States, p. 15.


\(^{14}\) See, for example, Mann, States, War & Capitalism.

\(^{15}\) In social science jargon, such explanations tend to pick on the dependent variable. Hendrik Spruyt, The Sovereign State and Its Competitors (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Similarly, as with most structural explanations, the war based ones are not very helpful in explaining why, given fairly constant geopolitical pressures, state building attempts begin or succeed at some particular points in time rather than others. See, e.g. Edward McCord, The Power of the Gun. The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 9.
1800) were destroyed rather than strengthened by conflict and increased geopolitical pressures; looking at non-European cases, other scholars have similarly argued that war is just as likely to promote political disintegration as political development.

In addition to painting too broad or undifferentiated a picture of state building, structural explanations generally ignore or treat only in passing “how” questions, and from a policy perspective such questions are crucial. Even if we accept that broad structural forces like warfare, increasing trade, the emergence of capitalism, or particular ideas help explain why state building occurs, such explanations tell us little about how it actually does. How does political authority actually get centralized? How do the key organizational components of states, especially taxation institutions, actually get built? How can state builders manipulate their environments in order to achieve their goals?

Answering these questions requires a more direct focus on what state building actually entails. Since modern states are centralized political units defined by their control over a clearly

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16 As one scholar put it, “Around 1500 there were perhaps five hundred entities claiming authority over the people residing within their borders, and it was not clear which would endure and which would be absorbed by others. For every France, England or Prussia there was a Burgundy, a Bohemia, a Lorraine, a Scotland or a Lucca that would not survive as an autonomous sovereign state.” Isser Woloch, Eighteenth Century Europe. Tradition and Progress, 1715-1789 (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), p. 2.


In addition, of course, a focus on war making alone cannot explain the differential development of states—unless one wants to argue that stronger, or rapidly developing states are those that were confronted with the greatest geopolitical pressure or war making challenges—a hypothesis that would be difficult to support. For an interesting study along these lines see Victoria Tin-Bor Hui, War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Others have argued that a focus on war making is itself too undifferentiated; rather, it is the type of war making that matters. E.g. Fernando Lopez-Alves, State Formation and Democracy in Latin America, 1810-1900 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
delimitated territory within which they have a monopoly over the (legitimate) means of violence, state building by definition consists of the construction of a political entity with these essential qualities. The problem is that such construction does not occur in a political vacuum. Areas that lack well-functioning states do not generally lack leaders, actors who control the means of violence, or defensible territories; what they lack are such things concentrated in the hands of a single, centralized authority. Instead, authority in such societies tends to be segmented or fragmented, held by local, communal and/or religious elites. Today we refer to such elites as chiefs, tribal leaders or most often, warlords, in the past they were referred to as nobles, dukes, magnates, princes or just lords, and any successful attempt at state building must include strategies for outmaneuvering, undermining or destroying them. As one observer notes,

it was only in the destruction of the “segmentary” character of medieval society that the formation of a territorial sovereign authority became possible. Clearly, state sovereignty

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18 The one exception here may be tyrannies, places were rulers have eliminated almost all alternative sources of power. Russia and the Ottoman Empire were the most oft cited cases of this type of political regime in the past. Places like this face their own particular problems in developing modern states. As Francis Bacon once wrote, “A monarchy where there is no nobility at all, is ever a pure and absolute tyranny as that of the Turks. For nobility tempers sovereignty, and draws the eyes of the people somewhat aside from the line royal.” Bacon, “Of Nobility,” in The Essays (London: Create Space, 2007), p. 19. For an excellent study of how state development did occur in the Ottoman Empire that makes some similar points to this essay, see Karen Barkey, Bandits and Bureaucrats. The Ottoman Route to State Centralization (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). And for an analysis that does focus on the critical role played by such elites in state building in the contemporary era see Catherine Boone, Political Topographies of the African State (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

cannot exist where real authority rests with subordinate social units. This is why many ‘third world’ states are states in name only…they are states attempting to rule essentially segmental societies based on tribal or other local units that are the locus of political loyalty that strive to function independently of the states. These states are still in the state building process and face, in essentials, the same dilemmas that the modern Western state faced in overcoming the centripetal forces of their own segmental societies.\(^{20}\)

Since overcoming such centripetal forces and imposing control over the opponents of centralization has always been an essential challenge facing state builders, examining how this challenge was met in the past should be useful for those facing such a challenge today. In an attempt, therefore, to begin filling in the gaps in our understanding of the mechanics and mechanisms of state-building (the “how” questions), this article will look back briefly on the European experience. This is not because state-building today will follow precisely the same patterns as it did in the past; it most certainly will not. Nonetheless, any understanding of how state-building actually occurs that builds on cases across time and space will be richer than one that does not. As Tilly pointed out:

Major political transformations which occurred in the past may not repeat themselves in the present and future, and are very unlikely to repeat themselves in exactly the same way, but any theories which claim to encompass general processes of political transformation must be consistent with past experience, and ought to be checked carefully against that experience….Ostensibly general formulations which can…be

proposed to account for the contemporary world deserve checking against the vast, well
documented European experience.‖²¹

