Democracy First or State First? A Historical Perspective on the Sequencing Debate

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Abstract:
The so-called “sequencing debate” has pitted those favouring a ‘democracy first’ against those favouring a ‘state first’ perspective. However, both camps agree that the historical frame of reference for the debate – the original European sequence – was one where state-building preceded democratization by centuries. In this paper, I argue that this is a misrepresentation of the Western sequence. Strong representative institutions and other ‘intermediary institutions’ existed and were an integrated part of the political regime form when large-scale state-building began following the 16th century military revolution. European state-builders were therefore checked by countervailing political power but were also able to channel authority through existing institutions when building modern bureaucracies and modern political institutions. It was on this basis that both the modern state and modern democracy emerged and took root in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This point is empirically illustrated by contrasting Western and Central Europe with the one major European country which never knew representative institutions: Russia. On this basis, I argue that if anything can be inferred from the European sequence, it is that power needs to be checked by and channelled through intermediary institutions to create effective state institutions and pave the way for genuine democratization.
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Introduction

In the century following the French Revolution, a massive democratization process transformed Western Europe and the British Settler colonies into ‘liberal democracies’ combining equal and universal suffrage, the parliamentary principle\(^1\), and the rule of law. It is today widely recognized that this democratization process owed a lot to previous developments in medieval and early modern Europe (Hintze, 1975[1931]; Poggi, 1978; Jones, 2008[1981]; Hall, 1985; Acemoglu et al., 2008; Fukuyama, 2011; Møller, 2015). More particularly, it has been pointed out that the Western sequence was one where state-building and liberal constitutionalism preceded electoral democratization by centuries (Marshall, 1949; Plattner, 1999; O’Donnell, 2007; Fukuyama, 2011).

This Western itinerary to liberal democracy has been the backdrop of the so-called “sequencing debate” (Carothers, 2007). A number of scholars have used the descriptive consensus about the Western pathway to make a prescriptive point: that state-building and liberal constitutionalism \textit{should} precede electoral democratization if democracy is to be stable and/or to facilitate democratic deepening (Zakaria, 2003; Fukuyama, 2005, 2007; Mansfield & Snyder, 1995, 2005, 2007). These arguments owe a lot to Samuel P. Huntington’s (1968; see Fukuyama, 2010) observation that strong political institutions are needed to channel the societal demands unleashed by political mobilization. More particular arguments include Shefter’s (1994) observation that politicians are able to capture bureaucratic institutions if the creation of a mass electorate precedes the establishment of a Weberian bureaucracy, and Mansfield & Snyder’s (1995, 2005) repeated

\(^{1}\) Either in the form of parliamentarism as such or via the direct or indirect popular election of a president, who then has the power to designate the government.
warnings that democratization in the absence of strong state institutions are conducive to violence (see Møller & Skaaning, 2013a: 177-180). On this basis, admonitions about “premature democratization” (Zakaria, 2003: 55-58; Fukuyama, 2005: 88) or “out-of-sequence” transitions (Mansfield & Snyder, 2007: 1) have been voiced.

These prescriptions, in turn, have attracted eager criticism. First and foremost, it has been pointed out that the Western itinerary plainly cannot be repeated today. More than fifty years ago, Gunnar Myrdal (1968: 127) pointed out that “the tide of history cannot be rolled back to enable the new states of the region to experience the political evolution of the Western countries.” According to a number of scholars, this point applies a fortiori in today’s international and ideological context, where the “liberal hegemony” (Levitsky & Way, 2002) inaugurated by the fall of communism means that all countries face a certain pressure to democratize and that citizens are not ready to wait with democracy (Plattner, 1999; Møller & Skaaning, 2013b). Finally, it has been pointed out that autocrats in any case have weak incentives for building strong state institutions and rules that constrain their exercise of power whereas there is no inherent tension between democratization and state-building (Carothers, 2007; Munck & Mazzacca, forthcoming).

A striking feature of the sequencing debate is that none of those critical of the “state first” perspective have disputed the description of the original Western itinerary. Tellingly, in their assertive defense of a “democracy first”-sequence, Munck & Mazzacca (forthcoming: 2) concede that in Europe “the emergence of political rights was clearly a byproduct of state formation and, in particular, a ramification of taxation” (see also Plattner, 1999).

What I will argue in what follows is that the current consensus is based on, or constitutes, a misrepresentation of European history. In Europe, representative institutions and what Finer (1997a) terms “intermediary institutions” – that is, corporate institutions of medieval origins such as structures of urban self-government, guilds, and courts of law – preceded both universal
citizenship rights and the establishment of bureaucratic institutions by centuries. These institutions – and the strong corporate groups represented in them – provided an important set of checks on all secular rulers of Western and Central Europe when large scale state-building began following the sixteenth century military revolution (Parker, 1996 [1988]; Downing, 1992). To be sure, this state-building process hugely weakened the representative institutions in much of Continental Europe. But even in these cases, state-builders had to compensate the corporate groups that had been represented in medieval parliaments and diets. Part and parcel of this process was that most other intermediary institutions survived and where sometimes even fortified.

In the absence of this legacy, it is difficult to see how the constitutionalism that set Europe apart from the rest of the world at the outset of the first wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991) might have arisen. Furthermore, these intermediary links between organized groups and rulers made it possible for state-builders to channel power via an existing institutional infrastructure. This eased the establishment of bureaucratic institutions and institutions of self-government on especially the local level. In other words, the main claim of this paper is that both the character of modern European state-building and modern European regime change should be traced back to medieval institutions of constraints. By ignoring this, scholars have tended to establish a false causal link between the twin European processes of state-building and democratization, a relationship which is arguably spurious.

