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New Agendas in Statebuilding

Hybridity, contingency and history

Edited by
Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén



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Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén

Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii

1 Introduction: the need for new agendas in statebuilding	1
ROBERT EGNELL AND PETER HALDÉN	

PART I

New theoretical approaches to statebuilding	11
--	-----------

2 Hybrid statebuilding	13
ROGER MAC GINTY	

3 Against endogeneity: the systemic preconditions of state formation	32
PETER HALDÉN	

4 Somalia: state 'failure' and the emergence of hybrid political orders	55
MORTEN BØÅS	

5 State theory and statebuilding: towards a Gramscian analysis	70
LEE JONES	

PART II

Revisiting historical cases of statebuilding	93
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6 The improbable European state: its ideals observed with social systems theory	95
GORM HARSTE	

7	The local adaptation of centralizing politics: hybrid statebuilding in sixteenth-century Sweden	122
	MATS HALLENBERG	
8	Changing perceptions of the Western form of government in Islamic thought	143
	MOHAMMAD FAZLHASHEMI	
PART III		
	Strategic imperatives in statebuilding	169
9	Exploring the strategic logic of withdrawal from statebuilding interventions	171
	JAN ANGSTROM	
10	In our image: statebuilding orthodoxy and the Afghan National Army	186
	ADAM R. GRISSOM	
11	Winning legitimacy?: counterinsurgency as the military approach to statebuilding	210
	ROBERT EGNELL	
	Conclusion	233
12	Towards new agendas: implications for the theory and practice of statebuilding	235
	ROBERT EGNELL AND PETER HALDÉN	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	247
	<i>Index</i>	272

1 Introduction

The need for new agendas in statebuilding

Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén

Building states has become a highly prioritised issue in international politics. Most attention is given to the acute cases, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, but also to states that seem to fit the label 'failed states' such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia. The state, however, is one of man's most complex inventions. Most stable and developed states are the result of centuries of context-specific social conflict, historically contingent processes and institutional learning and adaptation. Planning and executing such processes within a relatively short time frame and with a particular state framework as the aim are therefore momentous tasks – not least in failed states or contexts with limited traditions of Western state institutions. Statebuilding is also tasked with achieving very ambitious goals. It is intended to create security, development and justice in the territory that the state is supposed to control, as well as in the wider region and indeed in the international community. Since the 1990s mainly Western countries and international institutions have invested large sums of money, manpower and considerable political capital in ventures of this kind from Liberia in the West to Cambodia in the East. Security forces, civilian administrators, experts in development and in all fields of construction and engineering have been employed in connection with statebuilding.

The problem that serves as the driving force of this volume is that while most actors agree that statebuilding is a difficult and complex task the breadth and depth of understanding of these processes – both within the academic world and among policy makers and practitioners – is much too limited. Within the academic community it has developed into a subfield within International Relations (IR) with a narrow range of historical and theoretical input. Among policy makers and practitioners it is dealt with in a simplistic and technocratic problem-solving fashion.

The starting point of this volume is therefore that statebuilding, given the enormous complexity of the aims and tasks involved, must be informed by a deep understanding of the state as a social and political entity, by the theory and history of state formation processes and by the specific local contexts in which these endeavours are to take place. As we have argued earlier, statebuilding, particularly in the most extreme cases,

cannot be regarded as reconstruction or as surface-level engineering.¹ If we take the idea of building states seriously, we cannot believe that we can simply measure a demand for a particular public good and easily create institutions that will supply them. Often it seems like statebuilding nations have forgotten their own past and are blinded by the apparent 'end of history' stage that we have found ourselves in after the end of the Cold War.

The most fundamental mistake is confusing a seemingly static condition with a dynamic process. With the risk of over-simplification, there is currently a tendency of looking to Western, developed societies (or to the idealised models of political science) for templates of a desired end-state and trying to match these images with concrete realities that are less economically developed, politically more fractured, more violent and less legitimate. Instead we believe that more attention must be paid to the processes through which Western states were created. We do not claim, in the fashion of modernisation theorists, that non-Western societies could or should replicate the steps taken long ago under very different circumstances by European societies. But the study of the processes of creating institutionalised legitimate political orders in Europe (of which the state was eventually the victorious model)² will provide us with a greater understanding of the complexities at hand through analogies and by highlighting unexpected similarities and functional equivalents. If we only see the 'un-ordered' and fractured societies of Africa and Asia through the lens of the modern European/Western state all we will see is the absence of a particular pattern of order and conclude that they are failed states – essentially only a negative understanding.³ Studying emerging orders in the past and in the contemporary world in tandem alerts us to the fact that the range of possible 'forms of rule' was much greater in the European past and that it is in fact greater in the contemporary world than what the abstract and state-centric conceptual frameworks tell us.⁴ Of particular importance in the past and in the present is the normality of 'hybrid polities'.

