

Middle Range Theory

A Review of *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* by Francis Fukuyama (Straus & Giroux, 2011)

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This book does not lack ambition. Fukuyama's aim is to achieve, in the tradition of 19th century historical sociologists, a "middle range theory" of the historical development of political order. Like Goldilocks and the three bears, the book seeks a theory that is not too abstract, as Economists prefer, and not too particular, as Historians and Anthropologists are want to describe the world. The book is written as a kind of updated account of Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968). F.'s book is motivated by his belief that still more work needs to be done to understand development and decay. Unlike Weber and most other theorists of modernization, however, F. stresses throughout the book that China was first to emerge as a "modern" state. But it was only Europe, where individualism, rule of law and government accountability came together in delicate balance, which was able to achieve a durable political equilibrium and economic growth. The book should be read against the contemporary backdrop of what F. sees as a "democratic recession" of the early 21st century that has seen 20 percent of countries that democratized during Samuel Huntington's "Third Wave" (1970–2010) have reverted back to some form of authoritarian government.

There have been many books—Michael Mann (*The Sources of Social Power*, 2 volumes, 1986, 1993) and Ian Morris (*Why the West Rules—For Now*, 2011), to name just two—written to explain the exceptionalism of the political development of the West and how the future might play out based on these historical developments. The rise of China and the global financial crisis continues to fuel interest in macro historical explanations of political development and decay, and state formation in a broad, comparative historical framework. Not a new phenomenon, it is a tradition that goes back to scholars like Max Weber who wanted to explain German modernity.

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The core of Fukuyama's treatment revolves around the Weberian frame of governance (patrimonial versus bureaucratic) and Samuel Huntington's critique of why states fail. Like Michael Mann's *Sources of Social Power*, F's analysis will be divided into two volumes. Volume 2, we are told, will explain the "conditions of political development today" (p. 18) and how they differ from those set out in the present volume. His main concern here is with the history of states, modernity, and political institutions (p. 450). For "institution" he follows Huntington's definition: "stable, valued, recurring patterns of behavior." And for what a state is, he follows Weber's classic definition: "an organization deploying a legitimate monopoly of violence over a defined territory." For "modern state," again the definition comes from Weber: "states...subject to a rational division of labor, based on technical specialization and expertise, and impersonal both with regard to recruitment and their authority over citizens". The underlying thesis is that political institutions are very often too slow, too rigid to adjust to social change (driven by a variety of factors), which leads to social decline and decay.

In order to explicate this thesis, F. organizes his material into Five Sections: I. Before the State, II. State Building, III. The Rule of Law, IV. Accountable Government and V. Toward a Theory of Political Development. F.'s aim is in its essence to explain how states "Get to Denmark," i.e. achieve a modern, liberal, democratic, growth-producing state. F. deploys three categories of 'institutions' in his analysis: (1) the State, (2) The Rule of Law, and (3) Accountable Government. F. is concerned primarily with five main regions: China, Europe, India, Islamic states in the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire. He chooses these case studies, I think, primarily because they are important both historically and in the modern world as well.

Most of the leading social scientific works in English (F.'s bibliography is exclusively English language titles) on social science history of state formation appear in these pages. Such efforts have been attempted before. Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) and Reinhard Bendix *Kings or People: Power And The Mandate To Rule* (1980) are two examples, although neither appear in F.'s bibliography. F. differs from earlier work in holding up England/Denmark as the ideal against which other states can be measured, and in his motivation to take account of the recent developments in democratization throughout the world since the 1970s and the decline of democracy in some parts of the world more recently. F. is interested, one senses here, not just in comparative historical analysis but in policy implications as well.

The first four chapters of the book are devoted to setting up F.'s project and with understanding early human nature, tribal societies, and the nature of kinship and how this "undergirds" politics. Humans are violent creatures, prone to war. Warfare is important as a driver in the scaling up process from band to tribe and eventually to states. Chapter 5 begins the story of state

formation. The various explanations for the rise of states are summarized, pristine states are distinguished from secondary or “competitive” state formations. Here again China is highlighted as a state that began “extremely early, somewhat after Egypt and Mesopotamia” (p. 92).

Part II begins with Chapter 6 on Chinese tribalism. The first four chapters in the section are devoted to the rise of the Chinese state. The different social structures in F.’s comparison set begin to emerge in detail. Patrimonial power and the importance of family in China that was supported by Confucianism was weakened by Legalism, which led to the emergence of the “modern” state in China and not elsewhere. Intensive warfare between the Eastern Zhou and early Han periods was the engine of what F. claims to be a singular event of state modernization in antiquity. The number of wars, their scale, and their intensity is indeed a remarkable feature of Chinese state formation and bureaucratization.

