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Lisa Blaydes, Anna Grzymala-Busse

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HISTORICAL STATE FORMATION WITHIN AND BEYOND EUROPE

By LISA BLAYDES^a and ANNA GRZYMALA-BUSSE^{a*}

^a Department of Political Science, Stanford University, Stanford, California

* Corresponding author. E-mail: amgbusse@stanford.edu

ABSTRACT

State formation is a critical concern for comparative politics. Much of the most influential literature has focused on the politically fragmented setting of early modern Europe, where warmaking fostered state consolidation and the development of institutions of representation and taxation. More recently, scholars have expanded this perspective by emphasizing the state-building implications of alternative forms of competition, inter-state cooperation, and emulation, as well as the influence of a broader set of societal actors beyond belligerent rulers. The authors review recent scholarship on state formation that suggests that the canonical bellicist path is only one pathway to state consolidation, both in Europe and beyond. This article draws attention to the importance of geography and to new insights regarding the organization of state-society relations and the influence of regional and global economic engagements on state formation.

STATE formation has long been a fundamental concern of comparative politics. Since the early twentieth-century writings of Otto Hintze and Max Weber, scholars have sought to understand when territorial states first emerged and how states came to predominate over other forms of governance. The most influential scholarship on these topics describes early modern Europe, where the fragmentation of political authority was a critical antecedent for state formation. This political polycentrism led to competition among rulers, both belligerent and otherwise. States sought to engage in forms of revenue production¹ and sovereign territorial states proved better than city-states or city-leagues at organizing effective rule.² States that could not effectively meet the constant threat of war ceased to exist.³

¹ E.g., Levi 1988.

² E.g., Spruyt 1994.

³ E.g., Bean 1973; Tilly 1990; Downing 1992; Ertman 1997. Cederman et al. 2023 find that armed conflict led to the consolidation of larger states. In contrast, Abramson 2017 argues that small states survived alongside these new larger entities. Møller and Doucette 2022 and Grzymala-Busse 2023b argue that the fragmentation was deliberate and persistent, engineered by the Catholic Church.

Much has been gained as a result of the scholarly focus on state formation through a European lens. But what might be learned about state formation—and state-building—by adopting a broader view of these concepts, one that fully incorporates the experience of world regions with significantly less political fragmentation than medieval and early modern Europe? We argue that in settings with lower levels of potential conflict between political units, states were primarily shaped by their geographic features, their vulnerability to peripheral actors, their strategies of elite management, and their place in regional and global economies. By zooming out from the highly particular European experience, we can take an expansive view on the question of state formation and consider alternative paths to the creation of modern states.

EUROPE IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

A fuller understanding of state formation requires both a rethinking of canonical explanations of state formation in historical Europe as well as a general understanding of state formation as it occurred in other world regions. The idea that geographic factors are core determinants of early state development, especially in river valleys across world regions, is foundational within the literature.⁴ These old-state locations tended to be early adopters of settled agriculture and to have had higher levels of population density and more centralized state forms.⁵ Geography also had the potential to encourage forms of political fragmentation, working against centralized forms of authority in favor of polycentrism.

Regions with old states, such as those found in the greater Middle East and China, tended to take different paths to the modern state than world regions that were more politically fragmented. Indeed, in areas with lower levels of political fragmentation, nascent states did not interact intensely, and rulers did not face persistent, state-based external threats. Instead, threats tended to be either internal—consisting of revolting peasants, military garrison insurrections, or elite rebellions—or to emanate from the periphery—consisting of aggression by desert or steppe warriors. As a result, these regions tend to be characterized by inward conquest by indigenous elites (as in China) or by externally recruited elites (as in the Middle East), rather than by struggles to solve problems associated with interstate war.

Conversely, where geography favored fragmentation, nascent states faced external threats. The canonical bellicist literature argues that early

⁴ E.g., Diamond 1997.