Perhaps because of the prevalence of Tilly’s coercion centered view, insofar as we do
think about the mechanics and mechanisms of state building, there is a tendency to assume that
the strategy employed by successful centralizers consists almost exclusively of “sticks,” i.e. of
using force to coerce opponents into submission.²² This view is, however, incomplete and
flawed. To begin with, such a strategy presupposes the very dominance in military ability that is
one of the key consequences or goals of the state building process itself. Empirically,
Furthermore, this does not correspond to the way most of the classic European states were
actually built. Instead, in the European past as today, when centralizing elites initially embarked
on the task of state building they faced a myriad of adversaries who had much to lose from
centralization and resisted it accordingly. Unable initially to defeat their opponents solely
through the use of coercion, many European state builders were only able to achieve their goals
indirectly and in piecemeal fashion, and recognized that they would need to co-opt their
adversaries in order to achieve them. Centralization therefore often involved the use of strategies
that employed material incentives or “carrots” to try to bribe or entice adversaries into gradually
abandoning their opposition to central authority. Since some version of this strategy is implicitly

²¹ Tilly, “Reflections,” p. 3, 14. See also his “Western State-Making and Theories of Political
Transformation,” in Tilly, ed., The Formation of National States. For an analysis of these issues
that follows precisely this injunction see Thomas M. Callaghy, The State-Society Struggle. Zaire

²² This is, of course, somewhat unfair to Tilly who in his analysis of state making emphasized
“capital” as well as coercion, with the latter explaining the reason for state formation and the
former explaining the type of state ultimately formed.
being attempted in some parts of the world today, it should be especially helpful to provide some context and information about how it played out in the past.

The European Background

Up through the early modern period, Europe was divided into a large number of small political units with fairly porous, undefined borders. “Frontiers,” as one analyst remarked, “were still poorly defined, zones of contact between neighboring powers rather than lines clearly demarcated. The hold of central governments over officials and commanders in border areas was…incomplete, so that in these areas locally inspired acts of oppression and outright violence…frequently occur[ed].” Although border regions were particularly unstable, a king’s hold over the rest of his ostensible territories was often not much stronger; indeed, most of the “countries” of the day were really loose collections of provinces, regions and people “divided by interests and identity” and effectively governed by local rulers, legal systems, and traditions. In short, where kings existed, they were often more titular than actual rulers: as is the case in many underdeveloped states today, they had little power outside of a “capital” city; most people had little contact with or even knowledge of the king and his court; and the king’s authority was

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open to “constant challenge….Even if his rights were uncontested, he needed the loyalty and goodwill of his magnates to help maintain his power.”

Indeed, the dominant authority in most peoples’ lives during this time was local or religious. Direct responsibility for the provision of defense and welfare up through the early modern period lay for the most part not with kings but rather with regional or provincial nobles. In general, kings could not engage in warfare on their own; instead, they needed the approval and support of local nobles who often provided the resources and men necessary for battle. Far from any central leader having a “monopoly over the use of violence,” “authority and control over domestic violence” in pre-modern Europe “was dispersed, overlapping and democratized.” Nobles retained their own private arsenals, armed forces and fortresses and used them to defend their land and the people who lived under their rule. In many parts of Europe, therefore, “the ‘private’ jurisdictions of territorial lords were virtually as powerful and effective during early modern times as they had been in the centuries of feudalism, more strictly defined.” Since, “throughout history, that unit which affords protection and security to human beings has tended to become the basic political unit,” it was these nobles, rather than kings, who were the key authority figures in the lives of most Europeans before the seventeenth century. In addition, the Catholic Church and ecclesiastical figures exerted immense social, cultural and political influence and carried out many of the functions we would normally associate with “states” (e.g.

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education, care for the poor, running hospitals, etc.). In short, before the early modern period, authority in Europe was segmented and fragmented rather than centralized and most Europeans’ identities remained primarily regional, local or religious rather than national. The geographical, ethnic or linguistic unity that we associate with modern states, in other words, did not exist in the Europe of this time.

But beginning in about the seventeenth century, many European monarchs began to centralize authority and engage in what we now recognize as the beginnings of state building. As noted above, there are many theories as to why this process began at this time; the most influential being that which stresses the changing nature and frequency of warfare. And it is certainly the case that the seventeenth century was a period of extraordinary conflict in Europe. In fact, so constant was conflict and so dire were its consequences that many wondered if Europe would survive; as one contemporary observer wrote “if one ever had to believe in the Last Judgment…I believe it is happening right now.”

However, it is important to note that not all of these conflicts were international. In addition to a large number of wars, this period was also marked by immense domestic upheaval—revolts, rebellions and uprisings were also a characteristic feature of the age. (Reflecting this, it is worth noting that up through the 19th century, European militar ies spent probably as much time fighting internal as external enemies.) These revolts, rebellions, and

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31 In fact, because of the confused and changing nature of authority during this time, it can be difficult to distinguish between international and civil wars during this period. The most important conflict of this time, Thirty Years’ War, is a good example of this. Anderson, War and Society, pp. 14-5.
uprisings, in turn, were themselves largely a consequence of the centralization drive that began during this era. As monarchs and their agents began trying to centralize authority, challenging long-standing fragmented and segmented authority structures, local, regional and religious elites (as well as many of the ordinary people who had long lived under them) engaged in various forms of resistance. Indeed, so frequent and severe were center-provincial-local confrontations, and so acute and disorienting was the larger debate about the nature and locus of authority occurring during this time that many historians view them as the cause of the “general crisis” that Europe experienced during the seventeenth century. As one well respected treatment of the period put it, “behind the internal conflicts in the European countries in the middle of the seventeenth century, we find the same factor: the growth of state power.” 33 Indeed, the “blowback” many European monarchs faced in response to their initial state building forays was so substantial that while “centralization may have been an essential step in the modernization of states…for those who attempted it, it often proved more trouble than it was worth.” 34 In short, in Europe, as in much of the world today, “bloody turmoil” was the result of national leaders’ “efforts…to establish their authority over a country.” 35

Cambridge University Press, 1993), chapter 12; and Geoffrey Best, War and Society in Revolutionary Europe (NY: St Martin’s Press, 1982).