From Chapter 9, we begin to understand what goes wrong in states. Following Huntington, F. argues that social change upsets the political equilibrium. The developing corporate interest of palace Eunuchs, environmental issues, revolts, and an enormous drop in population led to the reemergence of patrimonial structures and the consequent decline in central state power. India makes for a good comparison case for F. In strong contrast to China, the “default position” of the Indian subcontinent was “small squabbling kingdoms and only occasional unity.

There are many reasons for the contrast. For F. perhaps the most important is the comparative role of religion. China was a ‘Caesarpapist’ state, one that subordinated the priestly class to the political regime, whereas in India, priests were a separate class (*varna*) and an independent power. It was from this source that Law sprang, not from the political but from religious power. The Mauryan kings in the 3rd century BCE managed to unite most of the subcontinent but it quickly fell apart. States were weak in India and the concentration of power and the ability to mobilize an army was difficult. But F.’s aim is not simply to analyze states but to come up with his middle range theory by the contrasts set up between India and China, for example. This is highlighted in his conclusion about the contrasts and similarities between Chinese and Indian history. “A better form of freedom,” F. argues, is created when a strong state is balanced by a strong society, something, as we will see as we read on, that is rare in world history.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 continue the study of state formation by examining Muslim states. In these chapters F. is concerned with the unusual solution of military slavery to solve the problem created by tribal organization. The Mamluk system was particularly effective and military slavery was the key not only to the political organization but also to the survival of Islam under pressure from Crusaders and the series of Mongol invasions. Even though the Mamluk regime in Egypt and Syria fell to the Ottomans in 1517, the Mamluk

system itself lasted in most parts of the Muslim world until the 19th century. But the Ottoman system and the military slavery system itself declined under the pressure of a variety of factors including demographic and environmental change and growing pressures of fighting wars on two major fronts. The Ottoman empire, the most successful regime in the Muslim world, compares well to the Chinese in F.'s analysis. Ultimately military slavery was a dead end. F. ends his second section in Chapter 16 by discussing how it was that Europe managed to "exit" the kinship structure. The difference between Europe and China, India or the Middle East lies in the early emergence of the individual in Europe created by the force of Christianity. F. follows Jack Goody's study *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (1983), in emphasizing the role of the Catholic Church in Europe. From an early point the Church, centralized and bureaucratic, emerged as a powerful force able to establish marriage and inheritance rules. Importantly, such rules, inter alia forbidding close kin marriage and divorce, severely affected kinship structures of tribal organization.

Parts III and IV of the book build on what came before and shows the contrast between Europe and the rest based on two keys of political development: the rule of law and the idea of an accountable government. Europe was unique in state formation, F. argues, in that states' ability to enforce laws played a stronger role in development than did military power. That, in turn, is premised on the existence of the rule of law that was contingent on the important role of the Catholic Church. The main contrast is once again China, where the emperor was the sole source of positive law and no rule of law existed. Part IV on accountable government is related to the preceding section. The establishment of the rule of law constrained rulers' behavior. Importantly, the relative lateness of Europe's state building was a key factor in achieving the equilibrium between state strength and the strength of society. The core of Part IV is dedicated to four main stories of governance: Weak Absolutism (the Dutch and Spanish), Successful Absolutism (Russia), Failed Oligarchy (Hungary and Poland) and Accountable Government, the "Getting to Denmark" story (England and Denmark). The reason why F. spends so much time developing the various cases is that he, quite rightly, did not want to make it seem that getting to Denmark was inevitable, merely narrating a "Whig" historical account of English history as the teleological conclusion of European developments. History is at once more complex and more contingent than that simple linear story.

F. concludes the volume at the end of the 18th century with the American and French revolutions. By these events all three principles of the modern political order: a strong state, a state subordinated to the rule of law and a government accountable to all citizens had been established. The path to this modern order was indeed very difficult and it is not yet universal. Indeed in many parts of the world this modern political order does not yet exist.

