

French history in which a new conservatism has been invented, much of it traceable to recent American extrapolations wrought on the Cold War inspired views of François Furet and his followers once active at the University of Chicago. Thus the best strategy is to ignore the eccentricities of Gordon's argument and to concentrate on the elements worth pondering. Those who remain captivated by the power and mystique of the social should know that they have rich and rewarding historical company.

*The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change.* By Hendrik Spruyt. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. Pp. xii + 288. \$39.50.

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Focusing primarily on the central and late Middle Ages, Hendrik Spruyt sets out to explain how the sovereign, territorial state became the dominant form of political organization in the international system. Two observations underpin this inquiry. The first one reminds us that the state is a historically distinctive system of rule characterized by two institutional facets: internal hierarchy and territorial demarcation. This twofold dimension—claims to jurisdiction are at once exclusive and territorially bounded—set the state apart from other modes of political organization. The feudal order, for instance, with its intricate pattern of crosscutting obligations and personal bonds, lacked territorial delimitation and a final locus of jurisdiction. Medieval church and empire, on the other hand, represented universalist systems of rule which were not predicated on fixed territorial parameters. The second observation is that the demise of the feudal system gave way to a multiplicity of institutional arrangements such as city leagues, independent communes, and city-states. Analyses that fail to acknowledge and account for this institutional variation run the risk of endorsing a teleological understanding of the feudal-state transition. Spruyt's agenda therefore is twofold. His purpose is not only to explore the emergence of the state as a system of rule alternative to the feudal order but also to shed light on the selection process whereby sovereign states superseded other contemporary forms of political organization. In each case, Spruyt provides highly convincing explanations based on theoretically elaborate and thoroughly documented comparative arguments.

Why did some governments take the form of a hierarchical, exclusive, and territorial rule while others did not? Spruyt traces back the origin of this process to the economic growth of the 11th and 13th centuries. The expansion of trade provided town dwellers with new sources of revenue and power. In this setting, burghers had two competing pref-

erences: they sought, first, to achieve the greatest amount of independence possible and, second, to lower transaction costs. Where trade remained low both in volume and in added value (as in France), cities did not have the resources to become independent. Preference was given to a centralized system of government that could introduce more certainty in the business environment through the standardization of taxation and administration. This alliance of king and towns was the foundation of the incipient French state. German towns, by contrast, had strong incentives to pool their resources given the nature of their trade (large in volume and low in added value). Feudal princes expanded their hold over their estates as emperors encountered increasing difficulties in Italy. Burghers formed urban leagues in order to consolidate their economic and political interests against the encroachment of the nobility. As for Italian cities, the high profits extracted from the commerce of luxury goods allowed them to mount considerable armies and navies on their own. Since the landed aristocracy resided within the towns and pursued mercantile interests, urban centers did not need to favor a royal-burgher alliance. Moreover, their market environment led them to compete rather than to unite. This divergence of interest as well as differences in types of government prevented them from establishing permanent leagues.

Having explored the generative causes of these three organizational forms, Spruyt then turns to the question: How did the sovereign state gain precedence over alternative systems of rule? According to Spruyt, this selection process was conditioned by three factors. First, urban leagues and city-states were less efficient (1) in creating a standardized system of rule (transactions were therefore more uncertain and costly) and (2) in preventing their members from defecting. Second, sovereign states were not confronted with the credibility problems faced by urban leagues. Due to its decentralized, confederated, and nonterritorial character, the Hanseatic League, for instance, could not bind all its members to the agreements concluded with other powers and lacked a clear focal point for negotiations. As a result, city leagues were not recognized by other actors as legitimate players in the international system. Third, state structures emerged as models of organization for political entrepreneurs eager, such as German lords, to increase their revenue and expand their military capacity.

Spruyt's effort to systematically disentangle the causal webs of an intricate process of transition and his careful handling of the literature make his study a model of historically grounded investigation. It is inevitable that, in a book of this scope, some claims might be disputed. For instance, observing that vassals were often caught in crosscutting obligations and mutual ties of dependence, Spruyt contends that, in contradistinction with sovereign statehood, "feudal role lacked hierarchy" (p. 38). Undoubtedly, the prevalence of private arrangements and personal bonds undermined the organization of a clearly defined hierarchy. Nevertheless,

this does not imply that the notion of a hierarchical order was alien to feudal society. Feudalism may in fact have been, as Poly and Bournazel suggest (*The Feudal Transformation* [New York: Holmes and Meier, 1991]), “the lasting foundation in Western Europe of solid and complete hierarchy” (p. 357). In raising this issue, I do not call into question Spruyt’s discussion of the fundamental contrasts opposing the feudal system and sovereign statehood. His analysis captures the *logics* of different systems of rule. From this perspective, the analytical and historical soundness of the argument can hardly be faulted. Similar remarks could be made regarding the suggestion that the French political system was no longer “feudal” after the Capetian dynasty (987–1328; p. 223). The point is not obvious. It takes its significance in light of Spruyt’s emphasis on the personal and fragmented character of feudal relationships of authority. The argument here is that the foundations of a centralized and territorial state had already been laid in France by the beginning of the 14th century.

The book not only illuminates processes of state formation and institutional selection but also significantly recasts the terms of the debate centered on these issues. In many respects, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* may be regarded as an attempt to develop, refine, and revise the framework laid out by Charles Tilly’s work in *Coercion, Capital and European States* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Spruyt displays the same concern as Tilly for explaining institutional variation and avoiding the analytical pitfalls of linear and “backward looking” explanations. His account maps out different institutional paths and mechanisms of selection in a competitive environment. Spruyt’s approach, however, departs from Tilly’s in three major ways. First, his study pays attention to the emergence of political arrangements alternative to the feudal system *prior* to the military revolutions of the 14th and 15th centuries. This temporal shift in focus leads him (1) to examine the impact of economic transformations on the dynamics of social bargaining between central rulers, urban centers, and feudal lords and (2) to take into account the crucial importance of social alliances in the emergence of different modes of organization. Second, Spruyt convincingly argues that the “victory” of the state over its institutional rivals between the 15th and 17th centuries cannot be explained solely in terms of military capacities. As suggested above, the demise of urban leagues and city-states was rooted in the institutional makeup of these organizational forms. States won because they proved to be institutionally more efficient in mobilizing resources. Third, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors* takes into consideration the influence of belief systems, social ideals, and conceptual frameworks on political practice and social coalitions. Spruyt’s analyses of the ideological facets of actors’ strategies enhances our understanding of the phenomena under scrutiny and testifies, more generally, to the richness of his inquiry.