

The Organizational Ecology of State Formation

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The past century saw an explosion of state creation, as the total number of countries grew from around fifty in 1900 to nearly two hundred today. This proliferation of new states has unfolded in a wide variety of ways—through violent revolutions, painful disintegrations, and fierce struggles for independence, but also through more peaceful paths like international treaties, voluntary mergers, and negotiated colonial separations.

The turbulent spread of modern statehood took place within an increasingly globalized international system. As a result, broad systemic forces have repeatedly intruded upon the local processes of state formation. For example, sudden shifts in the external environment led to dramatic bursts of new state creation in the wake of World War I and the Soviet collapse.¹ Moreover, systemic factors played a key role in shaping not only the number but also the *nature* of state formation, whether by shaping boundaries after major wars, changing the incentives for violence by secession movements, or unleashing the centrifugal forces of imperial collapse.

How does the international system shape the creation and destruction of sovereign states? To examine the linkages between systemic forces and the changing population of sovereign states, this memo applies an organizational ecology approach to state formation. This framework may be especially helpful given OE's emphasis on structural (or "ecological") factors as drivers of population-wide trends. As Abbott, Green, and Keohane note in this workshop's framing paper, organizational ecology offers a useful corrective to conventional theories of global governance because it "emphasizes the role of structural constraints and opportunities" rather than the more common focus on "the agency of individual actors and organizations."²

Similarly, the literature on state formation has traditionally emphasized the goals and struggles of local actors. The dominant historical-institutionalist approach, for example, focuses on the role of local power-holders—on roving bandits transforming themselves into stationary proto-rulers, and on the intense power rivalries that accompany the consolidation of monopolies on force.³ Conventional explanations of state formation therefore emphasize the internal factors that can undermine or strengthen institutional development—divided ethnicities, class relations, nationalism, or competing social forces within proto-states.⁴

As a result, the role of the international system in shaping state emergence and development remains poorly understood. Bridget Coggins, for example, argues that "state emergence is an essential dynamic of the international system, yet international relations scholars pay it little

¹ For instance, 22 of the 28 regime transitions in the post-Communist space took place inside

² Abbott, Green, and Keohane 2016b:1.

³ Tilly 1975, 1990; Olson 1993.

⁴ E.g. Beissinger 2002; Roeder 2007.

attention.”⁵ In fact, IR scholarship often takes the existence of states as a given, as a sort of axiomatic starting point, and then seeks to explain their interaction and behavior—usually without examining the systemic forces that created these entities in the first place. In this sense, international relations theory has not yet fully come to grips with the lessons of historical institutionalism of scholars like Charles Tilly and Gianfranco Poggi.⁶

Just as OE points toward more structural theories of global governance, it can also help in conceptualizing structural or global approaches to state formation. Given the huge variety of state formation types, OE’s emphasis on *populations* rather than individual organizations may be especially helpful here. The focus on population dynamics within a global system points towards a different way of framing questions about the ecological embeddedness of local state creation. For example:

- How does the nature of the global environment affect the *type* of state formation? For example, when do systemic or environmental conditions favor violent state birth, and when do they encourage peaceful state creation instead?
- Relatedly, how does the international system shape the organizational variety of state formation? That is, when does the global environment make secession (to take one example) a more viable or more likely path of state formation, compared to other types of creation legacies like imperial fragmentation, decolonization, or Tilly-style territorial consolidation?
- What kinds of states does the international system tend to create, and how has the distribution of these competing categories shifted over time?
- Are there global or regional selection criteria that favor the emergence of particular kinds of states—whether these are democratic, revolutionary, federal, or any other type?
- Weak and failed states have not only survived but proliferated—why does the system allow these “inefficient” (from the perspective of OE) actors to persist? Why is the environment permissive with regards to the creation of new entities?

This memo raises more questions than can be answered in this brief space. I would argue, however, that these questions are highly suggestive of the potential utility of organizational ecology in examining state formation through a global lens. Like Abbott et al., I view organizational ecology theory not as a replacement but as a complement to current theories of state formation, helping to link “the micro-foundations of agent-centered theories” of state

⁵ Coggins 2011:433.

