

Review – War, Survival Units, and Citizenship

Written by Siniša Malešević

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War, Survival Units, and Citizenship: A Neo-Eliasian Processual-Relational Perspectives

By Lars Bo Kaspersen

Routledge, 2022

The phenomenon of state formation has been one of the central topics for historical sociology. Sociologists have been puzzled by the key questions such as: Where do states come from? Why human beings live in states? How different forms of state organisation emerge, develop, and become hegemonic? Or: what is the relationship between the state formation and historical change? Scholars have provided different answers to these questions and have elaborated a variety of theories on the state formation, including neo-Marxist, culturalist, economic, and neo-evolutionary approaches.

However, since mid-1980s until recently the neo-bellicist paradigm has dominated much of the scholarship on the origins and transformations of the state. Charles Tilly and Michael Mann were central to the development of this perspective, but many other scholars such as Mohammed Ayoob, Robert Carneiro, Miguel Centeno, Chris Downing, Thomas Ertman, John A. Hall, Geoffrey Herbst, Veronica Tin-Bor Hui and Dingxin Zhao have contributed to the ascent of this paradigm. The neo-bellicist perspective identifies war as the central social mechanism for the development of the state. In Tilly's (1992) view the proliferation of inter-state wars in the early modern Europe was the key catalyst for the growth of governance structures, civil service, transport and communication infrastructure, and technology, all of which allowed for the more extensive extraction of resources for wars. Hence the famous formulation "war made the state, and the state made wars" (Tilly 1975, p.42). This was not a novel idea as the classical bellicist perspective, which included Otto Hintze, Franz Oppenheimer, and Alexander Rustow among others, articulated a similar argument at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century (Malešević 2010). However, the neo-bellicists were interested in the relationship between warfare and the emergence of modern nation-states and the question of how diverse premodern empires and patrimonial kingdoms have transformed into relatively standardised and stable territorial, constitutional, and national polities. By contrast, the classics were studying the diverse forms and origins of state formation (Malešević 2019, 2017).

In some respects, Kaspersen's book is an attempt to answer questions raised by the classical bellicist tradition while in the process critiquing the contemporary neo-bellicist perspective. Although Kaspersen focuses mostly on the European historical experience, he pays less attention to the modern world. Instead, he examines a variety of organisational forms that have dominated the political space of medieval and early modern Europe. Furthermore, drawing primarily on the work of Norbert Elias, Kaspersen argues that the state is an inadequate concept to capture the sheer historical diversity of polity formation. Hence, he opts for the Eliasian idea of 'survival units' instead. This concept is defined as

'an entity with an ability to defend itself,' and as such 'is a universal (transhistorical) concept, of which it is possible to identify a number of subvariants ... which defend their domain of sovereignty in very different ways. These different forms of survival units can differ from each other in defence structure, form of government, relation between survival unit and "society", economic structure, and structures of rights and obligations' (p.8).

Thus, for Kaspersen, the focus should shift from the narrow debate on the historical dynamics of state formation in

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modernity towards understanding how 'survival units' emerge, develop, and are replaced by alternative 'survival units' over the course of human history.

In the first part of the book, Kaspersen offers a critique of existing scholarship on state formation, and develops the contours of the neo-Eliasian approach to the study of the relationship between war, citizenship and 'survival units'. This approach is then applied to the European historical experience. The second part of the book zooms in on the period from 800 to 1500, and traces the social changes from the Carolingian Empire to the rise of feudal *Ständestaat* model of polity organisation. The third and longest part of the book explores the transformation of European social and political order from 1500 to 1660 with extensive historical analysis of France, England, and Germany. Kaspersen argues that the neo-Eliasian perspective sheds more light on the complexities of historical change as its processual-relational framework can explain many intricacies of the relationship between the transformation of political orders, citizenship and war.

This is an interesting and wide-ranging work that makes two valuable contributions. Firstly, Kaspersen demonstrates persuasively that the conventional debates on state formation and warfare are conceptually and historically too narrow. To understand the long-term social and political change, it is crucial to develop concepts that can accommodate historically diverse forms of social organisation. Instead of focusing almost exclusively on the territorial states, it is paramount to analyse the historical impact of other influential social organisations such as the city-states, city-leagues, merchant guilds, patrimonial kingdoms, free towns, or the religious organisations all of which have shaped our historical experience. Secondly, it is necessary to go beyond the neo-bellicist theories of state formation as they offer an overly structuralist, teleological and state-centric view of historical change that overemphasises historical 'winners'. Echoing Spruyt (2017), Kaspersen rightly argues that the mainstream approaches tend to see the contemporary nation-states as an inevitable historical outcome, while ignoring the significance of other social organisations that have now disappeared but have played a crucial role in the development of the contemporary world.