European state-building was not, in short, a top-down, unidirectional, and purely coerced process. Instead, it was extremely difficult, marred by constant conflicts and setbacks, and, as we will see, required endless compromises and concessions. This is because even when faced with a desperate need to raise revenue to fight wars—a classic Tillyesque situation—most European monarchs were initially unable to eliminate those opposed to the centralization of authority or construct the type of centralized state institutions required. They therefore turned to a variety of co-optation strategies in order to get the job done.

To show how this played out in practice, this essay will briefly sketch out some features of one particularly important case, that of France during what we now know as the Ancien Régime. France is often held up as the first modern, centralized state, and it is certainly the one contemporaries looked upon with the greatest awe. Its development is also well analyzed, and it often represents the implicit or explicit baseline against which other cases are judged. What a close look reveals is that in a case long viewed as an exemplar of successful, top-down centralization, state building was an extremely protracted and difficult process that required compromises, concessions and co-optation strategies to get the job done.

The French Case

When Hugh Capet, the first king of the Capetian dynasty that would eventually create what we now think of as France came to power in 987 he ruled over little more than a small assortment of lands, towns, and fortresses which were collectively much smaller than those
controlled by others within the territory we now recognize as France.\textsuperscript{36} During the Middle Ages, French provinces were almost entirely out of the king’s control; political and administrative power and nearly all the land was in the hands of the great nobles and the clergy. In fact “large parts of what subsequently would become the territorial state of the French monarchy were in practice independent and often belligerent states, imperial cities and principalities, dependent on the counts of Flanders, the dukes of Burgundy, the kinds of England and of Aragon, to name but a few of the long series.”\textsuperscript{37} The country lacked “well defined frontiers, a common language [or a] unified legal system.”\textsuperscript{38} Given the large obstacles to state-building in France—strong traditions of local sovereignty, powerful nobles, institutional diversity, and diverse languages among others—it is not surprising that French kings were only able to gradually and fitfully expand their territorial reach over the following centuries.\textsuperscript{39} In addition, the expansion that did occur during these centuries was only tenuously connected to what we would today consider modern state-building since the areas incorporated into France during this time were for the most part allowed to keep their old institutions, customs, financial infrastructures, currencies, and even languages.\textsuperscript{40} In addition, the Church retained critical powers over areas like education and poor

\textsuperscript{36} David Parker, \textit{The Making of French Absolutism} (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).
\textsuperscript{39} As Perry Anderson colorfully put it, “the history of the construction of French absolutism was to be that of a ‘convulsive’ progression towards a centralized monarchical state, repeatedly interrupted by relapses into provincial power, until finally an extremely hard and stable structure was achieved.” \textit{The Lineages of the Absolutist State} (London: Verso, 1974), p. 86.
\textsuperscript{40} Huguenot areas went perhaps the furthest in this regard, being allowed to keep their own troops, fortresses and authority structures. Perez Zagorin, \textit{Rebels and Rulers, 1550-1660} (Vol. II) (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1982); A.D. Lublinskaya, \textit{French Absolutism} (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1968).
relief while French nobles remained a particularly powerful and obstreperous lot. In short, up through the sixteenth century France remained “a collection of ‘nations,’ pays, seignories, fiefs and parishes…Each of these entities was accustomed to living independently its own customs, privileges, and even language, snug in its own fields and within sound of its own bells.”

However, even state-building “light” often provoked bloody reactions since any “expansion of monarchical authority brought central government into direct conflict with the many groups, duly constituted bodies and regions in whose interest it was to oppose and obstruct the process of state building.” Indeed, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries such conflicts had become so frequent and serious that the “French monarchy seemed to be disintegrating in civil and religious war”; some contemporaries spoke of “a kingdom that is broken.”

Yet during the seventeenth century this situation began to change. The reigns of Louis XII (1619-1643) and especially Louis XIV (1643/54-1715) are usually considered the pivotal era of state-building in France; during this period the monarchy made great strides in subduing the

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41 And lest we romanticize these nobles, especially in comparison to their contemporary counterparts, here is one scholar’s description of them: “Many noblemen…were nothing short of petty tyrants or gangsters who embraced violence as a way of life. Not only did they take up arms against royal magistrates and tax officials…they also waged war against the peasantry, and frequently fought to the death among themselves as a matter of course…..Moliere, of course, has given us an enduring image of this petty tyrant in the character of Don Juan, a blasphemer, womanizer, duelist, thief and murderer who recognizes no law, either earthly or divine, except that of his own sadistic will.” Robert Schneider, “Swordplay and Statemaking,” in Charles Bright and Susan Harding, eds., Statemaking and Social Movements (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 273-4.
42 Bendix, Kings or People, p. 339; Zagorin, Rebels and Rulers, 1550-1660 (Vol. II), esp. 6; Greengrass, Conquest and Coalscence; and James Collins, The State in Early Modern France (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
opponents of centralization—especially the great nobles—and concomitantly expanding its military forces, lawmaking authority, and bureaucratic apparatus.\footnote{Woloch, 18th Century Europe, p. 8-10.} When Cardinal Richelieu looked back on his service to Louis XIII he wrote that when he became chief minister in 1624 “the Huguenots shared the state with [Your Majesty]…the grands behaved as if they were not your subjects, and the governors of the provinces as if they were sovereign powers”\footnote{Richelieu in his Testament Politique, quoted in J. H. Elliott, Richelieu and Olivares (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 64-5.} but by the end of Louis XIV’s reign the French monarchy and state were the envy of Europe. How did this transformation occur?