For these reasons, the volume connects the study of statebuilding to more aspects of social theory, and historical studies, than what is usually the case in the literature. Thereby we show how the current projects, which involve large-scale attempts at social engineering and create great upheavals, require discussions of fundamental social and political questions as well as give new impetus to theoretically informed research. While a single volume cannot, and perhaps should not, attempt to cover the entire range of social theories or subject matters, the purpose of this book is to use the broader and deeper frameworks to show how new perspectives on statebuilding not only serve to highlight problems in the current approaches but, more importantly, bring forth new questions and starting points both academically and practically in the field of statebuilding. Our ambition is to be the first rather than the final word in a broadened debate on statebuilding and the social sciences.

The core themes of the book

The authors represented in this volume implement the purpose by engaging with four themes: (1) bridging historical 'state formation' and contemporary 'statebuilding'; (2) hybridisation; (3) contextualisation; 4) unpacking of the 'state'.

Bridging historical 'state formation' and contemporary 'statebuilding'

Several previous works tend to make passing nods to historical developments, European or otherwise. We believe that the scholarly fields of historical and sociological studies of state formation and contemporary statebuilding, which is usually studied within political science, IR and strategic studies have been artificially divided. Our ambition is not to advocate fusion, but a greater dialogue and exchange of ideas. Theoretically groundbreaking and empirically grounded research on both historical and contemporary events and processes should be carried out and engaged in dialogue with each other. This volume strives to use history as a heuristic tool to say new and relevant things about contemporary politics and, conversely, to use contemporary problems and processes as tools to say new things about past politics. Doing so means in effect dismantling the boundaries between the study of historical and contemporary formation of political order which we feel have their origins in the division of labour between different academic disciplines and research orientations rather than in substantive differences.

Hybridisation⁵

Many places of the world, particularly those that are the targets of projects of statebuilding, are what can best be described as hybrid forms of political order. In this volume we use the concept of hybridisation as a heuristic tool to create a better understanding of the situations we study. Its epistemological foundation is simple, yet it merits centre stage for academics and practitioners alike: pure forms, like 'the state', which can be captured theoretically and neatly expressed in organograms, do not exist in real social life. Instead all social practices, institutions and, on a higher level of aggregation, societies, are products of the fusion of older and newer forms, which at any given moment in time will be seen somewhat erroneously as 'local' and 'foreign'. This is the historical norm rather than the exception or even aberration. What makes contemporary statebuilding situations different is that the condition of hybridisation has become extreme. These situations often bear witness to a massive and rapid influx of new ideas, institutions and actors. Already existing actors, institutions and ideologies will relate to, cooperate with, resist and seek to create innovative fusions with the new ones. From a scholarly point of view, this

means that we must move away from discrete and reified categories like 'internal' and 'external'. From a practitioner's point of view it means that a greater readiness to face hybridised situations is necessary. From a political point of view it means that a greater readiness to accept hybrid politics and polities over the long term is also necessary. Placing hybridisation at the centre of the study of state formation/statebuilding directs our inquiry at combinations of factors that are often seen as binary distinctions such as centre and periphery; bottom-up and top-down; internal and external; and central and local. Rather than seeing them in an either-or fashion, the authors of this volume explore stable and unstable fusions of these distinctions in concrete cases.

Contextualisation

Overall, a greater knowledge of the cultural, economical, political and social context of the individual statebuilding project is central to success. In order to avoid mistakes and to raise the chances of success the activities and analyses of statebuilding need to curtail tendencies of self-centredness – what in development circles is usually referred to as 'donor-centric' approaches. Instead more knowledge and focus is required about the actors present in the concrete situation. They are far more important to the process of building states and their continued evolution than what epithets such as 'local actors' signal. Instead of treating them as a residual category in investigations of the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence or comprehensiveness of our own operations; studies of actors and their world-views, positions and conflicts vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis intervening forces need to take centre stage. Only thereby can we understand how interventions will be affected by local positions and conflicts of arms and ideas as well as vice versa. Too little attention has so far been paid to the political conceptual apparatus, world-views and political visions of non-European societies. Another knowledge gap that this volume attempts to fill is the reception and reformulation of Western models of political organisation outside of America and Europe, particularly in the Islamic world.