Nevertheless, the neo-Eliasian theoretical framework he offers to replace the neo-bellicist paradigm does not seem very convincing to me. For one thing, the concept of a 'survival unit' is analytically too vague and historically imprecise to serve as an adequate replacement for the concept of the state. In many respects, this concept reproduces the same problems that affect the idea of the state: it is a catch-all, transhistorical, concept with strong essentialist features, which aims to reduce enormous historical diversity to a singular phenomenon. In the book a 'survival unit' often appears as a simple synonym for the state. One could replace the two terms and not much would change in the existing narrative of the book.

Another problem is the rampant essentialism that underpins this concept. It is highly indicative that Elias (2012) interchangeably used the terms 'survival units' and 'attack and defence units'. These are obviously highly loaded terms that imply an inherent presence of violence and the inevitable struggle for survival, which are perceived to be the natural state for human beings. At times it seems that Kaspersen is not completely comfortable with this original formulation, as he states that 'a survival unit is in principle a defence unit – not an attack and defence unit as Elias suggests' (p. 60). However, Kaspersen still insists in a rather deterministic manner that a survival unit is 'a primary unit of social life' (p.1) or 'is the fundamental structuring principle of human life' and also 'an inescapable figuration' (p.58).

Leaving on one side the highly problematic understanding of violence in Elias (see Malešević 2017), this concept is also inadequate to capture different organisational capacities across time and space. For example, Kaspersen regularly emphasises that 'survival units have always shaped human life' and that 'human beings have always been born into survival units' (p.2). Nevertheless, if 'a survival unit' is defined in relation to its 'sovereignty', 'forms of government', 'structures of rights and obligations', 'the ability to monopolise the means of violence', as well as its relationship with 'society' (p.8, p.59), then much of human prehistory would not fit this pattern. Since human beings have lived for 99 per cent of their existence on this planet as foragers who roamed African savannahs in tiny and highly malleable egalitarian nomadic bands and who for the most part did not engage in organised violence (Fry 2007), then applying this concept indiscriminately to all humans seems highly counterproductive. Even if the concept is applied only to the sedentary populations, it cannot distinguish clearly between very different forms of organised

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social life. What is gained analytically if the Roman Empire or the People's Republic of China are treated as the same type of social organisation as the Augustine Band of Cahuilla Native Americans that consists of sixteen members?

These conceptual problems reflect wider issues that affect the general Eliasian approach. Elias was a pioneer of relational sociology, who rightly emphasised the processual and highly dynamic character of social relations. His figurational perspective has often been hailed as innovative, reflexive, and sensitive towards complexity of social life. However, there is a clear discrepancy between the noble goals of the Eliasian theory and the empirical analyses generated by its proponents. Simply put, while the Eliasian framework emphasises the dynamic, contingent and process-oriented features of social life, this is rarely reflected in the actual empirical analyses, which are often couched in fairly conventional, reifying and essentialist language.

Kaspersen recognises this difficulty when he makes a point about our 'language that makes it almost impossible for us to think in dynamic relational processes' (p.257). Nevertheless, the problem is not just static language. Some of Kaspersen's analysis represents an amalgamation of a subtle conceptual apparatus with old-fashioned, top-down historiography, often based on the very dated sources. Some of the empirical chapters are written in the style of historiography from the 1980s and 1990s. For example, while Kaspersen probes and criticises the idea of the state, the concept of the nation is mostly used in a non-reflexive way that implies historical continuities between pre-modern and modern social and political formations. Hence, there are regular references to 'the French survival unit' or 'the Spanish survival unit', which are unproblematically described as entities with the transhistorical national features. The Ottoman Empire is also constantly referred as 'the Turks', while in the several chapters 'France' and 'England' are reified, as they are attributed human qualities, such as in 'France has learned from its defeats and was again catching up' (p.166), and so on. It is a pity that the book does not engage with the recent and booming scholarship on nation-states, nationalisms, and empire, which analytically probes not only the process of state formation but also nation formation.

Despite my critical remarks, this is a worthy contribution that raises some important conceptual and theoretical issues in historical sociology. As such it should be read by the wider academic readership and not only by Eliasian scholars.

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