

Letter

Demographic Regulation and the State: Centering Gender in Our Understanding of Political Order in Early Modern European States

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The literature on early modern state-building in Europe has focused on war as its main driver and therefore on states' relationships with men. Feminist scholars have critiqued the Weberian conceptions this literature relies on as being gender biased. I suggest an alternative theoretical starting point for theories of early modern state-building: the political imperatives created by the demographic fluctuations of the Malthusian trap. Harnessing Foucault's concept of biopower and its application to the construction of gender, I argue that population fluctuations incentivized demographic regulation, in particular of childbearing, in order to keep birth rates high and maternal and infant mortality low, implying that early modern European states were constituted through the construction and maintenance of gender regimes. I propose strategies for empirical investigation and argue that a more accurate account of early modern European state-building needs to incorporate demographic regulation and therefore requires gender to be at its center.

INTRODUCTION


This letter suggests that the projection of power over populations, as demographic entities, was an imperative of rule in early modern European states, but one that has received less attention than control of territory. Primarily influenced by Weberian conceptions of the state as a territorial entity able to control the legitimate means of violence, the literature on the development of European states from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries has focused on war as the main driver of state-building. These accounts emphasize the material need to raise and support the armies required to defend territory and have therefore focused on states' relationships with men. Feminist scholars have critiqued this account, arguing that Weberian concepts of power are gender biased, and therefore, their empirical application has led to only partial understanding. This letter responds to these critiques by suggesting that understanding state-building in early modern Europe and locating the origins of gendered institutions require the integration of demographic imperatives. Harnessing Foucault's concept of biopower and the gender and politics literature that has applied this concept to the construction of gender regimes, I suggest that demographic imperatives, interpreted through a mercantilist lens, created a desire to maximize population size that incentivized demographic regulation, and in particular regulation of childbearing, in order to keep birth rates high and maternal

and infant mortality low. This suggests that projecting power over female bodies, their fertility, and childbearing was constitutive of political order in an equivalent way to projecting power over male bodies in order to fight wars. I propose strategies for empirical investigation and argue, overall, that a more accurate account of early modern European state-building needs to incorporate demographic regulation and therefore requires gender to be at its center.

WEBERIAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE STATE AND FEMINIST CRITIQUES

Weber defined the modern state as an entity with the monopoly over the legitimate means of violence within a given territory and saw it as distinct from its patrimonial predecessors in its separation of public power from kinship, creating a rational-legal public sphere. His conception has remained hegemonic in understandings of state-building and state capacity. The literature on early modern European state-building focuses on examining how the state acquired the monopoly of violence and how war stimulated institutional development (Ertman 1997; Tilly 1990). In these accounts, the pressures of military competition led rulers to consolidate control through the centralization of power and to build the coercive-extractive apparatus of the state (Dincecco 2011; Mann 1984). While this process was mediated by contextual factors (Ertman 1997; Karaman and Pamuk 2013; Tilly 1990), in these accounts, war over territory drove the emergence of a distinctly different kind of polity in early modern Europe.

Feminist scholars concerned with the relationship between gender and state power, and the construction and persistence of public and private patriarchy argue

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that the Weberian conception of the modern state is gender biased. In defining the state as a monopoly over public violence and centering explanations of state-building on war, the literature focuses on states' relationships with men as soldiers and owners of wealth, rendering this literature partial (Adams 2005; Geva 2014). Weber's definition speaks only of the monopolization of public violence and so does not address gendered violence in the private sphere, which can be seen as intrinsically connected to it (Brown 1995; Brush 2003, 29). These scholars see, in the separation of public and private spheres, the creation of modern patriarchy, where women were confined to private spaces and the public sphere was constructed as a masculine space for men (Wollstonecraft [1792] 2020; MacKinnon 1989; Pateman 1988). Yet with a few notable exceptions (Miller 1998), as Geva has pointed out, "feminist work rarely intersects with the fiscal-military state literature" (2014, 138) and, as a result, has struggled to provide "a developmental account of the gendered origins and contradictory character of modern states" (2014, 140).