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of this period was its conflictual nature. As Charles Tilly noted in his cross-national study of contention in Europe: “during the seventeenth century France passed through a significant revolutionary situation almost one year in two.”\footnote{Tilly, Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000 (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 99.} Peasant revolts, Protestant uprisings, obstinate resistance by provincial authorities, and armed opposition by local nobles marked the period.\footnote{Again to quote Bacon on this period: “The Kingdom of France…is now fallen into those calamities, that, as the prophet saith, ‘From the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, there is no whole place.’ Quoted in Zagorin, Rebels and Rulers, vol II, p. 58.} However, the most serious domestic conflict of the century, and the one most consequential for French state building, was the series of civil wars known as the Fronde (1648-53).

As was the case with many of the other conflicts of the period, the Fronde was itself a consequence of the monarchy’s centralizing aspirations. In the years preceding its outbreak, the French monarchy had not only had to deal with a wide range of domestic struggles, it was also involved in the Thirty Years’ War. Together these had served to drain the monarchy’s financial
resources. In order to deal with its growing monetary problems, the monarchy needed to expand its revenue raising ability which, in turn, would require expanding its control over a wide range of individuals, areas and corporate bodies that hitherto been largely free from central interference and burdens. The response to these proposed incursions was predictable: violent rebellions broke out, led by those committed to protecting ancient privileges and rights from the expansion of royal authority. The first of these (referred to as the first Fronde or the Fronde Parlementaire) was led by the Paris Parlement, which not only refused to pay the proposed taxes, but also, in order to avoid such incursions in the future, called for explicit limits on the king’s powers. This revolt was eventually put down (once the king’s army returned home after signing the peace of Westphalia), but this did not end the turmoil. In 1650 a second stage of the Fronde broke out (the Fronde des nobles). As the name indicates, this was a more directly noble-led affair, spurred by the determination of powerful aristocrats to protect their power and prerogatives from the monarchy’s centralizing aspirations. Over the course of the next few years these frondeurs too were gradually beaten back and by 1653 the Fronde was over. The cost, however, had proven to be very high: “a ten year prolongation of the anti-Habsburg war that seemed almost won in 1648; massive devastation of the provinces north and east of Paris from Flanders down to Burgundy; huge disruptions in the economic and social life of the capital and some of the greater provincial cities. It took several generations to repair demographic ravages.”

Nonetheless, over the longer term, the Fronde contributed to France’s long-term stability by opening up a new era in state-building, although not perhaps in the way we might

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think. The end of the Fronde did not eliminate opposition to centralization nor did it open up a clear path to construction of taxation and other institutions associated with modern states. What the Fronde did do, however, was change the dynamic between the king and nobles. Many nobles, having just lost a direct military confrontation with the king, began to recognize the advantages of compromise. The king, on the other hand, although emerging victorious from the Fronde, recognized that trying to defeat the nobles through coercion alone was much too costly. Ironically, therefore, the “chaos of the Fronde” led “both king and nobles to realize that cooperation could prove mutually advantageous. After decades of revolts and conflict, this realization came nearly as an epiphany to both sides.”

Instead, therefore, of relying on coercion to move the centralization process forward, Louis XIII and XIV and their ministers turned to things like venality, bribery, and patronage in order to get the job done. As Hilton Root, who has written one of the most interesting studies of the consequences of this strategy has written

the French King often had to grant concessions that compromised the uniformity of his rule…To maintain the cooperation of well-organized elites, the French Crown allocated favors of various kinds, including pensions, patronage, special legal treatment, exclusive commercial rights, and special courts. The dispersal of privilege was guided by the

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Crown’s intention to make it more advantageous for powerful groups to cooperate rather than resist the growth of central authority.\textsuperscript{53}

For example, even after his military victory in the *Fronde*, the king recognized that any attempt to try to raise all the funds necessary to pay off the immense debts and expenditures associated with war making through taxation alone was folly. In the past, attempts to expand taxation and the reach of extractive institutions had often been a cause of rebellion\textsuperscript{54} and so French kings understood the need to move slowly and indirectly. Louis XIII, XIV (and their successors) therefore made heavy use of a less politically problematic way of raising funds—the sale of offices.\textsuperscript{55} Venality has obvious advantages to leaders desperate for money. First, it is quick and easy, requiring limited personnel to administer and little in the way of institution building. Second, it does not require directly confronting the nobility and other taxation-resistant groups in society. Accordingly, the sale of offices went into “overdrive” after the *Fronde* to the point where by the eighteenth century, everything from the right to be an auctioneer, a baliff or an oyster seller to the ability to collect taxes and act as a judge was being auctioned off in France.\textsuperscript{56}


\textsuperscript{55} It should be noted that such tools had long been employed by French monarchs; they did not appear for the first time in the seventeenth century, although the Louis’ made heavy and innovative use of them.

Many of these offices were quite lucrative, bringing not just an annual income, but also the promise of keeping much of the revenue produced by the office itself. In addition, many also conferred substantial privileges on the holder, including ennoblement, and the ability to pass the office (and its benefits) on to descendants. The holders of such offices therefore tended to develop a strong stake in the maintenance of this system as well as some dependence on the figure who sat at its center—the King. And because these offices were for sale to those who could afford to buy them, they tended to be purchased by what we might now consider to be members of the fairly well off middle class or bourgeoisie. In addition, therefore, to providing initially quick and easy access to funds, venality also turned out to have other political advantages to the king as well, allowing him to “create a new nobility, a bureaucratic one, as a counterweight to the old.”

