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Sidney Tarrow’s *War, States, and Contention* is a hard book to pin down. The book is framed as a broad, theoretical intervention in macro-historical sociology, but it is also a deeply moral reckoning with the state of American politics in the War on Terror. If those two aims prove tricky to reconcile, the book is nonetheless an expansive, intriguing, and stimulating exploration of issues of importance to a wide range of historians.

The book’s major theoretical intervention can be gleaned from its title–Tarrow seeks to bring the study of contentious politics, of which he is an expert, into dialogue with literature on the relationship of state-making to warfare. The approach is, quite explicitly, an extension of Charles Tilly’s famous argument that wars make states as states make war. To that “axiom,” as Tarrow puts it, “I add the codicil ‘when states make war, this changes internal contention and thus the nature of the future state’” (p. 7). The book is dedicated to Tilly; Tarrow and Tilly co-authored *Contentious Politics* (2006).

The potential subjects encapsulated in that codicil are vast, as indicated by the five questions that drive Tarrow’s study: “How does war-making produce state-building, and what are their joint effects on rights and citizen contention? How do states control contention in times of war? How do states interact with civil society in wartime? How does war affect contention in the wake of war? How does war affect the future relationship between states and contention?” (p. 20).

These are clearly important questions—the real challenge is finding a way to provide concrete answers to such sweeping historical issues. “If I am not to descend into generalities,” Tarrow acknowledges, “the book’s scope will have to be limited in time, space, and subject matter” (p. 7). This desire to make a broad theoretical intervention and to ground it in a set of historical case studies produces what Tarrow concedes to be the “unconventional architecture of the book” (p. xiv). The ambition and idiosyncrasy of his approach can best be seen by outlining that architecture. After an introduction that helpfully lays out the book’s theoretical agenda, part 1 features three chapters, each of which is a case study of the role of war in state-building. A chapter on the French Revolution explores the birth of the modern state, and the modern notion of emergency powers. A chapter on the US Civil War shows how warfare expanded the power of the American state. The final chapter turns to Italy, and shows how the Italian state was unable to manage the contentious politics set off by World War 1, and was remade by the fascist movement that emerged out of those politics.

Part 2 then focuses on the emergence of the American warfare state from World War 1 to the present. Chapter 5 serves as an introduction to the section and explores shifts in warfare in the late twentieth century. It emphasizes the emergence of “composite conflicts” in which state and non-state actors use both conventional and unconventional forms of warfare—the chapter takes the Northern Irish Troubles as its primary case study. Chapter 6 explores the emergence of the American national security state between 1917 and 1975, and sketches such familiar episodes as the emergence of civil liberties activism in response to WW1 censorship, Japanese internment, the growth of the military-industrial complex during the Cold War, and contention over the surveillance state and the imperial presidency during the Vietnam War. The next pair of chapters explore the national security state during the War on Terror, once again sketching...
familiar episodes such as the George W. Bush administration’s manipulation of the news media, the expansion and semi-privatization of surveillance, and the practices of torture and rendition. Chapter 9 analyzes activism during the War on Terror, particularly antiwar protests, the legal activism of the Center for Constitutional Rights and the American Civil Liberties Union, and the emergence of online activists.

Part 3 consists of a single chapter, an intriguing exploration of the “dark side of internationalism” after 9/11 (p. 217): extraordinary rendition; Bush administration massaging of international law; and the proliferation of anti-terrorist state power throughout the world via the multilateral channels of liberal internationalism. As examples, Tarrow focuses on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373, and the politics of rendition in Italy and Britain.

While the subtitle of the book calls it a “comparative historical study,” this unusual structure reveals that Tarrow is not doing comparison to generate broadly applicable, rigidly determined models of structural change. During the first part of the book, for instance, Tarrow flirts with an eight-part “emergency script” drawn from Kim Lane Scheppele, but after using it to analyze the French Revolution, and mentioning it briefly in his treatment of the US Civil War, he lets it drop out of the analysis. And the book distributes its analytic attention too unevenly to generate a clear sense of cross-national trends. The bulk of the study is devoted to the United States, with brief forays into three other western European states. Tarrow acknowledges this limitation in the book’s final pages, but his highly truncated, six-page treatment of national liberation wars and state-making in Israel, Burma, Indonesia, and Algeria does not do a great deal to overcome it. At the same time, this is not a work of primary historical research but a work of synthesis and interpretation based on published scholarship. Tarrow’s treatment of the rise of the American national security state, for instance, is a helpful integration of the work of Mary Dudziak, Geoffrey Stone, Michael Hogan, and others who are likely to be familiar to scholars of America’s Cold War.

