

Gianfranco Poggi

Richard Lachmann, States and Power. Cambridge: Polity, 2010, xiv+233 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/33652)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, novembre-dicembre 2010

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Richard Lachmann, *States and Power*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010, xiv+233 pp.

doi: 10.2383/33652

This is an excellent book, by a sociologist on the faculty of the State University of New York at Albany. It is all the more remarkable because in spite of its relative brevity (little more than 200 pp. of text) it addresses its theme in a manner characterized among other things by its scope. Chronological scope in the first place, for the book's treatment ranges from the early beginnings of European modernity to very recent events – including an excellent discussion of neo-liberalism and of sultanism in oil-rich countries – plus an informed and disquieting prospect on the impending future. Then, geographical scope: besides the usual suspects evoked in the discussion of early state development, such distant locales as Chile, Singapore, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Irak. Thematic scope: I cannot think of another author who besides the more obvious aspects of state development and operation (military and fiscal arrangements, the pressures arising from the plurality of states, democracy or citizenship) encompasses such unconventional ones as the role of clerical elites or indeed, rather surprisingly, the cultural significance of national food-and-wine traditions. Finally, the sources discussed (and listed in a 14 pp. bibliography) are very numerous and diverse.

Lachmann's substantial and original book is also characterized by an exacting methodological approach. It does not limit itself, as do many other treatments (even very significant ones) to the description and narration of single historical examples or even at their typological characterization. It often challenges such treatments by questioning their ability to provide a causal account of the phenomena they discuss, focused on the when and where of their occurrence.

For instance, world system theories insightfully characterize the dynamics of the relations between core and periphery – but, Lachmann objects, one ought to establish also which factors, at a given time, place which countries within the one or the other category. Or: while Tilly does “offer a clear answer to the two questions of who initiated state formation and how they amassed power for themselves,” he is “less clear on why rulers were able to increase the size and resources of their kingdoms in the sixteenth century when their predecessors failed to do so in earlier centuries.” [pp. 38-39]. On the whole, Lachmann's assessment of the virtues and vices of the authors he discusses seem to me well-grounded and contributes significantly of the reader's understanding of the matters he discusses.

But let's consider briefly the book's own core argument. It is thoroughly sociological, for it deconstructs those of authors who attribute a kind of self-propelling dynamics to the rise and development of states, by pointing up the role played in them by the strategies of two different, and conceptually previous, collective units: classes and elites. He particularly emphasizes the latter, as in the following, extensive quote, intended to suggest to the reader the distinctiveness of both the *pars destruens* and the *pars construens* of Lachmann's central argument on “how states are made”: “States were not for the most part created by eliminating enemies on the battlefield, or by sending

bureaucrats from a capital to tax and control the hinterland. States came into existence when elites and their organizational capacities were combined into a single institution [... T]hey were instances of elites centralizing themselves. They did so for a range of reasons [...] Elites came together:

- to appropriate the powers and assets of other elites (England, France, Spain);
- to enhance control over peasants (Japan, Russia, and Eastern Europe);
- to protect themselves against foreign invaders (Russia, Eastern Europe, the Netherlands).

Once elites found themselves together in a single state institution they used their new capacities for a variety of ends:

- to exert new control over peasant labor (Spain, Britain, Japan, Eastern Europe);
- to launch wars against foreign invaders and seize colonies (Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Russia);
- to extract revenues from towns (Spain, Russia and Eastern Europe, Japan) and from clerics (Spain, Russia, Japan).” [p. 62]

Or, to quote two very succinct statements of the argument, the “consolidation of elites within centralized polities was the essential dynamic of state formation” [p. 104]; “European state formation drew various elites into states” [p. 107].

Given the forcefulness of these and other arguments of Lachmann’s, I need not say more to suggest my admiration for the intellectual feat he performs in this book, from which any reader may draw many, valuable insights. However, I would like to conclude this review by stating one of the few objections which formed themselves in my mind as I read and re-read *States and power*. Leaving aside my unease about some other (mis)uses of Weber by Lachmann, let me point up (what seems to me) the most significant one. A pointer to it is an odd absence from the book’s bibliography – nothing less than Weber’s *Politics as a vocation*. Aware (and envious) as I am of the quality of Lachmann’s scholarship I am not so foolish as to suggest that he does not know this text. Of course he does. However, Lachmann unadvisedly ignores, in that text, what seems to me a very significant construction of the state’s rise and development, or at any rate does not duly acknowledge what I would consider its undeniable merit and significance.

I am speaking of the few pages in which Weber imputes those events to the princes’ drive to free themselves of the burdens and impediments to rule represented by ständisch administration and to replace it with bureaucratic (i.e., professional, knowledge-based, centralized, uniform, etc) administration. He pointedly suggests that this process required the expropriation by the ruler of the means of administration. Another plausible way to conceptualize it, not used by Weber, might be the following: state-making involves the replacement of administration by subjects who have a right to exercise it with administration by subjects who place themselves under an obligation to exercise it.

This constitutes a drastic change in the institutional nature of rule, which in my view Lachmann (or anybody else) has no business ignoring or bypassing, treating instead the state as no more than the neutral site or container of elite relations, or an indifferent arena for contrasts and accommodation between elites, with no reason or logic or inherent structure of its own.

In fact, come to think of it, Lachmann neither ignores or bypasses that change. But its significance comes through in a series of statements which, I suspect, he makes

inadvertently, for they go counter to what I have suggested as his own central argument. From a certain point on, that argument proceeds (but, to my mind, subverts itself) by talking insistently about “state officials / managers / actors / elites / planners”, or for that matter about “state capacity”. None of these conceptual categories can be realistically seen as unintended components of elite relations – as Lachmann seems to consider them, given his unacceptable disregard for the significance of such central aspects of state development and management as bureaucracy or law.

Questionable as such disregard seems to me, in no way does it deny the significance of such an original and mature treatment as that offered by Lachmann (incidentally, in clear prose), and the intellectual benefit anyone can derive from reading this book.

Gianfranco Poggi
University of Trento, Italy