“[T]hrough venality the king had turned the richest and most ambitious local notables throughout his kingdom into his clients rather than those of the greater nobility….Those who had invested in a share of royal authority were reluctant to risk their investment by defying that same authority.” The sale of offices thus became a “key prop of royal absolutism” and an important “root of the King’s independence of the aristocracy.”

Alongside the sale of offices, the king also doled out or confirmed a variety of other privileges to potential opponents in order to increase their loyalty to the crown and make more “palatable” an expansion of central authority. Indeed, Louis XIV in particular made use of the monarchy’s position as the “fount of privilege” to buy the acquiescence of key groups. Perhaps the most important of these privileges was exemption from a wide variety of taxes. The nobles

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60 Hence, the title of Root’s *Fountain of Privilege*; See Doyle, *Old Regime France*, p. 52.
for example, were freed from many financial burdens, most notably the hated taille as well as more recent direct taxes such as the capitation and vingtieme. Other privileges granted by the king included things like freedom from billeting soldiers or liability to be nominated as guardians of minors. The Church, meanwhile, was allowed to keep the revenue it earned from the immense amount of land it owned (between 6% and 10% of the country’s total), making modest “gifts” to the King in lieu of many regular taxes. The Church was also entitled to collect the tithe (which theoretically entitled it to a tenth of every person’s livelihood). Ecclesiastical revenues, furthermore, were also exempt from ordinary taxation.

Such measures helped the king buy off his opponents “at a high price, by the perpetuation of their exemptions from financial burdens and the grant of sinecures and pensions.” “The privileges conferred by the king helped create a world where social and economic position was increasingly dependent on privileges created and defended by the state and on offices and titles which were defined in relation to the state.” The result was that those with social ambitions became loyal “supporters of absolute monarchy—provided that the monarch continued to guarantee those privileges.”

Venality and the doling out of privileges were part of a larger system of clientelism that the king and his ministers used to restructure social, economic and political relationships in France. Unable to directly eliminate the vestiges of the feudal ties and patronage networks that had governed the territories of France for centuries, they instead manipulated and “skillfully

61 Doyle, Venality, p. 12.
managed” them to create a level of political cohesion and centralization that had not existed before.\footnote{Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Clients and Brokers in Seventeenth Century France* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Bohanan, *Crown and Nobility*, p. 68.}

Precisely because they lacked the authority or institutional capacity to run the territories ostensibly under their control themselves, French kings had traditionally relied on brokers to govern. The problem was that these brokers, most often the great nobles, were largely outside of their control. Since much of these brokers’ power came from their ability to control the flow of resources to lower levels, Richelieu in particular recognized that successful centralization meant replacing this system with one that had the king (as opposed to the *grands*) at its center. In order to do this, Richelieu began creating his own network of brokers, purposefully bypassing the *grands* and instead searching out men with excellent connections and ties at the local and provincial level (people we might today call “joiners” or “connectors”) who were not members of the old, upper nobility. Lacking the independent power and resources of the *grands*, these men became Richelieu’s *creatures* alone.\footnote{Bohanan, *Crown and Nobility*, p. 57.} Richelieu then began funneling resources to his brokers, who then used them to gain the support of other key figures at the local and provincial level. “In this way, the crown was able to secure the cooperation of important members of the regional ruling elites. And in this way too, regional elites were introduced into the national political arena…Brokers thus helped to extend the authority of central government over the countryside and increase the political integration of France.”\footnote{Sharon Kettering, *Patronage in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century France* (NY: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), p. 427.} In addition to securing support for the center, these brokers also acted as Richelieu’s “eyes and ears” at the local level, facilitating information flows, acting as mediators between different interests, lobbying for the
king’s policies (or vice versa), and helping other bureaucrats carry out their jobs. This system proved particularly helpful in establishing “royal control over the peripheral regions of France, [thereby contributing] significantly to the development of the early modern state.”

This policy was continued by Richelieu’s successors, Mazarin and Colbert, enabling them to further bypass and undermine the grands’ networks, and create a new web of ties and relationships that reached from the center deep into local and provincial France. Thus here too centralization was furthered by buying “loyalty and support” rather than through “surveillance and coercion.” And, also noteworthy is the circuitous route taken to constructing state institutions: the center initially made use of traditional means and networks “outside and apart from formal political institutions” to expand its control; only gradually was this system superseded by what we today recognize as a more modern bureaucracy (the intendants).

Alongside venality, privilege, patronage and clientelism, the King also used the glittering palace of Versailles to co-opt and defang the nobles in particular. After the Fronde, Louis XIV made presence at Versailles a key prerequisite for the currying of favor and commercial advantage. Once at Versailles, the king created an elaborate court and set of rituals that despite the physical proximity within which they lived, had the effect of emphasizing the king’s differentiation from the nobles. The king devoted immense amounts of time and energy to cultivating a complicated world of social privilege that played to the aristocracy’s belief in a

69 Kettering, Patrons, Brokers and Clients, p. 142.  
70 The grands recognized of course what was going on and this contributed, for example, to many of them deciding to participate in the Fronde.  
71 Kettering, Patrons, Clients, and Brokers, p. 6.  
72 Kettering, Patrons, Brokers and Clients, p. 75.
natural and clearly differentiated social hierarchy—but with the king firmly at its center.\textsuperscript{73} The king “locked up the nobility in the gilded cage of a strictly ordered, controlled, and hierarchical court life”\textsuperscript{74} but what made the system palatable was that “royal glory enhanced the status of the whole hierarchy of traditional authorities. The rays of the Sun King reflected off all the lesser planets resolving in his solar system.”\textsuperscript{75}