The literature on early modern state-building largely ignores women and the relationship between gender and power. Feminist scholarship concerned with this relationship has pointed out these omissions, from the outside, in the form of critique. Can these two perspectives be brought into conversation with each other? What does a political science theory, concerned with the determinants of political order in early modern states, look like when approached with an attentiveness to gender? While this is a task for many minds, I offer some initial thoughts on where such theories might emerge: at the intersection between gender, demography, ideology, and power.

TOWARD THEORIES OF DEMOGRAPHIC REGULATION AS A POLITICAL IMPERATIVE FOR EARLY MODERN STATES

An alternative theoretical starting point for theories of political order might be the observation that early modern European states were concerned not only with control of territory but with regulation of populations as demographic entities.¹ Bellicist accounts have paid insufficient attention to the demographic realities of the early modern world. Before the advent of modern agriculture and medicine, as Malthus argued, the size of population was a critical determinant of living standards, and therefore, population fluctuations could have serious economic and political consequences (Malthus [1798] 1992). Population growth put pressure on food supplies and generated demand for land. Population shocks through famine or epidemics could create immediate imperatives to increase population size to restore political and economic fundamentals. The Black Death in the fourteenth century is estimated to have killed

between 30% and 60% of the population of Europe, with further waves occurring until the seventeenth century. Demographic shocks of this scale had serious immediate (Pamuk 2007) and long-term (Gingerich and Vogler 2021) political and economic consequences, yet the Black Death does not feature centrally in bellicist accounts of the early modern world (Gingerich and Vogler 2021, 396).

The so-called Malthusian trap was therefore potentially a fundamental determinant of political order in medieval and early modern European polities. Concern with population was persistent among rulers (Billar 2018; Kreager 2018), and population size was central to mercantilism, the dominant economic theory of the period which equated state power with *size* of population (Rusnock 2002). Thus, demographic realities and the ideological frames used to interpret them created incentives for demographic regulation (Kreager 2018, 266).

While demographic imperatives directed states' attention to a broader range of concerns—including migration levels, life expectancy, and population health—maximizing population size unavoidably involved attempts to increase births and lower maternal and infant deaths, therefore centering the relationship between state power and gender. The early modern period saw European states increasingly attempt to replace religious authorities as the regulator of childbirth, bringing it gradually under state authority and into the public sphere, by happening either in lying-in hospitals or under state regulated medical authority, with midwives becoming the first female state officials. From at least the fifteenth century, political authorities in some polities began to regulate midwifery, as midwives were central to the system of childbearing (Marland 1993). They not only provided medical supervision that was believed to increase maternal and child survival but were also important conduits of knowledge about contraception and abortion (Park 2018, 153). While the drivers of increased state regulation remain underexplored, Sweden offers an example of the role that demographic anxiety could play (Edgren 2010). Building on efforts in the early part of the eighteenth century, midwifery regulation intensified after the first census, which was conducted in 1749 and revealed a much smaller population than had previously been estimated and very high rates of maternal and child mortality (Högberg 2004, 1314). While stimulating immigration was considered, increasing the birth rate, reducing maternal deaths, and promoting motherhood became the main national response, with state midwives central to this process (Romlid 2002).

As the previous discussion illustrates, integrating demographic imperatives into theories of early modern state-building requires an understanding of state power that goes beyond territorial control and incorporates its gendered aspects. Foucault's concept of biopower provides this and has already been applied by scholars of gender and sexuality to understanding states' relationships with sex and gender. Foucault argued that in the early modern period, a new mechanism of power emerged that "applies directly to bodies and what they

¹ Scholars of gender and nationalism argue that states are also concerned with population composition, and therefore how gender intersects with race, ethnicity and class (e.g., Yuval-Davis 1997).

do rather than to the land and what it produces” (Foucault [1975–1976] 1997, 35). This biopower consisted both of disciplinary power over individual bodies and the biopolitics of population. As states equated power with population—“population as wealth, population as manpower or labour capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded” (Foucault [1976] 1998, 25)—they “perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects or even with a ‘people’” but with a “population with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, health...” (Foucault [1976] 1998, 25). Foucault referred to their actions to record and regulate birth, sex, and marriage in order to influence demographic realities as biopolitics. While he focused on the nineteenth century, the previous discussion suggests that biopolitical action began earlier.