⁶ For a general critique of this disconnect, see Fioretos 2011.

creation with “macro-level patterns of organizational change” across the population of states.⁷ Together with historical institutionalism and second-image-reversed theories of IR, organizational ecology offers a way to think about the global politics of modern state formation. (See Figure 1, next page.) To paraphrase Abbott et al., organizational ecology has not been systematically applied to theories of state creation “even though it speaks directly to the issue of organizational change and diversity” in the emergence of various state forms.⁸

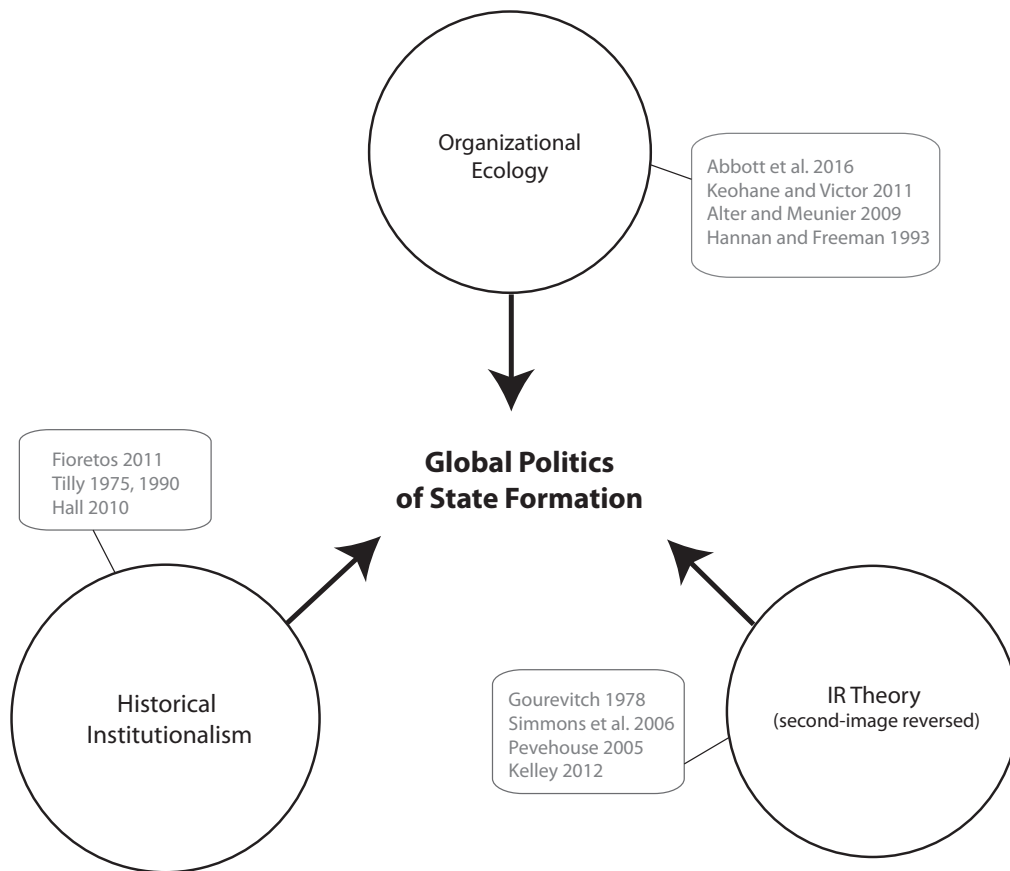


Figure 1: Theorizing the global politics of state formation.

⁷ Abbott, Green, and Keohane 2016b:1.

⁸ Abbott, Green, and Keohane 2016a:249.

I. Defining the Relevant Populations

The first step in applying the OE framework to state formation is to define the relevant populations. Even determining the relevant category of cases presents immediate problems. What counts as a state, and what should we consider as a state's date of entry into the international system? Current commonly-used datasets of state birth and death (such as Polity IV or the Correlates of War project) suffer from several major limitations. First, they exclude pre-colonial states that achieved both internal hierarchy and external autonomy because they were not considered part of the western European state system. As a result, they underestimate the number of state births and deaths in the international system and ignore the legacies of state-building outside of Europe. (For example, the often-used Correlates of War dataset defines states prior to 1920 as only those entities that had diplomatic missions at or above the rank of *charge d'affaires* with Britain and/or France.)