In short, by assembling the “great of the kingdom around his person” at Versailles Louis XIV was better able to “control them. Those who came were richly rewarded—and thereby domesticated and made dependent.”\textsuperscript{76} In addition, of course, being at Versailles had the added benefit (from the king’s point of view) of physically removing the nobles from their local power base and political functions and of making the court the center of debate about politics and France’s future.\textsuperscript{77} And, with more and more time spent at Versailles noble households, entourages, gendarmes, etc. shrank even further in size.\textsuperscript{78} The Versailles system, in other words, helped direct nobles’ wealth and energy away from the administration of their land and people and toward trying to impress the king and the other aristocrats at Versailles. “Feudal prestige, tamed at Court, was [thus] gradually stripped of its inherent tendency toward political insubordination and reoriented to pleasure seeking and conspicuous consumption.”\textsuperscript{79}

This strategy of using “carrots” to help entice co-optation proved enormously successful. Over time, and during Louis XIV’s reign in particular, both the ability and willingness of the key

\textsuperscript{73} Dunn, \textit{The Age of Religious Wars}, pp.138ff.
\textsuperscript{75} Beik, \textit{Absolutism and Society}, p. 318.
\textsuperscript{77} Collins, \textit{The State in Early Modern France}, pp. 136ff.
\textsuperscript{78} Kettering, \textit{Patronage in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century France}, pp. 159ff.
\textsuperscript{79} Doyle, \textit{Old Regime France}, 59.
adversaries of centralization to resist state-building declined immensely. For example, although he confirmed the enormous financial resources of the Catholic Church, Louis XIV also made sure to assert himself clearly vis-à-vis the Church and the Pope. For example, in the “Declaration of the Clergy of France” he declared the king’s right to make ecclesiastical laws; to approve all declarations by the Pope before they took force in France; to regulate bishops’ travel outside of France; and to protect royal officials from excommunication as a result of their official duties. A similar although even more pronounced dynamic occurred with the great nobles. Seduced into the monarchy’s orbit through privilege, patronage and other incentives, wealthy aristocrats secured for themselves substantial financial rewards but at the price of becoming increasingly dependent on the king and his ministers and having their local administrative and security functions undermined. Once nobles lost their authority at the local level, they came increasingly to be seen as parasites by the wider population. Tocqueville, of course, remains the classic analyst of this transformation’s consequences:

when nobles had real power as well as privileges, when they governed and administered, their rights could be at once greater and less open to attack. In fact, [in a previous age] the nobility was regarded…much as the government is regarded today; its exactions were tolerated in view of the protection and security it provided. [By the eighteenth century, however they had ceased] to act as leaders of the people [but had] not only retained but greatly increased their fiscal immunities and the advantages accruing to them individually.\footnote{Alexis de Tocqueville, \textit{The Old Regime and the French Revolution} (NY: Anchor Books, 1955), pp. 30, 204.}
With his opponents largely defanged, Louis XIV was able to make great strides in centralization and state building. For example, he expanded France’s territory by nearly ten percent and added one and half million new subjects to his realm.\textsuperscript{81} In addition, he also further unified this territory by giving it something resembling a single system of civil law for the first time and eliminating many local, provincial and municipal institutions.\textsuperscript{82} He also made his territory more religiously homogenous by revoking the Edict of Nantes\textsuperscript{83} thereby forcing two or three hundred thousand Huguenots to flee the country. (It is worth remembering that during this time it was widely accepted that religious diversity made a country unviable—as the old proverb had it: “one faith, one law, one king.”)\textsuperscript{84} And Louis XIV also expanded the monarchy’s administrative and military power, by making increasing use of \textit{intendants} (a sort of royal bureaucracy that operated parallel to the system of venal offices dominated by the wealthy but was loyal directly to the king\textsuperscript{85}) and modernizing and professionalizing the army, (which, among other things, ended the nobles’ monopoly over high positions in the military and thereby also

\textsuperscript{81} Jones, \textit{The Great Nation}, p. 53.  
\textsuperscript{82} Parker, \textit{The Making of French Absolutism}, p. 122.  
\textsuperscript{83} Which had granted toleration to Protestants. With this move, Louis XIV forced Protestants to choose between conversion and exile: after 1685 French Protestants no longer had civil rights; their clergy were exiled (or jailed); their possessions could be confiscated; and their children were encouraged to convert to Catholicism.  
\textsuperscript{85} These \textit{intendants}’ positions were salaried (rather than venal) and appointed (rather than purchased). Since they were “removable at the King’s pleasure, they were in every respect the King’s men and could at least rival if not altogether displace the local elites.” Isser Woloch, \textit{Eighteenth Century Europe. Tradition and Progress, 1715-1789} (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), pp. 8-10. It seems that the by the 1630s \textit{intendants} had become not only more numerous but also more powerful and had begun developing “many of the features of a permanent organization.” Briggs, \textit{Early Modern France}, pp. 119-20; Richard Bonney, \textit{Political Change in France Under Richelieu and Mazarin 1624-1661} (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 30.
their effective control over local units) as well as expanding it greatly in size.\textsuperscript{86} In short, after many hundreds of years of effort, largely during the seventeenth century French kings were able to centralize authority to a degree unimaginable to their predecessors and thereby begin the process of state building. France was thus transformed “from the country of classical feudalism…into the country of no less classical absolutism”\textsuperscript{87} and its monarchy and state emerged as the envy of Europe.