More particularly, the parties to the sequencing debate have ignored that the intermediary institutions make up the kind of strong political institutions that according to Huntington (1968) are needed to channel the societal demands unleashed by political mobilization. Seen from this vantage point, the crucial difference between the European context and that which characterizes most autocracies today is that the European state-builders were checked by countervailing power, including political institutions of constraints and strong societal groups. On
this basis, I argue that if any lessons about sequencing are to be gleaned from the European past – in itself a big ‘if’ – it is that state-builders need to be held accountable by checks on executive power.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I revisit the European process of state formation and regime change from the Middle Ages onwards. Second, I contrast this process to that which occurred in its most relevant “Other”, namely Muscovite and Imperial Russia. Third, I discuss the more general – or analytical – conclusions that can be drawn from these contrasting processes of “modernization”. The final section concludes.

**Sketching the European experience: the first phase**

There is broad agreement that the most important impulse behind the European state-building experience is sustained geopolitical competition (Hintze, 1975 [1902]; 1975 [1931]; Schumpeter, 1991 [1917/1918]; Tilly, 1975; 1991; Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Finer, 1997a; Møller, 2015). Using Otto Hintze’s formulation, the European states emerged in an anarchical context of *Schieben und Drängen* (push and pull), which was what impelled them to create political and bureaucratic institutions that could provide the wherewithal for warfare and muster larger armies.

However, we find such sustained geopolitical competition in multistate systems with independent units elsewhere, most prominently in ancient China (Hui, 2004; 2005; see also Watson, 1992; Kaufmann et al., 2007). Indeed, geopolitical pressure has historically been almost ubiquitous (Bradford, 2001; Bobbit, 2002; McNeill, 1982). What is particular to the development in Western and Central Europe is another factor that has often been glossed over: “a competitive social environment where powerful social groups could balance off rulers’ power” (Tuong Vu, 2010: 159; see also Hall, 1985; Tilly, 1985; Møller, 2015). More particularly, where medieval Western and

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² ‘Modernization’ here denotes the *longue durée* process of structural differentiation captured by a series of classic sociologist, a development that is much broader than the currently dominant emphasis on the socio-economic level of development (see Møller & Skaaning, 2013a: Chapter 8).
Central Europe differs from e.g. ancient China and Muscovite/Imperial Russia is in the existence of a multiplicity of privileged estate groups (Hui, 2005: 202-203; Møller, 2015). The three most important such groups were the clergy, the nobility, and the free towns but in some areas the free peasantry made up a fourth important group. The clergy’s independence was institutionalized following the so-called Gregorian reforms in the second half of the 11th century (Southern, 1970; Fukuyama, 2011), the nobility’s independence goes at least as far back, and owes a lot to its crucial role in medieval military organization (Bloch, 1971 [1939]; Blaydes & Chaney, 2013), and the majority of the autonomous cities emerged before 1200 AD, to be followed before 1300 AD by virtually all those that were to achieve this status (Spruyt, 1994; Stasavage, 2013: 17).

As geopolitical competition first intensified3 around 1200 AD (Hintze, 1975 [1931]: 346; Myers, 1975: 56; Ertman, 1997: 25-28; Maddicott 2010: 106-107), these privileged estate groups were present at creation. Indeed, it was the combination of sustained geopolitical pressure and strong and potent societal groups which produced representative institutions and further institutionalized the privileges of the estate groups, e.g., by formalizing already existing models of self-government via charters of liberties (see Møller, 2015).

The mechanism is to be found in bargaining over the resources needed to survive in the context of generalized geopolitical competition (Tilly, 1991). To bring about the wherewithal for warfare, ruler had to negotiate with the strong societal groups described above: representative institutions provided a forum for doing so and the notion of representation in itself provided a way of committing the estate groups on the agreed initiatives (Schumpeter, 1991 [1917/1918]). The most important role of these institutions was to deliver consent to taxation but often the assemblies also

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3 In Europe we obviously also find warfare before 1200 AD. But as Stasavage (2011: 9) points out, it was only with the economic expansion between 100 and 1300 AD that this pressure could produce secular change pertaining to state formation and regime change.
collected the taxes they had voted.\textsuperscript{4} Sometimes they even audited the spending of these taxes, and occasionally they had further competences such as a veto over lawmaking, over the declaration of war, and the right to settle succession at the death of a monarch (see Myers, 1975; Stasavage, 2010). Finally, most (though not all) of these assemblies evolved from institutions the rulers could summon at his pleasure into institutions which would be convened at regular intervals, often once a year (see Stasavage, 2010).

Tellingly, representative institutions first emerged toward the end of the twelfth century and in the early thirteenth century in the areas were geopolitical pressure kicked in the earliest, namely the Iberian peninsula where the \textit{Reconquista} raged, then in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries they appeared in the core parts of Western Europe as a consequence of sustained warfare between e.g. England and France, and finally they made a late entry in Central Europe (Poland and Hungary) and Scandinavia, were geopolitical pressure did not become intense until after 1450 (Myers, 1975: 24; Ertman, 1997). Around 1500, representative institutions were an integrated, and important, part of the political regime all over Latin Christendom, with the exception of the Italian city-states that had functional equivalents in the forms of direct republication government (Myers, 1975: 93-95; see also Hintze, 1975 [1931]: 347).\textsuperscript{5} Besides being ubiquitous they were also unique to this area (Hintze, 1962 [1930]; Myers, 1975; Poggi, 1978).

Parallel to this process of first convening and then institutionalizing representative assemblies we can discern another important development. Besides political representation, the estate groups represented in these assemblies also had other privileges enshrined and often expanded. For instance, the clergy and nobility were often exempted from taxation while the free

\textsuperscript{4} In other words, though part and parcel of the political regime, the representative institutions also carried out functions of the state, in the absence of a genuine state apparatus controlled by the executive (the secular rulers).