Although political scientists working on state capacity have generally not applied his concepts,² Foucault’s ideas have been particularly influential on researchers concerned with how state power is used to construct gender regimes and administer sex as a distributional category (Currah 2022; Spade 2015). Biopolitics has been used as a conceptual framework for understanding the techniques of power modern bureaucracies employ in order to construct sex and gender in the ways required by colonial and modern capitalist economies (Repo 2015). While understandings of the relationship among gender, sex, power, and bodies are diverse and debated (Coole 2013), this literature is centrally concerned with the ways in which states construct gender. Applying a Foucauldian conception of biopower, reified through engagement with the literature on gender and institutions, may lead to a more accurate understanding of early modern states. Equally, applying the concept of biopower to earlier periods has the potential to expand our understandings of what biopolitical techniques look like beyond modern Weberian bureaucratic settings and to speak to the question of whether or not biopolitics is a distinct feature of late modern political order.

Examining the demographic imperatives of early modern European states and their attendant biopolitical actions has a number of important potential analytical pay-offs. First, it can increase the empirical accuracy of our understanding of state-building in this period, by potentially altering our periodization (through examining the impact of major demographic events like the Black Death) and identifying important omitted variables (such as demographic shocks). This empirical work can help to clarify the underlying relationship between demography—understood dynamically³—war, and

state-building. War can be a response to demographic pressure and have important demographic consequences. Second, it has the potential to expand the conceptual understanding of the state, its power, and its relationship to gender. If early modern states had demographic imperatives which necessitated concern over birth and death rates, then these states may be constituted through the construction and maintenance of gender regimes. Examining demographic imperatives therefore requires gender to be centered in mainstream accounts of early modern state-building and political order.

AN EMPIRICAL AGENDA

Empirical investigation of the relationship between demographic imperatives and state-building in the early modern period is needed to test these ideas and reduce the trade-off between parsimony and nuance that theorizing at a high level of abstraction entails. While researchers in gender and politics have used a diverse range of methods that the state-building literature could fruitfully benefit from, to bridge with the existing literature, the suggestions made here focus on applying prevailing empirical approaches.

Exploring the relationship between demographic imperatives and state-building using a biopolitical conception of power requires new measures of state reach and capacity. Existing indicators reflect the Weberian emphasis on extractive-coercive power: tax records and revenues, troops under arms, and castles. Actors, arenas, and tasks not typically included in accounts of early modern state-building need to be incorporated. For example, priests are not only important state bureaucrats in Protestant countries but, in all, are agents exerting pastoral and disciplinary power at the interface between public institutions and private household decision-making. The regulation of the emerging medical professions and the setting of state-approved medical curricula are important manifestations of biopower. The production of demographic data itself needs to be understood as a product of biopolitics. To fully capture states’ biopolitical power, we therefore need detailed process tracing to establish its manifestations in different time periods and settings and quantitative measures that operationalize these. For example, event data on statutes regulating marriage and midwifery could be created,⁴ data on numbers of midwives could be extracted from historical accounts, and digital humanities projects on written medical texts could be harnessed to track changes in discourse.

Combining new and existing measures of state-capacity with demographic data would then enable quantitative analysis, establishing conditional correlations and broad trends, which are important for the task of periodization, and comparative qualitative process

² The literature on informational capacity as a form of state capacity (e.g., Brambor et al. 2020) uses the state’s ability to collect demographic data as an indicator of capacity but has not clearly acknowledged its origins in demographic imperatives or adopted a biopolitical conception of power.

³ Population density, as a structural endowment, has been a prominent variable in explaining state formation and capacity (Herbst 2014) but its dynamic effects have been understudied.