\textit{Conclusions}

Confronted with the large number of weak states in the contemporary world and the conflict and underdevelopment they engender, there is a tendency to imagine state building in the past to have been a simpler and more straightforward process, with structural factors, especially those emanating from war-making, inexorably leading to the rise of modern states. In fact, however, this picture is seriously flawed. The emergence of modern states in the past was neither unilinear nor inevitable, nor explicable merely by reference to the use of central coercive power. If we want to understand the state building process better, therefore, we need to pay more attention to how the centralization of authority actually occurs, and more broadly to the actual mechanics and mechanisms of state building.

\textsuperscript{86} At the time of Louis XIV accession the French army had about 20,000 men; by 1688 it had between 150-400,000 men (depending on whether it was peace or wartime). E.g. Woloch, \textit{Eighteenth Century Europe}, p. 51; H.G. Koenigsberger, \textit{Early Modern Europe} 1500-1789 (London: Longman Group, 1987), p. 185; Briggs, \textit{Early Modern France}, pp. 141-2; and Parker, \textit{The Making of French Absolutism}, p. 149.

\textsuperscript{87} Lublinskaya, \textit{French Absolutism}, p. 1.
As the cursory discussion presented here makes clear, even in the classic French case, state-building was protracted and bloody and required messy and unattractive compromises and concessions to succeed. Indeed, even after the critical victory of the Fronde, French kings recognized that centralization and a broader state building strategy built entirely on coercion would be extremely costly as well as unlikely to fully succeed. In early modern France as in many places today the reality was that local elites needed to be won over to state building (or at least have their opposition to it dulled) in order for it to succeed. In order to co-opt their rivals, French kings and their agents used a wide range of material incentives or “carrots.” These “carrots,” it must be stressed, had significant costs for the monarchy—both in a straightforward material sense as well as in terms of efficiency and the speed with which modern, national institutions could be constructed. Carrots were not, therefore, merely incidental or epiphenomenal to the monarch’s military capacity in terms of state-building, rather they were central to it. In order to gain a complete understanding of centralization and state building, in short, an appreciation for the fact these are as much political as military processes is necessary.88

The “carrots” used to promote centralization in the French case, in turn, consisted largely of practices that we frown upon today: venality, patronage, and clientelism were all integral to the process through which the French monarchy and state were transformed into the most powerful in Europe by the eighteenth century. These practices enabled centralizers to turn centralization into less of a zero-sum game: political power was exchanged for economic and social privileges. Under Louis XIV in particular, “hierarchy [was] reinforced, the claim of the privileged to the share of society’s resources [was] guaranteed and collaboration [was] properly

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88 This has clearly been recognized by at least some contemporary analysts, of course. See for example, John Hulsman and Alexis Debat, “In Praise of Warlords,” The National Interest, Summer 2006, p. 51.
rewarded.” The genius of Louis XIV, in short, lies in his “ability to translate royal aspiration towards greater and more centralized power into terms which appealed to the provincial ruling class and which enhanced their class position even while strengthening the state and the monarchy.”

French kings were not alone, of course, in turning to such instruments, although they definitely made more extensive use of them than did many of their counterparts. (Which probably had something to do with great challenges to centralization in France: i.e., it may be the case that the more difficult the state building challenge, the greater is the need for a wide variety of “carrots” in order to win over the varied opponents of centralization.) In fact, the use of material incentives to try to gain if not an alliance with than at least the acquiescence of their adversaries was a fairly standard part of the state-building strategy employed by many European (and non-European) leaders throughout history. Thus like many weak states today, during the early stages of state building most European states were permeated by clientelism, patronage and venality. Such features are perhaps, therefore, a “natural” feature of a certain stage in the state building process: when national leaders lack the strength to eliminate the opponents of

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89 Beik, *Absolutism and Society*, p. 334. Indeed, in some cases the “wealth of great magnates… increased almost in direct relation to the failure of their rebellions.” Bonney, *Political Change in France*, p. 447
90 Beik, *Absolutism and Society*, p. 280.
91 Friedrich Engels, for example, once argued that “Absolute monarchy had to be absolute [in France] just because of the centrifugal character of all elements.” Quoted in Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism*, p. 146-7.
92 For example, in a recent analysis of the state and political development in Iraq, Michael Hechter and Nika Kabiri found that “so long as local groups qua groups were made dependent on the center for their welfare and security, and so long as none was perpetually disfavored by the state, indirect rulers could have been dissuaded from sabotaging state building efforts.” Hechter and Kabiri, “Attaining Social Order in Iraq,” in Stathis Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro, and Tarek Masoud, eds., *Order, Conflict, and Violence* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 69.
centralization through coercion alone, they must try to co-opt them and material incentives can play a large role in helping them do so.\textsuperscript{93}

What the French case shows, furthermore, is that if designed correctly—if in return for material benefits the opponents of centralization can be seduced into giving up at least some of their local power and authority—such “carrots” can, in fact, push the state-building process forward. This is important to note today not only since patronage, clientelism and venality are so widespread in many parts of the world, but also because in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan granting concessions to the opponents of central governments has become increasingly commonplace. What the French (and other European cases) seems to indicate is that, although unattractive to those of us living in modern, Weberian states, things like patronage, clientelism and venality more generally are not necessarily antithetical to state building; it all depends on whether material incentives function merely hand-outs or if the recipients are required to give up power and authority in return for material goodies.