⁵ See Olsson and Paik 2016 and Olsson and Paik 2020 for more on the political and cultural implications of early transition to settled agriculture.

modern warfare was the result, with taxes and parliaments as functional responses to the need to prepare for conflict in Europe. While such threats were indeed important, a newer literature suggests that states interacted with each other in other ways as well—through cooperation, via emulation, and through attempts by rulers to assert supremacy over nonstate actors, including religious authorities, regional nobles, and autonomous cities. The state institutions that emerged from these interactions were not simply the byproducts of war but rather best practices that could convey significant advantages in governance. The eventual assertion of state supremacy over forms of baronial and religious authority was the crowning achievement of historical state formation in Europe.⁶

The pathways highlighted above assume relatively high levels of population density. But how can we characterize state formation patterns in world regions that tended to be both fragmented and less population dense? World regions with a North-South orientation, as observed in the Americas or on the African continent,⁷ tended to be politically fragmented while simultaneously less population dense, limiting the threat of conflict and hampering the rise of centralized states.⁸ In such settings, control over people may have been more important than control over land⁹ and warfare between nascent states less of a political imperative. Because nascent states did not constantly interact, they had fewer incentives to build the institutions necessary for the formation of cohesive and centralized states. As a result, fewer competing institutional forms existed that could engender kinds of emulation or cooperation. In addition, in the Americas, regions that may have been population dense were depopulated as a result of disease transmission during the Columbian Exchange, decimating populations associated with imperial states.

THE GEOGRAPHIC ROOTS OF STATE FORMATION

Geographic factors have long been hypothesized to influence the size and shape of states.¹⁰ In what has been called the “fractured land” hypothesis, Jared Diamond argues that geographic regions divided by high mountains and dense forests are less likely to form large, unified states

⁶ In contrast, relatively high population density and fragmentation were associated with lower levels of military conflict in India, where rulers governed through local alliances and cooptation of intermediaries. See Jones 2003; Nath 2019; and Tóth 2019.

⁷ Diamond 1997.

⁸ Herbst 2000.

⁹ E.g., Herbst 2000.

¹⁰ See Crosby 1972; Crosby 2004; Jones 2003; Morris 2010; Morris 2022.

than those with a core area of high productivity. Diamond suggests that China's alluvial core lands, located between the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, provided a rich agricultural region conducive to political dominance by a single polity.¹¹ In contrast, Europe was predisposed to state fragmentation as a result of geographic features that encouraged small, dispersed political units. While the existence of the Roman Empire may be a counterpoint to such arguments, Walter Scheidel argues that the size and extent of the Roman Empire was an anomaly for Europe—a political feat neither preceded by anything similar nor repeated in later European history.¹² In much the same way, the geography of South Asia made establishing an empire in India difficult.¹³ Jesús Fernández-Villaverde and colleagues seek to explicitly test the fractured land hypothesis with an empirical model of topographical and geographic features as predictors for state formation in Eurasia.¹⁴ They find that geographic factors, such as topography and differences in land productivity, explain political polycentrism in Europe and unification in China. Resource endowments are another geographic factor that shape the potential for population density, extraction, and fragmentation.¹⁵

Geography also interacted with emergent state forms to jointly shape the types of conflict that predominated across world regions. Mark Dincecco and Yuhua Wang argue that in Europe, political fragmentation was consistent with forms of externally oriented interstate conflict, in which attack threats could come from any direction.¹⁶ Conversely, in more politically centralized China, most political conflict took the form of either rebellion or civil war. When external threats did emerge, they were typically unidirectional, emanating from steppe nomads who mounted attacks against a settled Chinese polity.¹⁷ Dincecco and Wang's arguments build on scholarship that explores the nature of relations between pastoral nomads and adjacent settled societies.¹⁸ Indeed, Peter Turchin finds that a state's location near a steppe frontier was strongly correlated with the emergence of large empires in Eurasia.¹⁹ The influence of nomadic warriors and peripheral groups has also had a major effect on state formation in the Middle East, a phenomenon first identified by

¹¹ Diamond 1997, 414.

¹² Scheidel 2019.

¹³ Bayly 1990; Jones 2003.

¹⁴ Fernández-Villaverde et al. 2023.

¹⁵ For example, Sokoloff and Engerman 2000; Pomeranz 2000; but see Easterly and Levine 2003.

¹⁶ Dincecco and Wang 2018.

¹⁷ Dincecco and Wang 2018.

¹⁸ Barfield 1989; Turchin 2009.