\textsuperscript{5} It is telling – but also close to conceptual stretching – that Stasavage (2010) simply include the governing bodies in the city-states in his dataset on medieval representative institutions.
cities received charters that stipulated their judicial and commercial autonomy and that habitually recognized their right to keep their own army (Stasavage, 2013). The institutional residue of this process was the creation and/or official sanctioning – via collective charters of liberties – of corporatist ‘intermediary institutions’ (Finer, 1997a). Sabetti (2004: 74) includes the following such institutions on his list of the “multiconstitutional” world of the Middle Ages:

- fraternities and guilds (the oldest, most cohesive, and most universal form of local self-organized venture)
- community of the parish
- villages (villa or, as in England, communitates villarum), walled settlements (castra), and rural neighborhoods (vicini or vicinia)
- common property, for example, collective organization and the use of nonarable land, water streams, and local churches
- royal towns
- baronial jurisdictions (or manorial systems) as economic and political enterprises.

As the list shows, corporate rights often belonged to localities such as monasteries, parishes, and towns. More importantly, they pervaded medieval society in Western and Central Europe:

By the thirteenth century, the principle of ius proprium or iura propria – namely, the practice of (male) self-organization and self-governance, including relations based on contractual relations – extended to almost all forms of known collective activity and undertaking throughout Western Europe (Sabetti, 2004: 74).
Even peasants had some protecting from their lords, based on custom and law (Downing, 1992: 26). It was against the backdrop of this multi-constitutional world that the modern European state-building experience occurred.

**Sketching the European experience: the second phase**

Whereas differences of opinion exist with respect to when the onset of geopolitical competition should be dated, it is relatively uncontroversial to claim that it intensified in the period from 1550-1650. This period – what is normally termed the 16th century military revolution – was characterized by a huge increase in the scale of warfare, including the size of armies and the sophistication of weaponry, siege tactics, supply systems, drills, and deployment strategies (Parker, 1996 [1988]). This ‘second military revolution’ sparked a massive process of state-building. The rudimentary medieval bureaucracies – normally staffed by clerics – were replaced by bureaucracies staffed with candidates from the now ubiquitous universities, the state took over many of the functions representative institutions had carried out, such as the collections of taxes, local government was strengthened, and the military arm of government received a boost (Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997).

A common observation in the literature on European state-building is that, as it were, the representative institutions described above had little independent effect on the subsequent state-building and regime change (e.g. Hui, 2005). Indeed, in most of Continental Europe, they were swept away following the 16th century military revolution. In countries such as Prussia, France, Denmark, and Spain state-builders increasingly bypassed the assemblies, e.g. by taxing without consent and by instituting standing armies. As a consequence, ‘medieval constitutionalism’ was replaced by early modern absolutism (Downing, 1992).

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6 For the distinction between states and regimes – and therefore state-building and regime change – see Ertman (1997) and Mazzuca (2010).
Of course, in some states constitutionalism survived. Most important are Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, and Poland. But the variation between constitutionalism and absolutism provides little leverage for accounting for the patterns of state formation. Based on Weber’s classical distinction, it has been convincingly documented that we find instances of both patrimonialism and bureaucracy among both the absolutist and the constitutionalist regimes (cf. Ertman, 1997). To elaborate, whereas Great Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden came to be characterized by ‘Weberian’ institutions of bureaucracy, Poland and Hungary instead exhibited patrimonial administrations. Likewise, whereas France and Spain were characterized by patrimonial administrations, Denmark and Prussia came to conform to the Weberian model (Ertman, 1997).

Some progress has been achieved in accounting for both the variation in state infrastructures and in regime change: Scholars have highlighted factors such as the initial strength of the representative institutions, the timing of geopolitical competition, the geographical barriers of representation, and the ease (difficulty) with which economic resources could be mobilized by state-builders (Tilly, 1985; Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Stasavage, 2010).

However, most of these comparative frameworks have tended to miss the bigger picture in the sense that they have only compared cases within Latin or Western Christendom. What is ignored here is that the regimes of Western and Central Europe were more constitutionalist and their administrations more ‘Weberian’ than what we find outside of this scope. In other words, delimiting the focus to Latin Christendom, we fail to notice the unique features of the European experience. What a comparison with cases outside of this scope reveals is, for instance, that the European state-builders were to a larger extent than what we find elsewhere checked by quasi-

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7 Both Downing (1992) and Ertman (1997: 4) explicitly or implicitly uses a set of broader set of comparisons to establish their scope conditions and thus hold a number of relevant explanatory factors constant. However, the variation that they seek to account for in their actual analyses is solely that found within the area where representative institutions were ubiquitous around 1500, i.e., Western and Central Europe or Latin Christendom.
independent social groups and political institutions, even under absolutism (Finer 1997b:1298-1303-7, 1455).

The new literature on the colonial origins of comparative development has at least implicitly integrated this observation. Acemoglu et al. (2001; 2002a; 2008) and Robinson (2006) argue that the colonial transplantation of medieval institutions of constraints explain both patterns of modern economic growth and modern democratization and Hariri (2012) shows that an autocratic legacy has produced lower democracy-levels in those countries that were able to keep the Europeans – and hence the European institutions – at bay. Now, neither Acemoglu et al. nor Hariri make any distinction between European colonizers, irrespective of whether representative institutions survived or were replaced by early modern absolutism. France and Spain, where representative institutions were swept away and patrimonialism characterized the state apparatuses, were thus as capable of exporting propitious institutions as were Great Britain and The Netherlands, where representative institutions gained the upper hand and bureaucratic models of administration prevailed (but see Acemoglu et al., 2002b). The very premise for the Acemoglu et al. research agenda is that all (Western\(^8\)) European colonizers, even after the 16\(^{th}\) century military revolution, were characterized by political institutions which constrained the exercise of arbitrary power of state-builders, thereby securing e.g. private property rights.