The success of the book thus depends on the analytic insights that can be drawn from its comparisons, juxtapositions, and theoretical framings. And on this front, the book’s competing desires to make macro-theoretical interventions and to interpret contemporary politics leads it to speak in two registers. At times, Tarrow flattens his analysis into broad and somewhat indeterminate generalizations: “I will show that political contention has become imbricated with war-making in three important ways: (1) in mobilization for war, sometimes working to prevent war but more often enticing states to go to war; (2) in war-making, sometimes instilling patriotism in citizen armies and sometimes assuring defeat by passive or active resistance; and (3) in war’s wake, when political opportunities open up to change the direction of states and sometimes overturn them” (p. 15). Historians are unlikely to object to such formulations, and the openness to historical variation (sometimes X, and sometimes Y) will likely appeal much more than formalistic model-building. But such an approach is also a little underwhelming—if the devil is just in the detail, why even frame the problem so broadly?

The reason is that Tarrow is also looking for what he calls “recurrent processes” (p. 20). It is in this second register, one attuned to the troubling relationships between the state and civil society during the War on Terror, that Tarrow makes a sequence of observations that are most likely to intrigue historians. His account of recent history is grim. The state has developed vast powers to “mobilize and maintain consent” during wars of ever-increasing duration, and its emergency powers ratchet up in the wake of war (p. 247). Effective resistance to these processes is an uncertain proposition: the 2003 antiwar movement failed to halt the Iraq War while civil libertarian legal activism can become enmeshed in long-running court struggles in which the state can stay one step ahead by rewriting the law. The most effective mode of resistance, Tarrow suggests, might come from “lone individuals” like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden who are embedded within the state, and can exploit as a weakness its otherwise intimidating expansion into new arenas of civil society (p. 251).

Tarrow’s broadly comparativist approach is helpful in illuminating what is distinctive about these developments. While the mobilization of mass-civilian armies may have created an opportunity for mass-rights claims in the past, for instance, the rise of a professionalized and semi-privatized military has undermined that form of political contention in the present. He makes a similarly illuminating set of observations about the way that contemporary rights are rolled back not merely through states of exception to the law, but also through statist manipulation of the law. Tarrow’s approach produces many such clarifying and thought-provoking juxtapositions.

But the many moving pieces of Tarrow’s analysis can make it difficult to discern a clear causal argument that
explains the dynamics of the current War on Terror. The book often slips back into its more abstract theoretical register to summarize its broader narrative: “the repertoire of contention and the state’s strategies of social control evolve in an unending reciprocal spiral of move and countermove” (p. 251). But what produces new repertoires of contention? What accounts for the effectiveness of state strategies of social control? How do these particular processes change over time? These difficult questions tend to go unanswered.

Take, for instance, the important question of the state’s ability to marshal public opinion behind the politics of warfare—this is key to minimizing contention and legitimizing state expansion, and Tarrow returns to it at key moments in his account, emphasizing the power of both state messaging and a diffuse American “creed” to legitimate war as a necessary defense of “liberty.” But if these work to produce consensus at some moments, what explains moments of resistance or rejection? How are counterhegemonic discourses and movements developed? Which sections of society are inclined to support militarism, which to resist, which to blithely ignore? How has this changed over time, as both associational life and media structure have evolved from the 1910s to the present? A finer-grained analysis of ideological struggle in the public sphere might help to explain the uneven historical development of the warfare state.

Or, perhaps more crucially, take the relationship of war making to broader state-society relations. Borrowing from Michael Mann, Tarrow devotes a great deal of attention to the state’s “infrastructural power,” and suggests that the intertwining of state power with civil society risks the emergence of new sorts of state domination of society even as it creates new possibilities for resistance. The paradoxical nature of infrastructural power is intriguing, but one is left to wonder what historical conditions weigh the scales in favor of the state in some moments, and society in others. And more broadly, one wonders how political dynamics migrate from other domains to shape the unfolding of infrastructural and hierarchical forms of power—to understand the semi-privatization of surveillance and security, for instance, it would be helpful to understand the broader neoliberal currents shaping American political culture. Similarly, one gains little sense from the book about what interests motivate the “state” in its pursuit of particular policies. There is little analysis here of social movements of the nationalist Right, and little discussion of the relationship between state actors and particular political, economic, and ideological interest groups in the contemporary United States.

In a book of such scope, that already addresses so many topics, it might seem churlish to focus on what may seem like a few areas in need of further specification. But for those looking to understand the historical origins of our present moment, and for those looking to chart a way out of it, these sorts of details are important—they provide a clearer view of the interactions between state and society that rightly fascinate Tarrow.

All of which is perhaps to say that Tarrow’s desires to analyze the present state of American politics and create a broad theoretical intervention remain, at the end of the day, somewhat uncomfortable bedfellows. His comparativist approach certainly casts into provocative relief some of the distinctive features of the warfare state of the recent American past. And there is no doubt that the book successfully makes its broader point that war-making, state-building, and political contention intertwine in complex and historically variable ways. One can only hope that future scholars will take up Tarrow’s challenge to specify how those interactions have worked in particular times and places.

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