¹⁹ Turchin 2009. Blaydes and Paik 2021 suggest that the emergence of large land empires reduced jurisdictional barriers on the Silk Road, allowing entrepot cities to prosper and grow.

the fourteenth-century North African scholar Ibn Khaldun and widely remarked upon since.²⁰

The interaction of geographic features with emerging state forms further influenced the way technology was adopted across world regions. Kenneth Chase argues that areas with vulnerability to steppe and desert nomads failed to quickly and effectively harness firearm technologies, since such arms tended to be relatively ineffective against enemies of this type.²¹ As a result, states in China, the Middle East, and South Asia were late adopters of gunpowder weapons, a fact that may have disadvantaged these regions in later periods of global exploration and conquest.²² At the same time, conflict within Europe led to the growth of cities as rural populations sought shelter behind city walls and to innovations in urban fortification, like the *trace italienne*.²³ European cities became important laboratories for institutional design—including representative governance—as well as engines for economic growth with the emergence of an influential merchant class.

MANAGING UNRULY SOCIETIES

Political fragmentation also influenced the types of institutions that evolved to manage relations between states and societies. Europe's political polycentrism was associated with overlapping and fractured forms of sovereignty.²⁴ Gianfranco Poggi describes this setting as one of “feudal anarchy” associated with “baronial insubordination” that nascent states had a strong incentive to curb.²⁵ These same areas witnessed intense competition between forms of secular and religious authority.²⁶ Indeed, neither the state nor the church had clear authority over the other.²⁷

Lisa Blaydes and Christopher Paik argue that the Holy Land Crusades, a centuries-long form of “war at a distance” played a key role in breaking down old dependencies while simultaneously supporting the development of centralized state forms.²⁸ Until the Crusades, one's ability to alienate a feudal fief with the goal of raising funds was limited. After the Crusades began, however, a market for land emerged.

²⁰ E.g., Kennedy 2010; Blaydes 2017.

²¹ Chase 2003.

²² See also Gommans 2018.

²³ Dincecco and Onorato 2017.

²⁴ E.g., Blaydes and Chaney 2013.

²⁵ Poggi 1978, 34.

²⁶ E.g., Grzymala-Busse 2023a.

²⁷ E.g., Strayer 1970.

²⁸ Blaydes and Paik 2016.

In addition, the near simultaneous attempts to monetize these landed estates to raise funds for crusading greatly damaged the political power and wealth of medieval landholders. And as rulers sought to finance their own crusading expeditions, they were forced to innovate in the development of royal taxation and state extractive capacity.

If the Holy Land Crusades were an inflection point in the transition from a fragmented and polycentric Europe, we should see forms of increased state-making and state consolidation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. And indeed, many of the core institutions that we have come to associate with nascent states arose in this period and, importantly, existed long before the costly interstate wars of the early modern era in Europe. For example, the provision of law and order was a critical aspect of political authority during the High Middle Ages; kings and nobles alike were expected to resolve conflicts and provide judgements. State-making came to be strongly connected to law-making and the administration of justice through courts.²⁹ Kings made great efforts to wrest juridical authority from barons to establish centralized authority and courts became institutions responsible for collecting revenue in the form of taxes and fees.

Parliaments also arose long before kings had to negotiate taxes for the expensive wars that followed the Military Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact, the golden age of medieval parliaments begins in the thirteenth century, when assemblies met to deliver justice, legitimate kings, and assent to taxation and other royal policies. Deborah Boucoyannis emphasizes the role that medieval parliaments played as institutions that existed to provide justice.³⁰ Political fragmentation—to the extent that it was associated with state size—influenced the effectiveness of these institutions.³¹ Gary Cox argues that Europe's political fragmentation interacted with self-governing cities and national parliaments to facilitate forms of “economic liberty” that unleashed interconnected, rapid urban growth.³²

²⁹ E.g., Shirkey 2022.

³⁰ Boucoyannis 2021.

³¹ Stasavage 2010.