In an attempt to correct this oversight, Griffiths and Butcher 2013 have sought to expand the relevant system of states to include political entities possessing strong pre-colonial institutions. Traditional datasets suggest a monotonic increase in the number of states since 1800. (Figure 2)

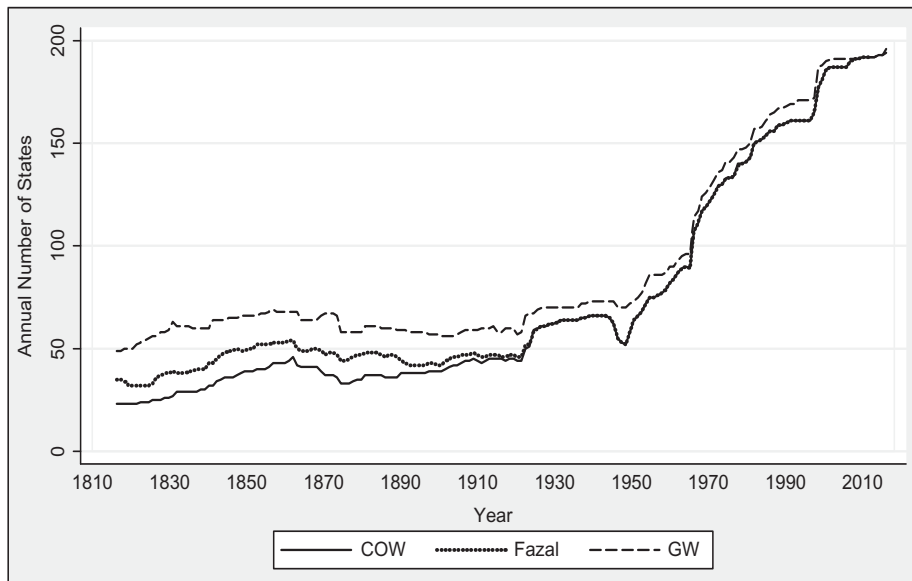


Figure 2. Global population of states, traditional datasets.⁹

⁹ Figure from Griffiths and Butcher 2013:750.

But as Griffiths and Butcher argue, adding pre-colonial entities reveals a concave historical trend, with a decline between 1800 and 1900, a plateau that lasts until the mid-20th century, and a sharp rise that levels off in the 1990s:

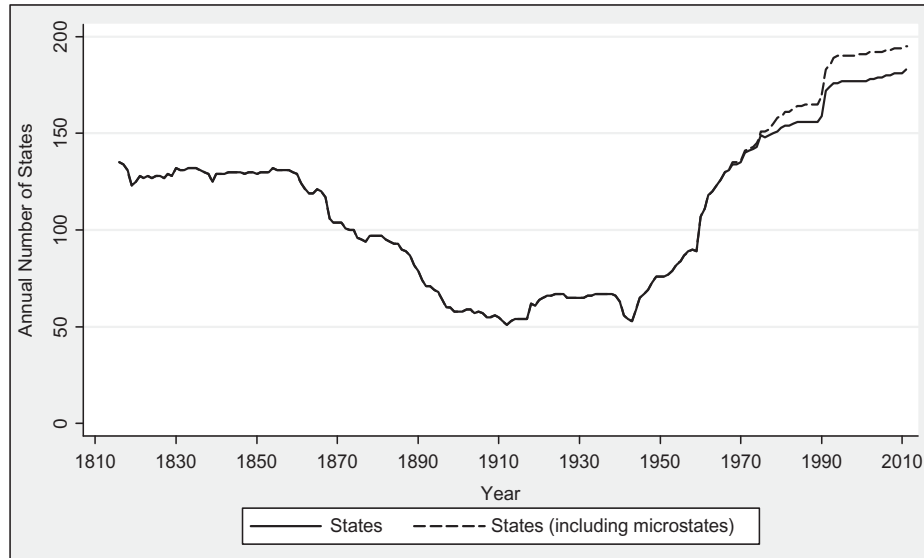


Figure 3. Global population of states, accounting for pre-colonial states.¹⁰

Deciding between these competing accounts has direct relevance for the application of OE theory to state formation. After all, a fundamental tenet of organizational ecology is that the environment helps to determine the conditions under which organizations emerge, persist, and die off, in a process akin to natural selection.¹¹ Taking the traditional story, the empirical evidence suggests that the global environment has been consistently permissive in allowing for the creation of new states. The Griffiths/Butcher story, however, is more complicated, suggesting that the international system produces competing incentives for organizational emergence. While the international system of the nineteenth century appears to favor a reduction in both the number and the variety of state forms, the twentieth century creates systemic incentives for the increase and fragmentation of these organizational forms.

II. Organizational Diversity and State Formation

A second limitation of existing datasets, therefore, is that they do not distinguish between the relevant sub-populations – that is, the organizational variety of birth legacies that accompany

¹⁰ Figure from Griffiths and Butcher 2013:751.

¹¹ Singh and Lumsden 1990.

state formation. In doing so, these datasets fail to categorize the *type* of state creation that leads to the creation and spread of new actors. To come back to one of my initial questions – when does the ecology of the international system favor secession, and when does it favor unification? Answering this question requires a classification of state creation legacies.

As a first cut, I examined all state entities since 1800 that were present in *either* the Correlates of War dataset or the Polity IV dataset. This expands the potential universe of cases but keeps the threshold for inclusion fairly high. The end result was 221 state entities, some with multiple exit and entry dates. I coded the years of state birth (and death, when applicable) of each country, and categorized the *type* of state creation in each case. Figure 4 shows the general trends in state birth, death, and resurrection since 1800.

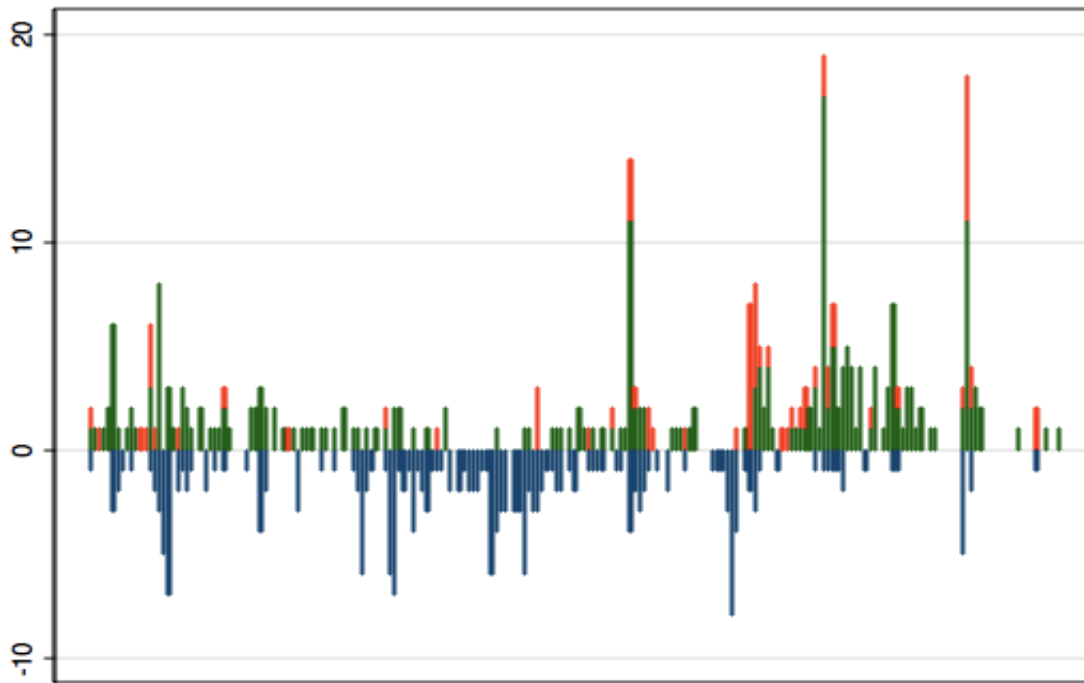


Figure 4. Population trends since 1800, focusing on state creation (green), state resurrection (red), and state death(blue).