Zooming further in on regime change and state-building, two points are especially important. First, it is well known that many early modern European state-builders struggled with the corporatist ‘intermediary institutions’ that were often locales of opposition to reform:

If the monarchy eventually gained in power, after many set-backs, as in France, Spain or Austria, the Crown harnessed the estates to its service, but at the price of

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\(^8\) The only major European colonizer which could not transplant ‘institutions of constraints’ is Russia, for the simple reason that – anticipating the second part of this paper – it never knew such institutions.
confirming and respecting many of their privileges, such as the exemption of nobles from taxation, the special position of churchmen in society, and important rights of urban oligarchs over the trade of their town or region (Myers 1975:22-23).

However, state-builders could also use these institutions to channel power. Structures of urban self-government thus became a model for the construction of local government, and eased an effective decentralization of state power. And the ultimate corporatist institution – the medieval universities – was the very source of the skilled administrators which according to Ertman (1997) made it possible for state-builders to create bureaucratic structures after circa 1450. Furthermore, because the corporatist structures were so strong, state-building tended to occur via negotiation between the rulers and the corporatist social groups, as emphasized in the quote above. In some countries, the result was initially the production of relatively patrimonial structures as taxes were farmed and offices sold (Ertman, 1997). But the negotiations tended to strengthen decentralization based on local institutions and over time, a certain convergence, centred on the model of modern bureaucracies, can be discerned. The result of this was that most of Western and Central Europe, on the eve of the modern democratizations in the 19th and 20th centuries were characterized by relatively bureaucratic states, including relatively strong and vibrant structures of local government; at least in comparison with what we find outside of this area and the Western settler colonies.

Second, even where representative institutions were swept away by the state-building following the 16th century military revolution, other constraints on the exercise of power remained. It was against this backdrop that the representative institutions were resuscitated during the first wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991). Otto Hintze (1975 [1931]: 347-348) goes so far as to argue that the absolutism that swept away constitutionalism over much of Latin Christendom following the military revolution, was in fact “only a transitional state…[a]s soon as we this
development dictated by political necessity had been completed, we find a revival of the representative principle…in the new form of a constitutional system”. The automaticity of Hintze’s description is of course exaggerated. But the strong social groups, anchored in the medieval constitutional world, provided ongoing checks on state-builders and helped foster what was to become the European civil society (Gellner, 1994). These institutions and the presence of these organized social groups have been proclaimed as crucial in the bringing about of modern democracy (Robinson, 2006; Acemoglu et al., 2008). Meanwhile, the prior existence of representative institutions and the survival of other intermediary institutions meant that blueprints for parliaments existed, once the pressure to democratize build up steam in the 19th century (Dahl, 1989: 215).

Returning to the sequencing debate, the main point I am arguing here is this: That the same thing is needed to create strong and capable states and democracy and the rule of law. Strong, impersonal institutions which work to channel authority and strong social groups which can guard the guardians are key. This is exactly what the ‘intermediary institutions’ and corporate groups brought about in Western and Central Europe. The basis for both strong local government and civil society therefore emerged out of the medieval multi-constitutional world. This is illustrated on the left hand side of Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

**Same, same, but different**

The best way to analyse the postulated effects of the medieval legacy for state-building and regime change is by combining a controlled comparison (Sartori, 1991) with an in-depth case-study (George & Bennett, 2005). The most relevant such comparison is between Western and Central
Europe, as described above, and Muscovite and later Imperial Russia, which is also the case I will analyze in-depth. This formulate makes it possible to identify the crucial factors of the European development and to trace the consequences of their absence.

In the words of Hosking (2001: xi), “[f]or most Europeans and North Americans, Russia is the great Other…the culture in whose mirror we better appreciate our own”. More particularly, Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries became an integrated part of the European multistate system but it contained a very different antecedent legacy.9 As we shall see below, Russia never knew potent estate groups and no representative institutions existed before large-scale state-building was commenced following geopolitical pressure. Nonetheless, the Russian state-builders were directly affected by the very same geopolitical pressure that obtained in the rest of Europe – and they were very keen to borrow military and administrative technologies from the rest of Europe. To quote Hosking (2001: 156-157):

In no other empire of modern Europe was the assimilation of a foreign culture as complete, not even in the Ottoman Empire, which in the nineteenth century underwent European-inspired reforms as radical as those introduced by Peter in Russia...Perhaps this wholesale borrowing from the west can be explained best by the fact that Russia did share with Europe a Christian tradition, albeit one with very distinctive characteristics...Being a member of the European diplomatic network also socialized Russia’s elites in the same direction.

9 The literature teems with one-liners aptly capturing this. Finer (1997b: 1405) observes that Russia was “in Europe but not part of it” and Downing (1992: 38) points out that while Russia lies in Europe “its political history has little in common with that of the West”.
One simple example of this wholesale borrowing is that Peter the Great’s reform of central government was directly modelled on that of Sweden (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 218). Likewise, his 1716 Military Statute was partly copied from Sweden and his College of War was even long known as the krigs-kollegiia (after the Swedish Krigskollegium) (Hughes, 1998: 76, 80). Had Russia had similar preconditions for state-building and regime change as those obtaining in Western and Central Europe, we would thus expect a convergence on the European model of state-building and regime change described above. Insofar as Figure 1’s emphasis on state-society relations before the advent of geopolitical pressure is relevant, the Russian development serves to place the European in relief.

Social groups and their political position

It is an often made observation that Muscovite Russia contained no strong societal groups (Hintze 1975 [1931], 341; Downing, 1992: 38-43). It is more correct to say that Medieval Muscovy was characterized by a very simple pattern of social stratification. The landowners were strong, ecclesiastical landholding was relatively important, the middle class was weak or virtually non-existent, and the large mass of population were downtrodden peasants (Riasanovsky, 1969: 129-31). Hosking (2001) repeatedly refers to this as a situation of undeveloped social differentiation.