'Statebuilding' is never and has never been a generalisable and deracinated process that effortlessly migrates across time and space guided by benchmarks and best practices. Instead contextual factors of various kinds, institutional, political, cultural, concretely relating to positional struggles and of various age are unique structural preconditions of state formation/building. Some factors will be conducive and others detrimental and in each case statebuilders will have to make as realistic an assessment as possible of which ones will be stronger in terms of constitutive and causal effects in the inevitable creation of local variations of 'the state'. Not only history, sociology or indeed anthropology have to be mobilised but also IR theory. The contemporary system of sovereign states has a decisive constitutive

impact on statebuilding processes. Several studies have pointed to the fact that since the mid twentieth century international borders have largely been frozen and the international system is very restrictive in allowing secession or other forms of creating new and possibly more viable states.⁶ The current condition of fixture is different from historical processes of state formation and statebuilding in a context of simultaneous system formation. Geographical boundaries and other questions of scale are of obvious importance to creating viable entities.⁷ There is also a reluctance or inability in the current international system to allow entities which are not sovereign states.⁸ However, we need to inquire whether institutional changes are possible in the current international system that would enable a wider range of forms which in turn might be more flexible solutions to the problems of political order, domestic and international.

Unpacking of the 'state'

This volume seeks to introduce more versions, visions, definitions and understandings of the state than the standard 'Weberian' one that currently dominates the debate on statebuilding. One of Weber's definitions of the state that has become canonical in many of the social sciences and in the minds of theoretically informed laymen reads as follows:

A compulsory political organisation with continuous operations (*politischer Anstaltsbetrieb*) will be called a 'state' insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order.⁹

This canonical status is particularly noticeable in IR and security studies, which are close to the core of the field of statebuilding due to the importance of security and of stemming violence in statebuilding ventures. Although parsimonious and elegant, there are several shortcomings of the Weberian definition of the state. First, it is a definition of the modern Western state developed in the early twentieth century. Second, its focus is too narrowly on the monopoly of violence. Third, taken on its own it tells us little about the complex social context in which a state is built. Fourth, it is a description of static condition, a finished process, whereas statebuilding deals with ongoing, unfinished, yet guided, evolution.

We do not disregard the importance of legitimacy or the centrality of the means of violence. However, other definitions of the state may provide better guides to the processes whereby different kinds of states have been formed. In particular definitions and theories which focus more on the way the state as an organisation connects to, negotiates and compromises with, and in certain respects captures social groups fulfil our current need for a processual understanding of the state. In this volume process-oriented understandings of the state-society configurations are represented

by the theories of Niklas Luhmann,¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci,¹¹ open-systems theories,¹² Norbert Elias¹³ and by historical studies of the intertwinement of social groups with state organisations.

Outline of the book

As already noted, the volume includes a wide variety of theoretical perspectives and empirical case studies. These are divided into three main parts of the book – theoretical and strategic issues, historical cases and strategic imperatives in statebuilding. While some chapters are clearly more theoretical or empirical than others, the strength of the volume is that all chapters include both and that all bring forth unique perspectives on the conduct and theory of statebuilding. The uniting factors of these chapters are a critical reading of current statebuilding approaches along the four core themes of the book, as outlined in this first and introductory chapter.

Part I of the volume provides new theoretical and strategic approaches to statebuilding. Chapter 2, authored by Roger Mac Ginty, introduces the themes of ‘hybridity’ and ‘hybridisation’ in statebuilding. Mac Ginty does so by advancing the view that we should celebrate – or at least tolerate – what he describes as a ‘deviation from normative models of the state and statebuilding based on Weberian and liberal ideals. Western political actors often describe such deviations as failure of statebuilding endeavours. Instead, we can view it as a form of hybridisation of top-down, Western-inspired notions and practices with bottom-up locally inspired processes – indeed a common process in historical state formation processes. Thus, while Mac Ginty does not necessarily advocate hybridity and hybridisation as a method in statebuilding, he makes a strong argument about the fact that they are systems already in existence. In relation to the core theme of contextualisation and the importance of specific contextual understanding that pervades this volume, the consequential policy implication is that the existing hybrid forms of state in the local context must be taken into account, and in some instances be embraced, when planning and conducting statebuilding efforts.

Chapter 3 highlights the need to view the state as part of a regional system and thereby highlight the importance of external factors of statebuilding endeavours. Peter Haldén’s analysis thereby highlights the importance of both wider contextual understanding, and also the importance of bridging historical state formation processes and contemporary statebuilding practices as separate fields of study. Haldén argues that state failure is too often seen as the consequence of endogenous factors rather than systemic ones. The idea that parts precede wholes is very old in political and social theory and is reflected in the conception that individuals precede societies and states precede systems of states. Correspondingly, the idea that states can be built by supporting internal processes and institutions

alone is prevalent in policy documents and in some of the literature on statebuilding. Haldén forcefully calls both assumptions into question by demonstrating important external preconditions of historical state formation – related to the system, or lack thereof, of states in the wider region. Analysing two contemporary geographical figurations – Central Asia/Afghanistan and Southwestern Africa/Namibia – the chapter concludes that statebuilding is substantially facilitated when external contextual factors are in place. The implication is a wider approach to statebuilding as a hybrid approach that builds regional systems as well as states.