These general trends suggest that environmental volatility, at least in the twentieth century, is closely linked to changes in the emergence and disappearance of new states. Particularly in the

last hundred years, changes in the international system have been closely associated with the birth and death of states.¹²

Code	Creation category	Number of cases since 1800	Percent of all cases
1	territorial consolidation	41	19
2	secession	52	24
3	merger/unification	8	3.6
4	dissolution/fragmentation	12	5.4
5	decolonization	94	43
9	misc/other/not yet coded	14	6.3
	TOTAL	221	

Table 1. Distribution of state creation types since 1800.¹³

Examining the categories of state formation also reveals particular trends over time. (A thorough analysis will have to wait the completed coding of cases.) For example, the majority of “territorial consolidation” cases are concentrated in the 19th century or before, and nearly disappear by the twentieth century. By contrast, the frequency of secession remains fairly constant across this time period. By contrast, decolonization as a path of state formation is nonexistent before 1800, then rises to about a quarter of all birth in the 19th century and becomes the predominant mode of state creation (approximately 60 percent) in the 20th century.

III. Populations and Niches in the Evolving Dynamics of State Formation

In short, preliminary analysis suggests two stylized facts that are key to the application of OE principles to theories of state formation:

1. The international environment has played an essential role in shaping the *number* of state actors. Systemic factors can tell us something about whether the international system has favored the proliferation of new entities, the consolidation of existing units, and the selection pressures that drive this process.

¹² Total state births since 1800: 221. Total state resurrections: 81. Total state deaths: 115.

¹³ Only the initial state births were coded here; in the near future, state resurrections and state deaths will also be classified according to these categories. Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

2. Changing environmental pressures may shape the *type* of state formation. At times international conditions may favor centripetal or decentralizing tendencies – secession, fragmentation, and imperial disintegration. In other times, international conditions may inhibit state creation or encourage centralizing tendencies through colonization, conquest and annexation, or voluntary unification.

The key step for an organizational ecology approach is to link the variety of organizational forms to the “niches” that sustain them. For example: which ecological “resource sets” determine which kind of state formation are likely to take place? Put another way: when does the organizational environment favor new state formation, and when does it inhibit growth in the number or variety of organizational types? I must confess that while there are obvious links that come to mind, this is the most preliminary element of the analysis. In lieu of a systematic theory, I want to suggest some arguments about the “emergent properties” of the international system that may shape its propensity for state formation.

Technological factors. The offense-defense literature suggests that systems in which offense is dominant are marked by conquest, expansion, and the aggregation of state entities. By contrast, defense-dominant systems are characterized by decentralization, fragmentation, and the proliferation of new units.¹⁴

International competition. Griffiths (2016) argues that the success of secession movements is often predicated on the intensity of competition in the international system. When the international system is competitive (as during the 19th century), secession movements face great obstacles against powerful states seeking to expand and consolidate their territory. By contrast, a relatively peaceful international system (as after 1945) facilitates the success of secession movements (and thus the creation of new entities).

Hegemonic preferences. The environmental incentives for state creation may reflect the preferences of rising powers. For example, decolonization accelerated after World War II because it reflected the preferences of both the US and the USSR. If so, the OE framework is of limited use, except insofar as the ecological environment is itself a byproduct of great power management. For instance, Coggins (2011, 2014) argues that secession movements are more likely to succeed when they have the support of the great powers.

Global norms. Fabry (2010) argues that the recognition of new states is deeply linked to the development of global norms and changes in international society. Likewise, Fazal (2007) argues that state death is a function of changing norms in the international system. Thus state death, she

¹⁴ Levy 1984; Jervis 1978.

argues, virtually ceases after 1945 due to the emergence of a strong norm against territorial conquest. In this way, the prevailing ecological norms can help shape both the likelihood of state creation and the types of states that emerge from this process. The norm of self-determination, for example, can encourage the creation of new entities even when the material incentives for such creation are absent. (The question remains to what extent changes in global norms may simply be reflections of other material changes in the environment.)