The most important social group was the high nobility, the so-called Boyars. Traditionally the Boyars were quite strong vis-à-vis the rulers (first Grand Princes, later Tsars), and they were one of the few checks on his exercise of power (Riasanovsky, 1969: 163-164). As described in the subsequent section, the Boyars partook in the rule together with the Grand Princes, who also relied on them militarily. However, when we compare the Boyar class with the nobility of Western and Central Europe, we find some stark differences. Though the Boyars were often able to balance the Grand Princes, they did so as members of clans or families, not as a corporate group
(Finer, 1997b: 1411). It was therefore not laws and institutions that empowered the high nobility politically but simply closeness and personal ties to the ruler (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 167). The Boyars “lacked any formal, corporate, or legal means of checking him, unlike their Western counterparts” (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 105-106).

The clergy made up a second important social group – indeed, the only other important social group in Muscovite Russia. But it, too, did not have much of an independent institutional foundation of its power. The Russian relationship between church and state was based on the Byzantine tradition. Church and State was therefore supposed to be in symphony – or at least in harmony – and there was no crisp distinction between the secular and the religious sphere (Ostrowski, 2006: 224-225). Not only did this give the rulers a quasi-sacredotl splendor which we do not find in Latin Christendom after the Gregorian Revolution in the 11th century, it also meant that the Church’s capacity to restraint rulers therefore depended upon personalities, in particular the personality of the head of the Church, from 1589 the Patriarch of Moscow (Finer, 1997b: 1411). The most assertive Patriarch was probably Nikon, who held the office from 1652. Nikon pronounced that the Church was superior to the secular ruler, and even attempted to act on the basis of such preeminence. But, tellingly, Nikon was deposed by a Church Council in 1666-7 (Riasanovskv, 1969: 200).

Besides these two groups, both of which lacked the corporate rights of the Western European nobility and clergy, Russian society was comprised overwhelmingly by peasants. There were two important categories: the freer state peasant and the more effectively bonded serfs of noble landowners. This poorly developed social differentiation was still valid at the time of Peter the Great. Even at this late point in time, the merchant class was virtually nonexistent and the

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10 In 1670, where Russia had at least 10 million inhabitants, the entire male urban population has been estimated at 185,000. Furthermore, we hardly find any representatives of the professional classes of Western cities (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 175-76)
nobility did not have the corporate rights we know from Western Europe (Taylor, 2003: 40). With respect to the ability of societal groups to constrain the rulers, Russia thus differed in conspicuous ways from Western and Central Europe:

the boyars and the Church hierarchy posed no such restraints on Ivan IV as the landed nobility and the Catholic Church did in the West, and there were no towns, guilds, and corporations to cope with either (Finer 1997b: 1411).

The early regime form

Above it was observed that the Boyars traditionally wielded much power in Muscovite Russia. The Muscovite rulers depended on the Boyars militarily and with respect to institutional consultation (Ostrowski, 2006: 217). The more specific political manifestation of this was that the Boyars – via the so-called Boyar Duma – participated in ruling the realm. In the 17th century, the Duma contained between 28 and 153 members, with membership largely being hereditary (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 175). In Muscovite Russia, it was continually in session and the proclamation of state policies was based on the formula: “the Grand Prince decreed with the boyars” (Ostrowski, 2006: 224-225). It has been pointed out that the Duma almost qualifies as a court of law, and on top of that it helped the rulers legislate (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 105). Hence the observation that “[i]n domestic terms, the grand prince of Muscovy ruled with sharply circumscribed powers” (Ostrowski, 2006: 215)

The Muscovite rulers nonetheless claimed to be absolute and it is important to understand that the Boyar Duma participated in rule in practice, but not a parliament with its own specific prerogatives. Indeed, the Boyar Duma was manifestly an advisory body. It was not alone in advising the tsars. In 1549, Ivan the Terrible convened what came to be known as the Zemskii Sobor, a gathering of the land where the monarch met with especially the boyar nobility and the
Orthodox clergy but occasionally also freemen more generally. Just as the Boyar Duma, the Zemskii Sobor does not constitute an instance of the representative institutions that arose in medieval Europe (Myers, 1975: 34-37; Downing, 1992: 38-43). Most importantly, membership of the Sobor was not based on representation and the assembly had no institutionalized position in ruleship. Ivan’s Zemskii Sobor was made up of “servitors of the tsar rather than delegates of constituencies” (Bogatyrev, 2006: 251). Nonetheless, especially in the first decade of Romanov rule, the Zemskii Sobor can be said to have participated in the government of Russia (Riasanovsky, 1969: 193). At different times we find it advising on foreign policy, levying taxes, and approving laws (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 131).

To sum up, both the Grand Princes and the tsars were formally autocratic but in practice restrained by especially the higher nobility but also sometimes the Church. This partly occurred through the Boyar Duma and the Zemskii Sobor. But just as the Russian nobility and clergy was not equivalent to the corporate groups of Western and Central Europe, so neither institution make up an equivalent to the representative institutions we find to the West. In other words, the duality of the medieval European regime form, where estates and rulers made up two different institutional poles of the regime, each with its specific prerogatives (see Hintze, 1962[1930]; Poggi, 1978), never characterized Muscovite Russia. The Boyars ruled with the Grand Prince but not besides him in the sense of retaining political rights independent of the Crown or of having a corporate identify.

The onset of geopolitical pressure

For centuries after the Mongol invasions in the 1230s, Russia was isolated from the warfare of Western and Central Europe. It was the military revolution between 1550 and 1660 that brought Russia out of its isolation. Russia was embroiled in a double geopolitical pressure by the 1550s:
against the tartar khanates in the Southeast and against Poland and Sweden in the Northwest. This impelled Ivan the Terrible to expand the army and invite foreign expertise (Riasanovsky, 1969: 161-163). More generally, the 17th century saw a huge expansion in the Russian use of foreign mercenaries and Western European military tactics (Parker, 1996[1988]: 38).