⁴ The timing of midwifery regulation could further be an important variable in explaining immediate and long-term public health outcomes, including the organization of maternal care today.

tracing. We have rich demographic data on early modern famines (Alfani and Gráda 2018) and mortality due to the Black Death (Christakos et al. 2005), which have been used to examine immediate and long-term political effects (Gingerich and Vogler 2021). However, effects on war and state-building have not been examined. Within this work, an important task would be examining the role of intervening variables—such as population ideologies, which changed over time and varied in uptake across countries (Rusnock 2002), and the potential differences between Protestant and Catholic states—and untangling the relationship between war, demography, and state-building. As with all historical institutionalist analyses, establishing causal inference will be challenging. Demographic outcomes—such as birth rates—are highly influenced by household decision-making that is consequential for broader societal outcomes (Hartman 2004), leading to potential confounders—such as modes of agricultural production (Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2011). However, the potentially exogenous nature of certain types of demographic shocks—such as epidemics—may enable causal identification.

Examining the causal process between demographic realities and state action, and in particular establishing motivation, will be a particular empirical challenge. States are not unitary actors, but rather complex institutions with competing and sometimes conflicting agendas, whose agency is relational, making the motivations behind state action difficult to pin down empirically and isolate from alternative explanations. Unpacking motivation will require similar methods to those used in historical institutionalist accounts examining the relationship between war and state-building: detailed process tracing leveraging cross-national variation and change over time, using sources—such as legislative records and public debates. Within this analysis, attention needs to be paid to alternative interpretations for state action—such as philanthropic responsiveness—and the agency of actors with different motivations—such as leading medical figures (like royal midwife Louise Bourgeois in seventeenth-century France), professional bodies, and women themselves. Integrating demographic imperatives involves a shift toward acknowledging women's agency and the ways in which they, at the household and the societal level, negotiated and responded to their changing relationship with the state.

CONCLUSION

This letter has suggested that a more complete account of the fundamentals of political order in early modern Europe should examine how states responded to the demographic imperatives of the Malthusian trap with attempts to regulate demographic realities—such as birth and maternal mortality rates. It has focused on early modern Europe as the literature on this period has had a formative influence on the conceptualization and measurement of state capacity globally and across time and because this form of polity subsequently became ubiquitous through colonial expansion.

Deepening our understanding of state-building in this period has the potential to expand our understanding of this kind of state and its power, opening up novel avenues of research on state-building in the contemporary period, including understanding how demographic regulation varies at different stages of demographic transition. The continuing salience of demographic regulation as a political imperative is illustrated by modern examples from extreme attempts to control population growth in states facing population pressure (the one-child policy in China and forced sterilization in India) to recent pronatalist policies adopted in industrialized countries in the face of demographic decline. Exploring manifestations of biopower in state-building globally and across time will enable us to better understand both biopolitics and states themselves.

At a fundamental level, examining the impact of demographic imperatives requires gender to be centered in mainstream accounts of state-building and understood as constitutive of political order in modern states. Incorporating a Foucauldian concept of power considers rule of a population within a territory. The latter is fixed and has to be defended, while the former needs to be reproduced, requiring the centering of states' relationships to female fertility and childbearing and acknowledgment that state power is gendered. Despite the centuries that have passed since the early modern period and the advances made in understanding the complexity of gender construction and toward greater gender equality, the perspective put forward here suggests that there are important ways in which states' relationships with men and women retain a biological basis, as illustrated by the example of the Ukrainian state, after the Russian invasion in February 2022, claiming authority over male bodies and banning fighting age men from leaving. With the UN recently warning that population anxiety is threatening the rights and bodily autonomy of women and girls (United Nations Population Fund 2023, 7), understanding the historical development of states' gendered power and spotlighting their relationship to women's fertility and childbearing is of both scientific and normative importance. Without this understanding, our central conceptualizations of modern state power are incomplete and our ability to understand contemporary political developments is reduced.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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