The final part of the volume, Part V. “Toward a Theory of Political Development” attempts to put all of this historical study into his “middle range” theory explaining the processes of political development and decay. F.’s study is “an account of political development from prehuman times up to the eve of the French and American revolutions” (p. 437). F.’s theory treats the biological foundations of humans, their organization into kinship groups, their propensity for following rules, their propensity toward violence, and their desire for “recognition,” the latter being an important part of political struggle. F.’s explains his “General mechanism of political development” by briefly reviewing the important role of institutions in political history (pp. 446–52). Here is where, we are told, political systems differ in development and decay from biological systems. Institutions can change quickly or be extraordinarily conservative.

The treatment of states and institutions in the volume is superficial and disappointing. As I’ve said, F. adopts Huntington’s definition of institution and Weber’s definition of the state (p. 450). The use of Weber is doubly bad. It conflates “institution” and “organization,” and it uses a definition of state that is highly problematic. F.’s treatment surely would have benefitted from Sheilagh Ogilvie’s recent discussion of institutions in *Economic History Review* (2007, 60:649–84).

There is much fine analysis in F.’s book and it is well worth reading. In the end, however, I found the book wanting in several areas. For one, it is too myopic in its approach to the history of states, missing both a large amount of history and some important work in the historical social sciences. Political institutions that sustain intensive economic growth are in the background of what F. is looking for, but growth is not well treated in the volume. He eschews discussing the ancient world entirely, even democratic Athens. Classical Republicanism (his preferred term) he tells us, did not scale well. That is quite true. Such states, moreover, were rather more limited in number than the more common authoritarian monarchies, which established more stable political equilibria over large territories. Nevertheless any treatment of the development of political order in a global context must, at a minimum, discuss Republican states. Unfortunately we must wait for the promised second volume to get F.’s analysis of the relationships between classical republics and modern democracies (p. 20).

The premodern Middle East, including Egypt is also entirely absent in the volume although for these states not even a cursory reason is proffered. At the risk of sounding particularist, to dismiss without comment a civilization like Egypt, whose language was written and spoken for two-thirds of recorded human history, and one that cast a large shadow over subsequent eastern

Mediterranean history is a serious intellectual flaw. F. is not the first to leave out the ancient Near East and Egypt in macro-historical studies of state development. Hegel's work (and Hegel is very much on F.'s mind here as in his previous book *The End of History and the Last Man*) on ancient art is one powerful reason. Standing proxy for Egyptian civilization and its political development at large, Egyptian art could be admired, but it still was merely *Vorkunst*, not fully free and not fully art for that matter. For that we have to wait for Greek art.

Hegel was not alone in his preference for classical civilization, but there were more practical reasons why Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern civilization (except for Biblical History) was treated so differently. Egyptian civilization itself was not directly accessible before Champollion's initial decipherment in 1822. Establishing fully understood texts took much of the remainder of the 19th century. We really only have, then, a century of analytical scholarship on Egypt, and for some topics such as the economy, real work has just begun.

Preferences for classical civilization and a lack of accessibility have played powerful roles in downplaying the contributions of the Near East in western civilization. In terms of state formation, F. offers another, unstated, reason, namely that the region was a dead end. Mesopotamia and Egypt were absorbed into the Islamic world, and thereafter followed a different historical trajectory. States such as the Egyptian New Kingdom or the Persian empire were seen as developmental dead ends, governing large and stable territory for long periods, but subject to cyclical expansion and contraction, and not leading directly into later political and economic developments, and certainly not into 'today.' While these basic ideas have become commonplace, they are wrong, and they lead to bad scholarship. The absence of thousands of years of state history, as in F.'s book, impoverishes any account of political, legal and economic history.

F. insists, for example, that China was the first to "develop state institutions" (p. 19), and the only great world civilization that did not have, by his definition, the "rule of law." This, simply put, gets history wrong. Several states in Mesopotamia, and Egypt formed states earlier than China, not simply "somewhat" earlier, and that is an important fact in the history of states. F. specifically has in mind Han period China, although he mentions "extensive written and archaeological records of early Chinese history ... with its uniform, multilevel administrative bureaucracy, something that never happened in Greece or Rome" (pp. 92–93). Egypt certainly is another important historic case of early development of state institutions.

F.'s treatment of the history of the rule of law also misses something by excluding the Egyptian case. The definition that F. gives on p. 246, "the rule of law can be said to exist only where the preexisting body of law is sovereign over legislation..." is too simplistic. The key concept in Egyptian civilization, which was established at the dawn of the Egyptian state (c.3000 BCE), was Ma'at,

“moral rightness, cosmic order, correctness, balance,” a concept that connected all of society from the gods to the king and to all people in Egypt. The law was embodied in the king, and the concept constrained what ‘good’ kings could and could not do, just as it governed private behavior that led up to the last judgment of the dead. It did not always solve the “bad emperor problem” that F. discusses for China, but it is an important concept in the history of law and in political history that should have been addressed. Another example of why Egypt mattered historically comes in the one-sided analysis of the rise of Han China.