However, most scholars agree that it was Peter the Great’s humiliating defeat against the Swedes at Narva in 1700 that triggered intense state-building and military buildup (Riasanovsky, 1969: 245; Finer, 1997b: 1413; Hosking, 2001: 185). There is a very broad consensus in the literature that Peter’s reforms were elicited by war (Taylor, 2003: 29; Finer, 1997b: 1413). The need to counter the Sweden – The Hammer of the North (Anderson, 1974) – necessitated a virtual transformation of the Russian state and the Russian army after Narva had exposed Russian military weakness. The two most important reforms were the introduction of general conscription and the introduction of a direct head tax on all peasants and townspeople (Riasanovsky, 1969: 252-259; Taylor, 2003: 29).

**Entrenchment of autocracy**

Posterity knows Peter the Great as a Westernizer. This is true in many senses but it is blatantly wrong politically. As has often been pointed out, Peter’s main method of reforming was the standard method of Russian rulers: coercion (Taylor, 2003: 40). His was state-building from above, based on autocracy (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 221). This was possible because Peter faced very few political constraints on his exercise of power. The traditional constraints on the power of Muscovite Grand Princes and later Tsars were removed by Peter. He had no use for an independent Church, the Boyar Duma, or convening Zemskii Sobors, and by ignoring these institutions he largely escaped the traditional hindrances to absolute power in Muscovy (Riasanovsky, 1969: 254-255;
Finer (1997b: 1414-1416). Indeed, Peter was “probably the least constrained of European rulers” (Taylor, 2003: 40).

The nobility Peter brought under his thump via his establishment of a new Table of Ranks. This made rank – especially military rank – much more meritocratic and much less dependent upon noble status (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 215-217). Indeed, any commoner obtaining a particular military automatically gained membership of the nobility. Peter’s reform therefore transformed the Russian nobility into the service nobility described by Anderson (1974) as characteristic of Eastern European absolutism. To quote Finer (1997b: 1415):

The landholders were now thoroughly subjected to the wishes of the Crown and such restraints as they had ever been able to impose on the tsars from Ivan IV up to Peter’s time had entirely disappeared.

Peter made similarly made short shrift with the Church – or at least its ability to restrain him politically. When Patriarch Adrian did in 1700, Peter did not appoint a successor. And in 1721 he went so far as to abolish the office itself and replaced it with a ‘Holy Synod’. The Synod was staffed by clergy but it was overseen by a secular official, normally an officer. This new arrangement gave Peter – and subsequent Emperors – a virtual control of Church possessions, Church organization, and Church policies (Riasanovsky, 1969: 257). The Church, which had never been independent in the sense that the Catholic Church was independent, thereby became completely subordinated by the state (Finer, 1997b: 1416; Hosking, 2001: 198-199).

In sum, Peter intensified the already existing autocratic regime form. But he was able to do it from a different starting point than that obtaining in Western and Central Europe and his ability to remove restraints was much bigger than that characterizing Western European cases of
absolutism (Hosking, 1997: 78-92). “Petrine absolutism was emphatically not European absolutism” (Finer, 1997b: 1419). The cultural residue of this process was that a certain religious embellishment of autocracy was produced. To quote Hosking (2001: 201):

In the West the concept of monarchical absolutism had arisen out of the struggle with the papacy and out of the need to overcome the immunities of ancient privileged institutions. Transferred to Russia, where papacy was not an issue and there were no such institutions, absolutism took on a completely different coloring and implied a sacralization of the monarchy itself.

State-building

The geopolitical pressure which manifested itself in the 17th century but intensified during Peter’s reign paved the way for the rise of a “fiscal-military state”. This created the need for an “increasingly elaborate and differentiated bureaucracy” (Hosking, 2001: 155). We have already described some of the reforms this entailed. Peter introduced universal conscription, a direct poll-tax on peasants and townspeople, issued internal passports, had censuses carried out, and introduced the meritocratic Table of Ranks (Hosking 2001, 196-219). Also, he completely reorganized central government along lines inspired by Western European states in general and Sweden in particular.

These reforms were obviously successful in military terms. Not only did they allow Peter to stave off the challenge from perhaps the most formidable army in Europe at the time, that of Sweden under Charles XII; in the 18th century the Russian army was, generally speaking, second to none in Europe (Hosking, 2001: 190). With regard to the organization of central government, Peter also made some progress based on his top-down approach, though as I argue below he did not
succeed in transforming the state along European lines. In the shorter term Peter’s greatest headache was finding a framework for provincial government (Evtuhov et al., 2004: 217).

Peter’s inclination was to reform local government based on Northern European blueprints, just as he had the military. But his attempts repeatedly failed, mainly for two reasons: the lack of a pool of skilled officials and the lack of local initiative (Riasanovsky, 1969: 256). These problems were not new. A conspicuous trait of Russian history of government is the lack of strong local self-government. There is some evidence of local self-government in early Muscovy but in the 17th century any such structures were replaced by military government as a response to the onset of geopolitical pressure. The problem with augmenting local government was the weak social stratification, which we have already described (Riasanovsky, 1969: 212-213). This meant that no strong groups and no strong institutions were available as building material which state-builders could use to create and staff new structures. As Hosking (2001: 215-216) describes, the absence of estate group and intermediary institutions meant that there was simply no “transmissions belt for government authority” (see also Hosking, 1997).

In this situation, state-building from above had to rest on patron-client relations. More particularly, as I will further document below, Peter and his successors had to rely on noble landowners rather than the professional strata that dominated urban and local government in Western Europe (Hosking, 2001: 219). Hence the more general predicament for Russian state-builders, which affected their attempt to transform central and local government alike: a bottom-up strategy was foreclosed by the weakness of societal groups or civil society. Hosking (2001: 292) formulates this as the “old Russian paradox: that a reforming autocrat needs autocracy more than ever”.