³² Cox 2017. Coalitions among burghers, monarchs, and cities played the key role in the rise of the territorial nation state in Europe (e.g., Spruyt 1994). Scholars examined the balance of power between monarchs and nobility as critical to the form that states would take in Europe (Kiernan 1965, 24; Poggi 1990, 42; Downing 1992; Ertman 1997). Powerful nobles with exit options could constrain rulers and obtain property rights (e.g., Bates and Lien 1985; Levi 1988; North and Weingast 1989; Kiser and Barzel 1991; Hoffman and Rosenthal 1997; Barzel and Kiser 1997; Blaydes and Chaney 2013). Subsequently, noble families sought to ensure their standing and status by collectively building a patrimonial state (Adams 2005).

Existing law and the rules imposed by it further shaped state formation in Europe. For example, family law and inheritance rules helped to limit conflict over territory. As a result, dynastic unions and primogeniture meant that states could expand, contract, or disappear thanks to inheritance rules rather than via warfare.³³ Broadly, the medieval Catholic Church limited marriage and restricted obligations to extended kinship networks.³⁴ During this period, Europe came to distinguish itself for the rules that made both property and royal office inheritable in more predictable ways.

At the same time, however, state-elite relations in Europe remained peculiar. As David Stasavage points out, the European state was distinct when compared to that which existed in polities in Muslim societies or in imperial China.³⁵ For example, in Islamic dynasties, slave-soldiers facilitated the consolidation of state power.³⁶ This constitutes an alternative route to state-building that meaningfully differs from what J. C. Sharman and Ayse Zarakol have called the “over-studied European trajectory.”³⁷ Sharman and Zarakol argue that the “slaves as the state” model emerged as a common state-building strategy for long periods of human history in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.³⁸ Reliance on slave-soldiers, however, generated relatively brittle forms of political power that came to be associated with significant ruler turnover.³⁹ In addition, slave-soldiers undermined the strength of the state by preying on common-pool resources when seeking to provide financial security for their offspring.⁴⁰

In China, state-building strategies relied on management of geographically dispersed social groups. To investigate these patterns, Wang examines a thousand years of Chinese political development, emphasizing that the configurations of elite networks were critical to the nature of authority and stability.⁴¹ Where central elites connected to geographically broad social groups, a strong state emerged, capable of protecting the far-flung interests of the elites. Where a central elite was connected to geographically defined, proximate regions, politics was compartmentalized, and internal conflicts tended to be geographically concentrated. A central elite unconnected to societal groups meant that the state did

³³ E.g., Konrad and Skaperdas 2007; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014; Sharma 2015; Acharya and Lee 2019.

³⁴ E.g., Henrich 2020.

³⁵ Stasavage 2020.

³⁶ Blaydes and Chaney 2013.

³⁷ Sharman and Zarakol 2023.

³⁸ Sharman and Zarakol 2023.

³⁹ Blaydes and Chaney 2013.

⁴⁰ Blaydes 2019.

⁴¹ Wang 2022.

not enjoy strong linkages to society, making the central elite vulnerable to both internal rebellion and external invasion. Scholars have provided empirical support for the importance of the Chinese civil service examination in supporting the stability of Chinese state institutions.⁴²

COOPERATION, EMULATION, AND TRADE

States also interacted with each other in other ways, including competing to provide markets for security.⁴³ The emergence of mutually recognized borders comprises what Avidit Acharya and Alexander Lee have called the “cartel system of states”—a collusive recognition of territorial sovereignty among localized monopolies.⁴⁴ Although brief spells of conflict may have occurred, the cartel returned to long spells of cooperation. This cooperative perspective on the origins of states is also emphasized by scholars who argue that state formation represents the solution to coordination over shared economic institutions, like irrigated agriculture.⁴⁵

Models for state-building diffused across space as political actors observed and emulated institutional forms viewed as successful. Joseph Strayer argues that the Catholic Church provided emerging states with meaningful governance models.⁴⁶ Anna Grzymala-Busse details the avenues by which these institutional practices and norms diffused to states, such as the migration of literate and trained clergy to various royal courts.⁴⁷ The Catholic Church offered institutional templates for rule of law, taxation, representation, and royal administration.⁴⁸ Eric Grynaviski and Sverrir Steinsson provide an account of institutional diffusion through war.⁴⁹ They argue that raids, settlements, and conquests by Norwegian and Danish rulers in England offered an opportunity for institutional learning that influenced state formation processes in Norway and Denmark over the course of the ninth through fourteenth centuries.

⁴² E.g., Huang and Yang 2022.

