

“The Informational Origins and Consequences of Colonial Governance”

Overview

Introduction:

Despite growing consensus that economic development is conditioned by state capacity, we know relatively little about the origins of local inequality in the developing world. I argue that subnational variation in state capacity is conditioned by individual incentives to provide the state with information, which in turn impacts economic growth and the distribution of wealth and human capital. I test this theory by examining policy implementation in the colonial period, because the influx of European settlers fundamentally altered how the developing world measured, enumerated, and registered people and land. I argue that the colonial state’s ability to tax and coerce was shaped in part by patterns of European settlement, and that these legacies continued to shape policy implementation post-independence.

Chapter 1: Theory

Low state capacity drives unrest and inhibits economic development, especially in former colonies. However, we lack a generalized account for why most post-colonial states are able to implement policies in some localities, but not others. This chapter introduces a theory arguing that patterns of European settlement conditioned colonial state building. I argue that during colonialism, European settlement increased “legibility,” officially imposed definitions, standards, and metrics, which facilitated governance. This was for two reasons. First, common institutions made European citizens and property easier for the colonial state to identify and enumerate. Second, preferential access to public goods ensured that European citizens perpetuated these institutions wherever they settled. Neither condition held for subject populations. In regions far from European settlement, there was limited public goods provision, decreasing the incentives to register and less coercive capacity, making it difficult for the colonial state to simply impose the institutions that made European citizens legible. The calculus was distinct for subject populations proximate to European enclaves. The coercive power of the colonial state was higher and while subjects were systematically denied access to most public goods, registration could facilitate access to some services, and were essential for elite subjects seeking to gain access to European institutions. I outline a research design to test this theory using novel subnational data from Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. I focus on North Africa because while we know a great deal about the origins of state capacity in the Americas, which experienced varying degrees of settler colonialism, we know less about the origins of state capacity in Africa and Asia in which some colonies experienced settler colonialism but others did not, and where unlike the Americas and Oceania the vast majority of Europeans departed at independence.

Chapter 2: Taxation

Taxes are the quintessential measure of state capacity. Yet while we know that rates of taxation are generally low in the developing world, we know much less about why there is such significant variation in local taxes. In this chapter, I present evidence that historic rates of agricultural taxation on indigenous properties were positively correlated with European settlement patterns. I theorize that the threat of European encroachment made indigenous landowners more likely to register their property, facilitating the collection of taxes. I provide evidence of this pattern using subnational panel data from Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Chapter 3: Conscription

A growing body of evidence shows that in sharp contrast with Europe, interstate war decreased state capacity throughout Africa. I reconsider this finding by examining mobilization and conscription in three conflicts: World War I, World War II, and the French war in Vietnam, using new data from the French Ministry of Defense. I present evidence that two very different mechanisms drove local conscription. In areas proximate to European settlements, the state was able to implement conscription, while in regions far from European settlement, the colonial state relied on poverty and neglect to drive young men into the military. I exploit a change in the law which made recruitment for Europeans obligatory in World War II, but not Vietnam, in a difference in difference specification that allows me to estimate the effect of European settlement on indigenous recruitment in these two conflicts.

Chapter 4: Enumeration

Previous research has demonstrated that investment in infrastructure and public goods provision is higher in more “legible” regions, yet we lack a generalized explanation for why some regions are more legible than others. Using previously undigitized data from the first census prior to independence and the first census after independence in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia I show significant local variation in the registration and enumeration of subject populations, and that rates of registration and the accuracy of reported ages increases significantly in localities previously settled by Europeans.

Chapter 5: Mass Education

In most former colonies, independence was accompanied by a massive expansion of compulsory education. Decades later, official statistics reveal stark and persistent regional inequalities in measures of basic education. I argue that variation in registration helps account for local variation in literacy and enrollment. Using census data from Egypt and Morocco, I demonstrate local variation in the registration rates of children and show that registration had significant consequences for contemporary educational outcomes. Children with official documentation were more likely to be enrolled in school and literate than their peers without documentation, even after controlling for the head of household’s education levels and a host of other household and individual characteristics. These results are consistent with the argument that colonial institutions had persistent, unintended consequences for the development of human capital over the long term.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

I consider the implications of my argument for state building and state capacity in former colonies outside of North Africa. I argue that one of the lessons from North Africa for the rest of the developing world is that decreasing gaps in legibility can help to decrease “inequality of opportunity.”