The Early Han dynasty was established in 221 BCE. The focus on Chinese state formation should have been contrasted with similar and contemporary processes in the Mediterranean. The early Ptolemaic kings, as the early Han kings, went some way to professionalize the bureaucracy and to subordinate patrimonial social structure and religious power to state aims. In terms of state building the Ptolemies were, in my view, the most successful of the Hellenistic states. The same year as the founding of the Han dynasty was, as François Chamoux once put it, a turning point in Mediterranean history. Between 223 and 221 BCE new kings ascended the throne in all three of the major Hellenistic kingdoms (Philip V in Macedonia, Ptolemy IV in Ptolemaic Egypt and Antiochus III in the Seleukid kingdom). In some ways these kings mark the end of the height of Hellenistic state power and the rise of another to the west, Rome. If we are to follow Weber in what counts as “modern,” surely these Hellenistic states—and the cities they built and supplied (Alexandria for one), and the armies they mobilized—that emerged at the end of the fourth century in the eastern Mediterranean basin equally count as “modern.” In both Han China and the Hellenistic states (and we cannot exclude the rise of Rome in this Hellenistic context), intensive war fueled the bureaucratization process that disembedded, to varying degrees, ancient patrimonial patterns. We would have, then, at least two, not one, inflection point in world history beginning in the late fourth century BC—the rise of the Chinese state culminating in the Han Dynasty, and the post-Alexander eastern Mediterranean. They were not mutually isolated processes.

The Ptolemaic state, for example, created by Ptolemy I beginning in the 320s BCE, compares very well to the Han state in terms of structure. Warfare in the Mediterranean was crucial to the bureaucratization process. Another difference may have been the much vaunted recruitment and examination system in China that did not seem to have emerged in Egypt. There are many things that we do not know precisely about how the Ptolemies recruited and trained officials or scribes who served in the bureaucracy. But there were methods of instilling loyalty in the bureaucracy and there are instruction texts that describe how good behavior in one office would lead to promotion higher up the bureaucratic chain. In both cases, neither China nor Egypt completely

solved the problem of the historic weight of the patrimonial power of local families.

An extended comparison of Hellenistic and early Chinese developments would be fascinating to see in the context of this book. One Hellenistic state is treated by F., the Mauryan state in India, as a precursor to later Indian developments. This state arose at the end of the fourth century BC, along with the Seleukids, the Ptolemies, and other states in the Mediterranean. The early Mauryan kings successfully united virtually the entire subcontinent. While the state is often treated in isolation, its rise, in my view, should be seen in the context of the wave of new state formation (“competitive” state formation to use F.’s term) created by the Alexander’s campaigns, the collapse of the Persian empire, and the intensive inter-state competition that resulted. Not to say that the Mauryan kingdom was a ‘Hellenistic’ kingdom in the traditional sense of the term—to be sure, Greeks were not ruling in India. But it is to say that states from Greece to central Asia were more connected than ever before. In this light, it is at least worth asking whether Han state formation was linked to these massive post hegemonic disruptions and new state formations in the Mediterranean world. The connections, after all, between the Mediterranean and East Asia after Alexander were real. The great Mauryan king Ashoka, in the middle of the third century BC, was aware of his contemporaries Ptolemy II, Antigonus Gonatas, and Magas. Trade along the silk road and the southern sea routes through India intensified in the wake of Alexander’s campaigns in central Asia.

Jack Goody’s recent *The Theft of History* (2006) shows us some of what we lose by focusing on just a few states in isolation when attempting to explain European exceptionalism. Any successful “middle range theory” of political order should be more expansive than what F. provides. If history gives us lessons for political development, one of these is surely that there were multiple ‘modernities’ before the American and French Revolutions, not merely one, the Han state in China, that ultimately failed. There is no simple road map to Denmark, and F. is right in suggesting how complex the political processes were in getting there. As Chapter 30 of the present volume intimates, F.’s second volume will really be concerned about the modern world, about the fates of the West and of China. The development and economic growth of modern states certainly face “different conditions that prevailed since the Industrial Revolution” (p. 483). But the very complex history of pre-modern state formation still has much to teach us about the fate of human societies.