The relationship between the centre and the periphery of state territories is also highlighted by Morten Bøås in Chapter 4. The chapter emphasises the importance of bottom-up processes in Somaliland and in eastern DRC and introduces an innovative alternative to top-down statebuilding with a model that even bypasses the Somali state and indeed the state as such. The town of Bosaso in Puntland, Somalia serves as a thought-provoking example of a small area of relative peace and prosperity that has completely bypassed the Somali state in its development. Instead, it is functioning thanks to the administrative needs and structures created as a response to trade across the Gulf of Aden. Beyond the city-state structure of Bosaso, Bøås revisits the role of religion in the reclaiming of the city of Mogadishu that the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) managed in 2005–2006, as well as the role of the clan-based order in the stabilisation of Somaliland. These islands of functionality should not only be acknowledged and respected in the processes of wider statebuilding in Somalia, but should perhaps be seen as a new building-block approach of building administrative state structures from the bottom up.

In Chapter 5 Lee Jones adds a central aspect to the theme of contextualisation by emphasising the importance of bringing the social conflicts of a 'target' society into the statebuilding processes. One potential explanation for the persistent gap between international statebuilders' aspirations and achievements is their misguided understanding of states as institutional apparatuses abstracted and separated from society. State-society interpenetration is actually the historical norm, and a proper understanding of different state forms requires close analysis of the conflicts between different social forces as they promote state projects that will advance particular interests over others. International statebuilders are best conceptualised as merely one – albeit important – party to this ongoing struggle, which statebuilders have no realistic hope of taming. Jones' analysis also helps bridge the divide between historical processes of state formation and contemporary statebuilding by pointing to the context-specific social conflicts as instrumental influences in the processes of creating and consolidating the nature and characteristics of the many variations of political systems of states.

Part II of the book brings important lessons from past state formation and statebuilding processes into the light. These are not merely historical

cases, but are written to provide food for thought in the contemporary context of international statebuilding. Chapter 6 stresses the importance of understanding contemporary statebuilding in the light of historical state formation. Gorm Harste highlights the historical improbability of the state as we know it by studying the state-formation process in France. The chapter employs Luhmann's social systems theory and thereby makes the utility of further theories from the wider social sciences quite explicit. Not only does Harste unpack the Western notion of the state by highlighting the historical contingency and improbability of its creation in France, he also uses innovative approaches to increase the understanding of state formation as processes of co-optation.

The importance of historical understanding is strongly reinforced in Chapter 7 where Mats Hallenberg takes us through the unlikely, yet, as it turns out, very useful case of Swedish state formation in the sixteenth century. In particular the chapter highlights another form of hybridity in the importance of the relationship between the central power of the king and the local peasants in the periphery. The successful stabilisation of Sweden was in many ways a consequence of a bargain between the king and the peasants. The implications for contemporary statebuilding campaigns are extremely interesting. This is not least highlighted by the campaign in Afghanistan where a key challenge has been to establish a central government that is perceived as legitimate among the local population far from Kabul. This relates directly to Mac Ginty's argument about hybrid forms of governance and striking a balance between top-down and bottom-up processes of statebuilding.

An unusual and necessary perspective is provided by Mohammad Fazlhashemi in Chapter 8. By reading a number of key Islamic thinkers he analyses the reception of Western norms of statehood in the Islamic world from the early modern era to the present day. This reading unpacks the Western notion of the state from an 'outside' perspective and forces us to think about more versions, visions, definitions and understandings of the state and the normative frameworks of statebuilding. More immediate policy implications of Fazlhashemi's analysis include the importance of local cultural and religious understanding in order to anticipate local reactions to planned programmes of statebuilding.

Part III of the volume discusses a number of strategic imperatives in the conduct of statebuilding. When is a state built and time ripe for withdrawal? What is an appropriate role for military force, and what types of military activities can contribute to statebuilding success? In Chapter 9, Jan Angstrom asks the key question of when an external statebuilding endeavour is completed – when is a state built and the time ripe for withdrawal? The chapter studies the strategic logic of withdrawal from statebuilding campaigns, and thereby fills an important gap in the literature. Angstrom's starting point is that the overwhelming majority of research within the fields of strategy and statebuilding focuses on the causes of interventions