War, State Formation, and Culture

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Historical sociology has long been concerned with the study of organized state violence.[1] Since the mid-1970s, a substantial body of work has come to focus on the importance of warfare to historical processes of state formation. The first generation of this literature proposed that the relentless existential struggle between the warring polities of medieval Europe had favored the survival of states that could adopt ever more efficient means to extract and mobilize resources from the local population to feed the war effort. Early states therefore evolved the institutions to collect taxes and administer territory largely as a functional byproduct of interstate military competition. From this perspective, the logic of war making was the driving force behind the rise of the modern state in Europe.[2]

Scholars of the Middle East and North Africa swiftly objected that European models of bellicist state formation could not be neatly transposed to other regions of the world. As Ian Lustick pointed out, the fact that external powers policed the post–World War I division of the region effectively removed state expansion through warfare from the options available to local political leaders.[3] Yet even if the same relationship between war making and state making does not obtain in the Middle East, the work of scholars such as Steven Heydemann, Michael Barnett, Toby Dodge, and Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp reminds us that warfare is not an isolated event that unfolds on the distant frontline but rather a large-scale assembly of practices that differentially structures the organization of state-society relations.[4] War is not merely a political act, but an intrinsically sociological process.

Despite the insights of this approach for understanding the impact of wars in the Middle East, one issue has remained inexplicably neglected: the actual violence that is perpetrated by the state-in-arms. In the state-formation literature, it matters whether warfare is fought with trebuchets or Tommy guns, cannons or kalashnikovs only if these different means of violence produce greater military efficiency against competitors, or if they produce varying institutional configurations of state-society relations. The broader cultural, discursive, and semiotic contexts in which violence is situated are largely irrelevant to such accounts. This lacuna is curious: despite the increased attention paid to culture even in mainstream political science over the last two decades, the literature on state formation continues to conceptualize state violence as a purely *material* phenomenon. How, then, might we incorporate "culture" into the study of war and state formation? Recent work in Middle East studies suggests three possible answers.

The first of these might center on the discourse of violence. Studies of French Algeria, for example, identify not only the immiscible ideologies of Orientalism, modernism, and militarism that informed the metropolitan discourses that justified the use of force in the 19th-century Maghrib but also the symbolic, ritualistic, and communicative dimensions of colonial brutality.[5] Similarly, the politics of occupation and reconstruction in 21st-century Iraq have been shaped by neoconservative notions of the utility of "kinetic power," neoliberal norms of the economic role of the state, and those strands of classical

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liberal philosophy that can be used to buttress arguments for imperial power.[6] Despite its diverse theoretical inspirations (from Gramsci to Geertz and Said) and its varied empirical referents (from formally articulated ideologies of violence to the symbolic systems underpinning military action), this approach implies that the cultural aspects of state violence can be read in terms analogous to the reading of a text.

A second approach, less vulnerable to accusations of slipping toward an untenable idealism, would address the *meaning* of violence. Here, we might usefully draw on the work of interpretive political scientists such as Lisa Wedeen, who has proposed to understand culture not as a more-or-less coherent system of disembodied ideas but as the result of fluid semiotic practices that produce meaning in specific empirical situations.[7] A meaning-centered approach does not assume that state violence is rooted, instrumentally, in military logic, but instead advocates making acts of war intelligible in their particular context. Understanding violence as meaningful action might help us better understand cases such as contemporary Syria, for example, where the sheer excess of the Asad regime's bloody atrocities is simply inexplicable in terms of military utility, Baʿthist ideology, hegemonic discourse, or formal symbolism. Curiously, although anthropologists working on Africa and Latin America have long pioneered a meaningful approach to violence, relatively little work on the Middle East has adopted this perspective.[8] In Middle East studies, moreover, the study of meaning is closely associated with ethnography. Perhaps presumptions of the presentist preoccupations of ethnography have dissuaded historical sociologists working on the Middle East and North Africa from incorporating explicitly interpretive approaches into the literature on state formation.

Taking a slightly different turn, the final suggestion would be to adopt what we might call the constitutive approach to state violence. To understand what this means, we can use Timothy Mitchell's well-known account of the emergence of "the economy" as a point of departure. For Mitchell, the economy is brought into being neither as an innovative conceptual development in the history of ideas nor as a thin, intersubjective social construct, but as the peculiar product of certain material and calculative technologies that constitute (rather than correspond to) the reality of the economy.[9] In a similar vein, my 2012 book *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Space, Insurgency and State Formation* analyzes Syria's interwar experience of colonial conquest, rebellion, and state building by understanding the culture of state violence in terms that include materiality as well as discourse and meaning.[10] This third definition of culture has been employed by numerous historical sociologists working on cases in other regions of the world but has only rarely been adopted by scholars of the Middle East and North Africa. Yet a constitutive approach offers rich resources for social scientists to expand culturalist analyses of state formation to include the phenomenon of violence, rather than reductively conceptualizing it as a crude expression of sovereign state power.

If the first generation of neo-Weberian scholarship on war and state formation might be criticized for an undue bias toward materialism, studying the discourse and meaning of violence offers a way to reintroduce Weber's original concern for interpretation. A constitutive approach, moreover, offers an opportunity to overcome the idealist/materialist division that still characterizes many studies of state formation. Far from representing the annihilation of culture, violence provides its ultimate expression.

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NOTES

[1]I use historical sociology in its broadest sense to refer to the full range of historically oriented social sciences. In U.S. political science, for example, the term encompasses historical institutionalism and comparative historical analysis as well as interpretive approaches. In the United Kingdom, historical sociology has largely moved out of sociology departments and into the discipline of international relations. Despite disciplinary divides that conventionally place history beyond the social sciences, historians also contribute to the field to the extent that their work actively engages with concepts and themes in historical sociology. Classic examples of historical sociology in Middle East studies include Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830–1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1994); Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996); and Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2]Charles Tilly and Gabriel Ardant, eds., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States: AD 990–1992* (Oxford: Wiley, 1992).

[3]Ian S. Lustick, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective," *International Organization* 51 (1997): 653–83.

[4]Steven Heydemann, ed., *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000); Michael N. Barnett, *Confronting the Costs of War: Military Power, State, and Society in Egypt and Israel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012); Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[5]Abdelmajid Hannoum, *Violent Modernity: France in Algeria* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844–1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); William Gallois, *A History of Violence in the Early Algerian Colony* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[6]Toby Dodge, "The Ideological Roots of Failure: The Application of Kinetic Neo-Liberalism to Iraq," *International Affairs* 86 (2010): 1269–86.

[7]Lisa Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002): 713–28.

[8]Göran Aijmer, *Meanings of Violence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000).

[9]Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

[10]Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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