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## REZENSIONEN | REVIEWS

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**Sverre Bagge: State Formation in Europe, 843–1789. A Divided World, Abingdon / New York: Routledge 2019, 297 pp.**

Reviewed by  
John Breuilly, London

This ambitious book aims to describe and explain state formation in Europe over a millennium. Bagge necessarily draws mainly on secondary literature and strays well beyond his own expertise as medievalist.

Chapter 1 outlines the rise to dominance by 1200 of some dozen territorial monarchies, arguing that how these acquired legitimacy is key to understanding state plurality and continuity thereafter. Chapter 2 traces the internal development of these monarchies to 1500. Chapter 3 looks at other significant forms of medieval rulership: the Catholic Church, and city-states. Chapters 4–6 cover 1500 to 1800: the impact of the global expansion of European power, the rise of science, the “military revolution”, the Enlightenment, the distinction between “constitutional” and “absolute” monarchies.

Competing kingdoms formed in post-Roman Europe north of the Alps. Comparing this region with southern Europe, East Asia and the Ottoman Empire, Bagge argues that neither geography nor culture provide much understanding of varying patterns within the “lucky latitudes” 20 to 40 degrees north. The same is true of cultural factors like language diversity. More time is spent on military arguments, such as Tilly’s dictum that “war made the state, and the state made war”. Bagge contends that European state formation does not fit any chronology of war-making. Radical change comes only with the early modern “military revolution but the European state system was largely set by 1200.

A problem is what is meant by “state”. Bagge focuses on “kingdoms” (including “empires”). He counts 15 in 1200, reducing to seven “fully independent” entities by 1648, plus the German Empire, to which are added Prussia and Sardinia by 1800. By contrast Tilly reckons 80 to 500 in 1490, settling for a median figure of 200, and 20 to 100 in 1848. Tilly explains such variation, e.g., whether every separately enumerated member of the Holy Roman Empire counts. Tilly’s dates (1490, 1848) are different from Bagge’s (1200, 1500, 1800) but that does not explain these differences. Neither offers a definition of “state”. Bagge begins with the 1933 Treaty

of Montevideo: “a state must have a permanent population, well-defined borders, a government and a capacity to honour international obligations” (p. 1). He notes this pays no attention to “the quality of government, internal sovereignty, impersonal bureaucracy, etc.”

Even by this definition, many medieval “states” lacked well-defined borders, discharged few of the obligations associated with a state today, and there was no “international recognition” procedure. Bagge’s “kingdoms” appear more “state-like” than Tilly’s “states” but co-existed with many other political entities.

Rather than fruitlessly searching for a definition useful for 1200 and 1800, we should ask if Bagge’s approach helps us understand changes over that time. His focus on dynastic legitimation is illuminating. Kingdoms had higher status than other political units. The effective making of dynastic claims were crucial for the construction of alliances and the merging of kingdoms, while failure to assert such claims had disastrous consequences. Huge efforts went into constructing genealogies, policing dynastic marriages and births, as well as challenging these. The Catholic Church played a vital role enforcing monogamy on European rulers, and providing the requisite ritual, ceremonies, symbols and personnel to legitimate succession.

War mattered but had to be linked to legitimation, something often made explicit in the very names of wars. Without legitimation war usually failed, and with it was often unnecessary for state formation. Most impressive is the Habsburg achievement. The dynasty’s apt motto was “let others wage war: thou, happy Austria, marry”. Aristocratic legitimation accompanied

monarchical legitimation; noble genealogies paralleled royal ones. Bagge argues this enabled stable elite structures, vividly expressed by Louis XIV and his palace at Versailles. This leaves the problem of explaining the incorporation of non-noble elites into late medieval and early modern monarchies.

Tilly in *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* distinguished between how economic and military elites wielded power. Michael Mann in *The Sources of Social Power* differentiated between military, economic, political, and ideological power. Bagge does not proceed in such analytical fashion, instead making mainly descriptive points. He starts with “feudalism”, which highlights coercive-military power, followed by the three orders (those who work, fight, and pray), which adds economic and cultural power. However, counting lawyers, merchants, manufacturers, and bankers – all vital to state formation – amongst those who work add Tilly’s “capital” and Mann’s political power to the mix. This additive procedure explains little.

It also neglects key institutional and financial props. Bagge describes how Roman law promotes monarchical power, but not the marginalisation of local coercive power. State finance is treated sketchily; a list of the various taxes monarchs could raise but nothing on the elaborate banking system assembled by city-states such as Venice, Genoa, and Florence which were crucial to waging war and forming dynastic alliances.

There is little on the construction of a professional state apparatus, dealt with in a short section (pp. 75–79), half of which considers the English example. Yet Eng-

land is a-typical: a conquest state which suppressed significant regional institutions and was continually plagued by legitimisation conflicts from Stephen and Matilda to the Stuart pretenders.

In chapter 3 Bagge draws on Spruyt's "co-ordination" thesis to argue that neither the Catholic Church nor city-states could challenge monarchical power which was territorially focused. It would help to show how instead they helped monarchical coordination by providing resources, networks, and expertise.

The second three chapters are weaker. Chapter 4 is less about state formation than its post-1500 context: Reformation; global expansion; science. The narratives are elementary and connections to state formation are hardly explored. How far did the Reformation and Counter-Reformation "confessionalise" European monarchies and subordinate churches to their power? One could add many such questions.

Narratives explain little. One can always find stories with similar beginnings but different ends. Bagge describes how military defeats for the Danish monarchy led to a crisis which ended with the aristocratic estate agreeing "absolute" powers for the king. However, in another story military defeat for the "absolute" Charles I of England led to confrontation with Parliament, civil war, and regicide.

This highlights the problem of the absolute-constitutional monarchy distinction. Much hangs on contingency which seems ever reversible. Is there a coherent descriptive distinction? What about conceptual distinctions? Bagge does not explore arguments such as the eastern and western typologies of Perry Anderson in *Lineages*

*of the Absolute State*, or the distinction between "despotic" and "infra-structural" power made by Mann. Instead, he offers thumbnail case studies, moving from west to east. How one can generalise from these is unclear.

These chapters are wide-ranging, erudite, with many references to historiographical debates such as the Pomeranz thesis about a late economic divergence between China and Europe, or Hoffmann's argument about how the concept of the "tournament" can explain European military innovation. However, the whole is less than the sum of its parts, and many of the parts are purely descriptive.

I extend such criticism to the last chapter. It starts with a wonderful quote from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* on how "affections" have become wider and shallower compared to an earlier "aristocratic" age when they were intensely and narrowly focused on genealogy. This invites one to explore Max Weber's arguments about how modernity undermines dynastic legitimation and leads on to other kinds of legitimation. Instead, we get brief narratives of political thinkers, science and secularisation, printing, and "public opinion", followed by sketchy state histories. The elementary narratives cannot carry the conceptual and explanatory burden required of an historical analysis of state formation and its links to forms of legitimation.