However, the French case also highlights how consequential different state building trajectories can be. Studying the “how” questions of state building promises not only to expand our knowledge of this process but also promises to enhance our understanding of political development more generally since the way states are built critically influences the type of political regime that subsequently develops.\textsuperscript{94} French kings did successfully use things like

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\item If they don’t or co-optation strategies fail, the consequences are likely to be deadly. European history is littered with cases where the opponents of centralization won out and Kings were unable to centralize power. Such places were left increasingly vulnerable to the predations of those communities where strong, modern states were developing; from the seventeenth century on, these places disappeared from the map of Europe with great rapidity.

\item See for example the excellent study of this dynamic by Thomas Ertman, \textit{Birth of the Leviathan. Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe} (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
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\end{footnotesize}
venality, clientelism and patronage to help them defang their opponents, but the state thus created had fatal flaws. In particular, the French state rested on an extremely narrow social base, with the king and the nobility locked into an unhealthy embrace. By confirming and expanding an elaborate system of privileges, and in particular by exempting many of the wealthiest groups in society from the need pay taxes, the system ensured that taxation ended up falling on those least able to pay (especially peasants) and thus almost guaranteed conflict between the lower orders and the privileged sectors of society. The nature of the French state thereby helped create a “society divided into closed, self-regarding groups”\(^95\) “whose members” as one of Louis XVI’s own ministers once put it, “have so few links between themselves that everyone thinks solely of his own interests, no trace of any feeling for the public weal is anywhere to be found.”\(^96\)

Furthermore, the French state’s dependence on a narrow social base and a system of privilege to keep its limited supporters happy also severely limited its ability to reform. By the second half of the eighteenth century, largely as a result of several expensive and disastrous wars, the French state’s fiscal position had become increasingly precarious.\(^97\) Unable to significantly raise taxes, it turned increasingly to borrowing, but by the 1780s its debt burden had become unsustainable.\(^98\)

\(^{95}\) Root, Fountain of Privilege, p. 236.
\(^{96}\) Turgot in a confidential report to the king, quoted in Tocqueville, The Old Regime and the French Revolution, p. 107.
\(^{97}\) Although the sale of offices and privileges did initially enable the French kings to raise significant amounts of money, it was ultimately a self-limiting source of revenue (there are, after all, only so many offices that can be created and sold although French kings did constantly try to expand the number of offices in a desperate attempt to raise funds). Ironically, the deficiencies of this system only became fully clear as the state actually grew stronger—and its aspirations and need for revenue grew accordingly.

\(^{98}\) By 1788 the payment of interest on France’s debt was by some estimates eating up almost 50 percent of state expenditures. It is important to note, however, that it was not merely the size of the debt that helped doom the Ancien Régime but the interest rate that had to be paid on it. However, the high interest rate itself was a consequence of the particular nature of the French state, i.e. its narrow social base and inability to raise taxes. As scholars like Hilton Root,
However, despite the fact that the regime’s very existence was at stake, all attempts at reform were ultimately rejected because they threatened the social base and system of privileges upon which the state had been built. Indeed so entrenched was this system, so central was it to the state’s very nature, that it would take a revolution to finally get rid of it.99

In short, a reconsideration of the French case (and the European experience more generally) has a lot to offer students of state building today. First, and most obviously, it can remind us of historically how bloody, protracted and difficult a process state building is—a finding that makes perfect sense once one recognizes that an essential part of the process is the breaking down and displacing of long-standing authority patterns, relationships and elites.

Second, what the French and other European cases reveal is how misleading it is to view state building as a fairly straightforward process of transforming pre-modern forms of political organizations into modern ones. As the French case highlights, even for a state considered by many to be the most “modern” of its time (as well as the most powerful) the evolution from feudalism to modernity was anything but unilinear. Instead, rather than directly building modern state institutions, French monarchs and their agents made use of traditional means and relationships when pursuing centralization: clientelism replaced kinship, patrimonial ties replaced local ones; only relatively late in the game did modern state institutions (e.g. rational

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Douglass North and Barry Weingast pointed out, the English state was able to raise more money and at a lower interest rate. This they attribute to greater openness of the British system and in particular the presence of parliament, which allowed greater numbers and different groups in society to have a say in the running of the state. See Root, *Fountain of Privilege*, and Douglass North and Barry Weingast, “Constitution and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth Century England,” *The Journal of Economic History*, XLIX, 4, December 1989.

99 However, it should be noted that however dysfunctional the state thus constructed ultimately turned out to be, it was better than the alternative—i.e. the continued anarchy and conflict that characterized France in the period preceding the seventeenth century.
bureaucracies and extractive capacities) as we understand them today begin to emerge. State building in France, in other words, entailed an intermediary phase of centralization that exhibited at least as much continuity with the past as it did with the future.\footnote{Kettering, Patrons, Brokers, and Clients, p. 224 and Parker, The Making of French Absolutism, p. 148;}

Third, the French and other European cases also reveal how important it is to move beyond the existing literature’s focus on structural factors and focus more attention on the process of state building itself. As helpful as structural factors can be in helping us understand why state building occurs, they are much less useful in telling us how it actually does—and especially from a policy perspective, such questions are absolutely crucial. In particular, this essay has argued for greater attention to be paid to co-optation along with coercion, so as to be better able to understand the ways in which opponents of centralization can be undermined, eliminated or bought off.

And finally, the French and other European cases also reveal the need to integrate our study of state building with our study of political development more generally. It is impossible to understand the French revolution and subsequent French (and European) political development without understanding the nature of the Ancien Régime French state. Although certainly an extreme case, it is still instructive—there is a critical difference between strong states and durable ones. More study of the differences between the two and the paths different societies take to them would be of immense scholarly and practical use.