The general pattern of Russian state-building – both before and after Peter the Great and with respect to both central and local government – was therefore that reforms were carried out
via intensified coercion and in a way that strengthened existing patron-client networks rather than created new institutions (Hosking, 2001: 176).\textsuperscript{11} This is very obvious in the way that Russian landowner were invested with power by the state but it was also a latent aspect of central government. For instance, it was these arrangements that allowed Tsar Nicholas I to regularly evade the formal channels of the state and conduct state affairs through secret committees of people who were appointed due to their relationship with the tsar. This use of \emph{ad hoc} committees represented a “major means of conducting a personal policy which bypassed the regular state channels” (Riasanovsky, 1969: 360-361)

Though rule in this situation of institutional void was by definition dependent on the personal character of the tsar, it was not only under reactionary tsars such as Nicholas I that such personalism prevailed. Catherine the Great is said to have introduced the Enlightenment into Russia. But even during her watch, the Russia polity remained “as unrestrained by laws and institutions as ever” (Finer, 1997b: 1420-1423).

Not until the great period of reform in the 1860s – where serfdom was finally abolished – was any real progress made with respect to local government. In 1864, the so-called Zemstvo system, which included a modernization and partial democratization of local government, was enacted, to be followed in 1870 by a similar reform of urban government (Riasanovsky, 1969: 417). However, these reforms were first retrenched by Alexander III and then further curtailed under Nicholas II (Riasanovsky, 1969: 431-439). Even into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the sinews of the Russian state therefore remained based on patron-client relationship and personal dependence. More particularly, the Russian rulers relied on their rural agents, that is, the landed nobility (Hosking, \textsuperscript{11}That this pattern is an old one is emphasized by Hosking (2001: 135-136) when he describes how Boris Godunov’s attempts to strengthen the state around 1600 were likewise based on personal despotism rather than institutions and impersonal law, a pattern which Hosking also attributes to the absence of corporate bodies and intermediate institutions.
2001: 240). These landowner meanwhile behaved as semi-autocrats in their relationship with their own serfs, and their local empowerment by the state meant that they gained sway over entire localities.

The result of this was what Max Weber referred to as “local patrimonialism”, where landed nobles “acting through local government offices which they collectively monopolize, extend the authority which they already exercise over their own dependents to all inhabitants of a given region” (Ertman, 1997: 8). The fact that the very sinews of the Russian state were based on this local patrimonialism means that the role of the landowners need to be further elucidated to understand Russian state-building.

In political terms, Peter had castrated the nobility, including the high (Boyar) nobility. But he and his successors compensated it in several important ways. First, by making it possible for especially younger sons of nobles to make careers within the military and the state. Second, by strengthening the landowners’ hold over their peasants. These two developments are captured by P. Anderson (1974) in his description of the development of a ‘service nobility’ and the advent of the ‘second serfdom’. The third important empowerment of the nobility is that described above: that they were, based on patron-client relations, put in charge of local government.

We have already seen that this was not at all Peter’s intention. But it was to have long-term consequences. Throughout the 18th and 19th century, the tsars kept relying on the landowner as their rural agents. When Catherine the Great introduced a new system of local government in 1775 it was this premised on cooperating with the landlords – and, in turn, it strengthened them further (Riasanovsky, 1969: 290). More than a century later, Alexander III similarly used the landed gentry as his local agents. In 1889, Alexander established the so-called zemski nachalnik office. The zemski nachalnik (chief), was a land captain, who was always recruited directly from among the ranks of the landowners, and who was judicial authority for dealing with peasants – or, more
generally, in charge of managing and supervising peasant (Riasanovsky, 1969: 431-435). Even as
tsardom reached its end in the early 20th century, the old pattern of local patrimonialism still held sway.

**Relating the argument to the broader literature**

While this paper challenges both of the alternative positions of the ‘sequencing debate’ (‘state first’
and ‘democracy first’, respectively), it corresponds with a number of other insights within the
literatures on state formation and regime change. Most generally, there now exists a widespread
consensus in the literature on comparative development that the 19th and 20th centuries patterns of
democratization owe a lot to the prior existence of institutions of constraints, including most
notoriously representative institutions (e.g., Robinson, 2006; Acemoglu et al., 2008; Hariri, 2012).
What this paper has done is in a sense to bring this insight to bear on the sequencing debate. The
simple point of departure for my argument is that these prior institutions of constraints are
properties of the regime form, not of the state infrastructure. More precisely, early modern state-
building occurred against the ramifications of a multi-constitutional world. It is therefore manifestly
wrong to characterize the European development as one where state-building preceded the
development of political constraints on the executive – though it is of course correct that modern
state-building preceded modern democratization in the form of the introduction of equal and
universal suffrage.

More particularly, the argument presented in this paper is analogous to Robinson’s
(2006) and Acemoglu et al.’s (2008) notion that medieval institutions of constraints have an effect
on both economic growth and democratization. My relatively similar point is that the prior presence
of institutions of constraints shaped pattern of both early modern state-building and subsequent
democratization. In large swatches of Europe, the 16th century onset of geopolitical pressure led to a
relatively bureaucratic pattern of early modern state-building, based on impersonal institutions, and to a later democratization of already existing representative institutions or a resuscitation and democratization of representative institutions where these had been swept away by early modern state-building. In the great European Other, Russia, the absence of similar institutions of constraints meant that geopolitical pressure instead paved the way for an intensification of autocracy and a much more patrimonial pattern of state-building, based on patron-client relations rather than impersonal institutions.

Important aspects of the presented argument also correspond well with two more specific notions within the literature on political development. The first is the notion that the former regime type might ease or make more difficult the transition to democracy (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Geddes, 1999; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Svolik, 2008; Brownlee, 2009). This literature is characterized by rampant disagreements about both the extent to which the regime form matters for democratization and subsequent democratic stability and about which autocratic subtype makes up the most propitious point of departure in these two respects (compare Linz & Stepan, 1996; Hadenius & Teorell, 2007; Brownlee, 2009). But if one point of consensus can nonetheless be identified, it is this: That the most difficult point of departure are regimes without strong impersonal institutions. In other words, the more personalistic the prior ruleship, the more difficult is democratization. The argument about regime change presented above is basically of the same ilk.

