OTHER BOOKS IN REVIEW


Whatever may have been the case a decade ago, it is no longer necessary to worry about “bringing the state back in” to the analysis of development; the state has fully arrived as an independent object of study and will not soon lose that status. The advocates of state-centric approaches performed a useful service in countering the neglect and structural determinism of earlier theories. We now understand that the state is neither the handmaiden of a particular social class nor the passive registry of contending interest-group pressures; it is an institutional actor separate from, and autonomous of, forces based in civil society, irrespective of whether those forces are conceptualized as classes, interest groups, or elites. Yet the state-centric analysis of development begs as many questions as it answers.

The state’s coercive powers are manifestly inadequate to the achievement of ends much beyond the mere preservation of order. Since the most significant ends—for example, industrialization, social reconstruction—demand a high degree of more or less willing cooperation on the part of the populace at large; what other tools can the state bring to bear, and how do they function? Despite yesterday’s high hopes and a considerable expenditure of effort, no Third World state has yet managed to institute a more just and equitable social order than that associated with Western capitalism. Whence the societal resistance to change ordered from above? (The recent experiences of the USSR and Eastern Europe suggest that advanced technologies, industrial cultures, and social structures, and highly developed coercive and ideological apparatuses are much less central to the effectiveness of state-imposed social change than has generally been assumed heretofore.) Even in Africa, where processes of class formation are fairly new, states do not operate in a social vacuum. What is the relationship between the state and the contending forces of civil society, and how are the political outcomes of this relationship determined? Our discipline is now attempting to deal more directly with the culturally and historically determined structures of meaning that underlie all political action. How and to what degree can the state influence the evolution of the so-called moral order? How and to what degree is state action shaped and constrained by that order?

Joel S. Migdal’s *Strong Societies and Weak States* apparently sets out to answer such questions. In his theoretical chapter, Migdal centers on the issue of social control, conceptualized as “the successful subordination of people’s own inclinations of social behavior... in favor of the behavior prescribed by... rules” established by particular social forces or by the state (22). Many non-state forces and institutions “have used a variety of sanctions, rewards, and symbols to induce people to behave in their interactions according to certain rules or norms” (22); the state’s effort to institute its own social control places it in competition with these forces, and the outcome of the competition is very much an open question. Each contender puts forth a combination of incentives and punishments, “ordered and packaged... to be as attractive and compelling to
people as possible.” Importantly, Migi-
dal adds that although the “packaging
rests... on the bedrock of material needs
... it also lends meaning to people’s
behavior as they meet these needs.” Thus,
social control involves as well the shap-
ing of a “consciousness about social be-
havior” that “aims to tie action together
in some meaningful or purposeful way
... These systems of meaning... make
manageable a universe... They ad-
dress cravings and needs, such as sal-
vation, affection, and respect,” and may
be regarded as indispensable social
myths” (26).

Meanwhile, the people who are to be
controlled act on the basis of “strategies
of survival” which integrate “the mate-
rial and the moral.” These strategies have
an economic basis, to be sure, but they
also embody people’s use of “myths or
symbols to help explain their place and
prospects in an otherwise bewildering
world.” Since the “choice of compo-
ments for one’s strategy of survival is se-
verely constrained by available re-
sources, ideas, and organization means,”
social control “rests on the organiza-
tional ability to deliver key compo-
nents,” including the symbolic-mythical
component. The symbolic configura-
tions and “arrays of rewards and sanc-
tions have determined the characteristic
forms of social control in a society;
through time, they have constituted the
specific institutional arrangements that
have... marked off one culture from
another” (27). In thus refining the con-
cept of social control, Migdal has use-
fully combined ideas about ideology and
belief with notions of material interest
and power. This is a worthwhile advance
over deterministic theories, like ortho-
dox Marxism, and theories that reduce
all action to rational choice.

Given the nature of the theoretical
framework, one anticipates a rich anal-
ysis of carefully selected cases in which
the principal dimensions of social con-
trol, the symbolic-cultural in addition to
the material-economic, are subjected to
integrated empirical study in order to
verify the theory. Unfortunately, the
promise of the first chapter is never re-
deeled. The three cases examined—
Sierra Leone, Israel, and Egypt—have
very little in common; the suspicion arises
that they were selected because Migdal
already knew something about them
rather than because together they of-
fered a systematic test of theoretically
derived propositions and claims. Much
of the discussion belabor issues that most
analysts of Third World development
have for some time regarded as settled:
is it necessary, in 1990, to devote over
150 pages to demonstrating that the so-
cietal forces which most successfully re-
sist the state’s effort to establish social
control are products of colonialism rather
than “tradition”? Nor will many readers
be surprised to find that Third World
states are weak because their societies
suffer from “fragmented social control”
(non-state elites have usually managed
to preserve their social control and even
reinforce it by colonizing state institu-
tions). The emergence of a strong state,
Migdal believes, requires “massive so-
cietal dislocation, which severely weak-
ens social control” and which can be
provided only by “a devastating com-
bination of war and/or revolution, some-
times associated with massive migra-
tion” (269–70). There is no hint that
other wrenching social changes—the in-
troduction of industrialism and capitalist
market and work relationships, urban
migration, processes of class formation,
etc.—could have comparable effects.

The popular resistance to domination
that has become an important area of
research is equally absent from Mig-
dal’s treatment. The explication of the
case studies follows well-worn elite-an-
alytical pathways from which the people