⁴³ E.g., Konrad and Skaperdas 2012; Acharya and Lee 2018.

⁴⁴ Acharya and Lee 2022.

⁴⁵ Allen, Bertazzini, and Heldring 2023.

⁴⁶ Strayer 1970.

⁴⁷ Grzymala-Busse 2023a. Religious movements, like Holy Land Crusades mobilization, (e.g., Blaydes and Paik 2016) and Cluniac monastic institutions (Doucette and Møller 2021), are also associated with the emergence of autonomous cities.

⁴⁸ Grzymala-Busse 2023a; see also Berman 1983 and Fukuyama 2011.

⁴⁹ Grynaviski and Steinsson 2023.

The importance of institutional diffusion extends beyond the European case. Chin-Hao Huang and David Kang offer a similar diffusion-oriented account of state formation in East Asia, showing that Japanese and Korean elites consciously and intentionally emulated Chinese models of governance.⁵⁰ They also show that institutions, including legal and penal codes, military conscription, taxation practices, educational systems, and census taking, were adopted in the absence of war and with the goal of bolstering the authority and prestige of political elites. Given the predominance of the Chinese model of governance, the fundamental organizing principle in East Asia was hierarchy, not sovereign equality, as no state existed that might compete with the power and influence of imperial China.⁵¹

Economically driven perspectives on state formation have also been highly influential.⁵² Recent scholarship in this vein emphasizes the importance of global trade and borrowing in narratives of state-building around the world. For example, Sebastián Mazzuca describes Latin America as a case of successful state formation but unsuccessful state-building, in which political development took place in a context of territorial stability.⁵³ In particular, he argues that reliance on trade meant peripheral elites were not effectively incorporated into a cohesive state administration.⁵⁴ Conversely, Ryan Saylor argues that trade was a fundamental driver of state formation in Latin America, and export-oriented trade allowed economic elites to provide public goods.⁵⁵ Didac Queralt finds that the ability of developing countries to turn to the credit houses of Europe for sovereign loans enabled rulers to bypass critical stages of fiscal capacity-building in the state development process.⁵⁶ In other words, easy credit in the early stages of state-building led to weaker forms of state capacity.

In addition, colonial states built state institutions. A literature on colonization argues that colonizers imposed particular forms of administration

⁵⁰ Huang and Kang 2022.

⁵¹ Kang 2020.

⁵² E.g., North and Thomas 1973. These accounts suggest that Europe's fragmentation increased the exit options for merchant elites, forcing rulers to compete; see, e.g., Landes 1998; Jones 2003). Fragmentation could also foster forms of overtaxation, free riding, and endemic warfare; see, e.g., Epstein 2000; Rosenthal and Wong 2011).

⁵³ Mazzuca 2021.

⁵⁴ Soifer 2015 argues that where politicians faced a single political and economic center, they developed a centralizing ideology and expanded state control to the periphery, developing their own bureaucracy rather than relying on peripheral elites. Kurtz 2013 argues that elite cooperation and free labor markets allowed state-building to take off in the postindependence period.

⁵⁵ Saylor 2014.

⁵⁶ Queralt 2022.

and law on Indigenous populations, including a decentralized bureaucracy in the Philippines and a centralized one in India.⁵⁷ Such imposition interacted with Indigenous structures. Thus, Diana Kim argues that local officials played a pivotal role in the development of state bureaucracies in postcolonial societies.⁵⁸ Similarly, Pavithra Suryanaryan finds that high-caste elites in colonial India undermined tax collection to dull the effects of franchise expansion on public good provision.⁵⁹ In both cases, local elites shaped the colonial state and its capacities.