Second, the proposed explanation for state-building fits well with what has been written about the auspicious effects of British colonial systems (Clague, Gleason & Knack 2001; Joireman, 2004). The key insight here is that the British colonial legacy was one centred on creating strong local institutions – as opposed the e.g. the French systems which were more centralized and where authority emanated from this centre via patron-client networks (but see Hariri, 2012). The latter pattern resembles that identified in the Russian case, and my argument about the effects is
analogous: That the subsequent building of impartial state institutions is made more difficult by such a legacy.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that both parties to the so-called sequencing debate – the ‘state first’ and the ‘democracy first’ perspective – have misconceived the original European sequence of state-building and regime change. The part of European experience that has entered the sequencing debate is the part that was triggered by the 16th century ‘military revolution’ (Downing, 1992). This revolution inaugurated a large scale process of state-building, only to be followed centuries later by the democratizations of the 19th and 20th centuries. My point of departure is the deceptively simply observation that the 16th century states were not blank slates. The military revolution occurred against a particular backdrop, namely a multi-constitutional world inhabited by potent corporate estate groups and packed with local ‘intermediary institutions’ and even national representative institutions.

This multi-constitutional world was ubiquitous in Latin Christendom around 1500 AD. In many countries of Continental Europe, it was transformed by the advent of early modern absolutism. But in some countries representative institutions survived and even where they disappeared other remnants of the medieval multi-constitutional world persisted, including corporate rights and corporate institutions. That the autocratic phase was less important than it has often been made out to be is underlined by a new body of research which traces both modern economic growth and modern democracy back to pre-1500 institutions of constraints, whether or not absolutism intervened (Acemoglu et al., 2001; 2002a; 2008; Robinson, 2006).

I have extended this argument to state-building. The main thrust of my claim about state-building is that the existence of corporate groups and intermediary institutions made it
possible to channel government authority based on impersonal institutions and laws rather than on patron-client relations. To be sure, Western and Central Europe contains a lot of variation with respect to how bureaucratic (patrimonial) the state infrastructure was. But seen from the higher ground all of Latin Christendom developed relatively modern state institutions in the centuries following the military revolution. This is placed in relief by the Russia development. What geopolitical pressure did in Russia was to remove traditional restraints on autocracy, boost military might, and to strengthen the centripetal capacities of the state. But did not create genuinely impersonal institutions. Rather, the Russian landowners were made the rural agents of the state, based on a pattern which Weber aptly termed “local patrimonialism”. Moreover, the Russian development was not in any way conducive to the advance of constitutionalism and to democratization. Down until the very end of Imperial Russia, autocracy remained the pillar of ruleship and patrimonialism the sinews of the state.

Which lessons do the contrasting Western and Central European, on the one hand, and Russian experiences, on the other hand, hold for present-day processes of political development and state formation, if any? One should always be somewhat vary of making historical analogies for the simple reason that contextual factors might condition relationships identified in prior periods. This point holds, a fortiori, considering that the geopolitical pressure which triggered both the European and the Russian regime-cum-state developments have largely been absent since 1945 (Tilly, 1991; Krasner, 2005). This absence of external pressure might in itself mean that the European experience cannot be generalized to a post-World War II context.

But insofar as the contrast between the European and the Russian developments hold any lessons, it is surely the following: That the prior existence of internal checks on executive power are the most propitious point of departure for state-building and democratization. Most important here is probably the existence of strong societal groups which can guard the guardians
(Gellner, 1994). But political and corporate institutions might also count, both on the national level where they serve to police the rulers and on the local level where they create transmission belts through which to channel government authority. More precisely, what the European experience teaches us is that it is advantageous to have ‘intermediary institutions’, including representative institutions, before large scale state-building and political reforms.

It is important to emphasize that the account provided in this paper cannot be translated into a pure democracy first perspective. Medieval rights of corporate groups were privileges, which were furthermore associated with individuals via their membership of estates rather than as citizens – in stark contrast to the universal rights that we associate with modern democracy (Hintze 1962[1930]; Finer, 1997a; 1050). The 19th and 20th century democratization entailed the evening out of these privileges. What is more, and shifting focus to state-building, it might still be the case that, for instance, it is easier to build bureaucratic institutions before extending the suffrage to prevent capture of state institutions. What I have argued is simply that institutional constraints on executive power and the existence of semi-autonomous societal groups is an auspicious point of departure for state-building and regime change. The pure ‘autocratic transition to democracy’, where enlightened absolute rulers build strong institutions that ultimately pave the way for their own demise, is difficult to fathom. Some checks on power are surely necessary for both a felicitous pattern of state-building and for increasing the odds of democratization.
References


Figures

Figure 1: Contrasting paths of state formation and regime change

Western and Central Europe

- Bottom-up state-building, based on intermediary institutions and corporate groups
- Presence of multiplicity of estate groups
- Onset of geopolitical competition
- Strengthening of privileges for estate groups and advent of institutions of constraints

Russia

- Top-down state-building, based on state bureaucracy and landowners
- Entrenchment of autocracy
- Weakening of hereditary noble stratum and entrenchment of absolutism
- Absence of multiplicity of estate groups

Incremental democratization of extant representative institutions or resuscitation and democratization of representative institutions
Table 1: Geopolitical competition, regime change, and state-building in Russia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geopolitical competition</th>
<th>Onset in 17th century, intensification after AD 1700</th>
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<tr>
<td>State-society relations</td>
<td>Strong Boyar nobility based on lineages but weak social differentiation in general</td>
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<td>Nobility and clergy politically weakened by centripetal reforms</td>
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<td>Regime change</td>
<td>Traditional autocracy with Boyar Duma and Zemskii Sobor transformed into unrestrained modern autocracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>State-building</td>
<td>Strengthening of military and central government accompanied by local government based on landowners. State-building based on patron-client relationships rather than impersonal institutions</td>
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