Global political economy. Alesina and Spolaore (2005) argue that highly-integrated international markets allow small and weak states to participate in the global economy at relatively low costs. Low tariffs, low transportation costs etc decrease the benefits of large economies of scale, and create a system that favors the proliferation of small entities. By contrast, an autarkic international system would favor the emergence of fewer large entities with domestic economies of scale.

Figure 5 offers a simplified view of how these ecological resources – geopolitical, economic, technological, and normative—can shape the likelihood and the type of state formation. The question for future research is how changes in these resources (and interaction among them) can alter the propensity for state creation, while also affecting the changing likelihood of the emergence of particular *types* of state creation:

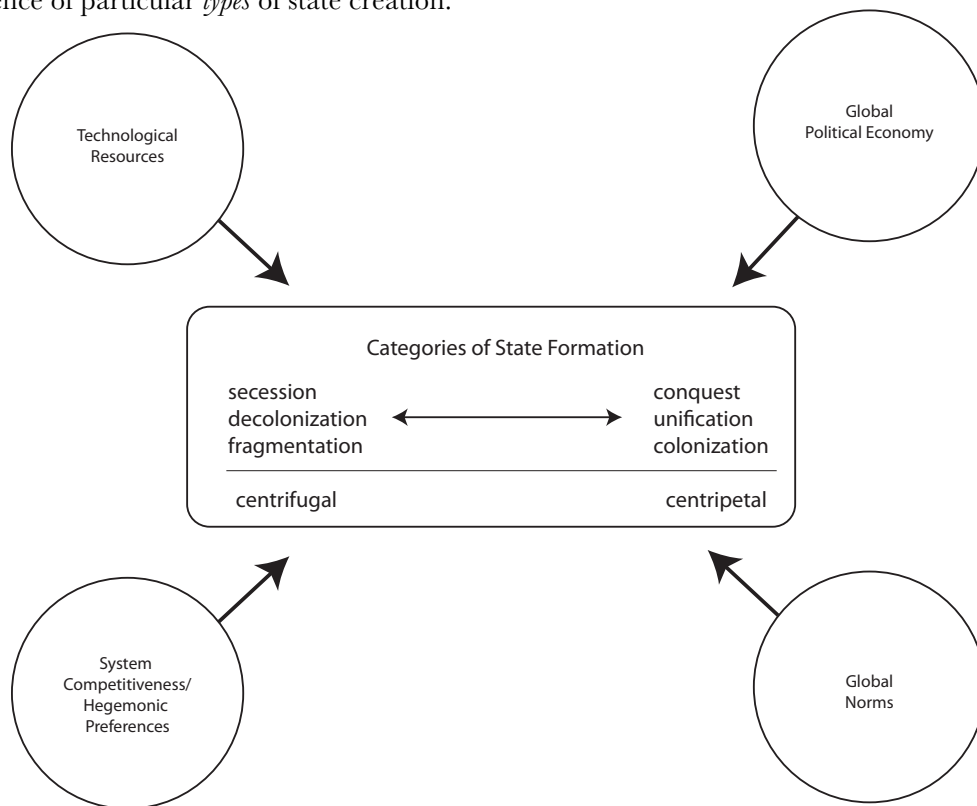


Figure 5. Global resource “niches” and types of state formation.

IV. Conclusion

State formation, particularly in the twentieth century, has been deeply embedded in abrupt changes in the international system. This memo argues that organizational ecology offers a useful prism through which to consider the global dynamics of state formation. Unlike traditional approaches to state formation, OE embeds this localized process in a networked environment whose features facilitate certain paths of state creation while blocking others. Moreover, the system's propensity for certain types of state formation can itself shift over time, driven by changes in the resources available to particular kinds of organizational varieties. The precise mechanisms through which this process unfolds awaits future research.

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