Despite significant new investigations of historical state formation under colonialism, important questions remain unanswered about how precolonial conditions interacted with colonial experiences to generate postcolonial state-building outcomes.⁶⁰ In part, this gap remains because much of the comparative literature on state formation discussed above focuses on regions that were relatively lightly colonized (China and the Middle East) relative to more intensively colonized areas (Latin America, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa). For example, in this essay we have said little about how forms of precolonial state formation, such as the Aztec and Inca empires and Mayan civilization, influenced later state efforts to project political power in the Americas. Nor have we discussed how deeply rooted local structures have shaped political development outcomes in Africa and elsewhere.⁶¹

An important frontier for this research is the study of historical state formation in South Asia. The diverse geography of the region suggests a mixture of state formation strategies. The Indo-Gangetic plain in the north (where Muslim rule was established in the twelfth century) combines with mountain ranges, valleys, and rivers in the south and extensive coastlines that offered opportunity for maritime trade and conquest.⁶² South Asia is also demographically dense and has a history of political fragmentation, making empires difficult to establish.⁶³ At the same time, the region's trajectory of state formation appears to have been transformed to a significant degree by the colonial experience. For example, colonial institutions interacted with domination by local landlords to affect state capacity and subsequent economic development.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ E.g., Sidel 1999; Hutchcroft 2000; Vu 2010.

⁵⁸ Kim 2020.

⁵⁹ Suryanaryan 2016; see also Chibber 2003.

⁶⁰ See Mahoney 2010 for a discussion of these issues as related to Latin American economic and social development.

⁶¹ E.g., Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2013.

⁶² Dincecco et al. 2022 show that where precolonial conflict existed, there is higher economic development in contemporary India, suggesting the potential for competitive mechanisms at work.

⁶³ Jones 2003.

⁶⁴ E.g., Banerjee and Iyer 2005; Naseemullah and Staniland 2016; Lee 2018.

While the length and nature of colonial episodes differed across regions, we need to develop further our understanding of the impact of precolonial legacies and colonization on state consolidation.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE EFFECTS OF FRAGMENTATION AND CONFLICT

Arguments about conflict-driven state-building have deeply influenced our understanding of the origins of states and state systems. Scholars of comparative politics have fruitfully explored these ideas in the context of state formation across world regions, including on the African continent⁶⁵ and in China during the warring states period.⁶⁶ Yet war is only one of many channels that drive the evolution of states. Bellicist accounts are limited in what they say about state-building—the formation of internal institutions of order, justice, extraction, and societal negotiation. Indeed, some bellicist accounts see domestic institutions as either functional responses to the exigencies of war or inadvertent byproducts of warmaking. Accordingly, recent scholarly contributions have sought to reexamine the sources of state-building and institutional formation within and beyond Europe.

In this article, we reviewed developments in the literature on state formation that, taken together, provide a broad look at the diverse origins of states and state systems in Europe as well as in a comparative perspective. We find that the literature increasingly emphasizes the importance of geography, the organization of state-society relations, and the influence of regional and global interactions as key determinants of state formation.

These new lines of research have prompted a rethinking of familiar conceptual reference points. For example, a number of the contributions that we have highlighted suggest that the effects of war on state-building might operate through channels other than those that have been most commonly hypothesized.⁶⁷ In addition, recent scholarship has emphasized the role of cooperation—not conflict—in processes of state formation,⁶⁸ as well as the importance of emulation of state forms across polities.⁶⁹ Taken together, these new venues of research suggest

⁶⁵ Herbst 2000.

⁶⁶ Period was 475–221 BC. Hui 2005.

⁶⁷ E.g., Blaydes and Paik 2016; Dincecco and Wang 2018; Grynaviski and Steinsson 2023.

⁶⁸ E.g., Acharya and Lee 2022.

⁶⁹ E.g., Huang and Kang 2022; Grzymala-Busse 2023a.

that the paths to historical state formation are diverse and complex—and leave much still to be explored.

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AUTHORS

LISA BLAYDES is a professor in the Department of Political Science and a senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. Her research interests include comparative politics and the politics of the Middle East. Blaydes is the author of *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein* (Princeton University Press, 2018). She can be reached at blaydes@stanford.edu.

ANNA GRZYMALA-BUSSE is the Michelle and Kevin Douglas Professor of International Studies in the Department of Political Science at Stanford University. Her research focuses on the state, political parties, religion and politics, and post-communist politics. She is the author of four books: *Redeeming the Communist Past: The Regeneration of Communist Parties in East Central Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); *Rebuilding Leviathan: Party Competition and State Development in Post-Communist Democracies* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); *Nations under God: How Churches Use Moral Authority to Influence Policy* (Princeton

University Press, 2015); and *Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State* (Princeton University Press, 2023). She can be reached at amgbusse@stanford.edu.

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