

Review of: "State crisis theory: A systematization of institutional, socio-ecological, demographic-structural, world-systems, and revolutions research"

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Peer Review of Tilman Hartley, "*State crisis theory: A systematization of institutional, socio-ecological, demographic-structural, world-systems, and revolutions research*"

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This article provided a compact literature review of state crisis theory, spanning five different research traditions and showing how they similarly and differently explained how states respond to crises. The piece covers a lot of ground covering institutional, socio-ecological, demographic-structural, world-systems, and revolutions approaches to state crisis. Given the novelty of this open review format, I didn't know what to expect, but I was pleasantly surprised. Had this been for a typical blinded review, I would have recommended a minor revision. The article has a lot to commend it.

State crisis is a broad concept that the author uses to reflect decisive turning points that can go badly or turn to the better. The author provides multiple analytical frameworks to trace the dimensions of crisis and pathways to positive and negative societal responses. Broadly, he suggests that crises can come in two forms: states are tested in moments or periods of sufficiency or scarcity. Within the realm of scarcity, processes can be relatively short-lived shocks such as from natural hazards, disease, or external attack. They can also be gradual, reflecting processes of diminishing returns from resource extraction/conversion or from labor or economic processes that ultimately come to a head. There are other efforts like this that try to explain how the same drivers are important in explaining state stability to a variety of shocks.[1]

In crisis moments, the state is tested in key ways that threaten its existence, its legitimacy, its monopoly of force. Different research traditions instrumentalize and define the moment differently. Some states have relatively open institutions that can overcome crisis and come out better through processes of *reform*. Other states with closed institutions resist change and elites are able to *retrench* power despite the moment. Partially open regimes are at most at risk from these moments unable to reform or contain pressures from citizens or elite competition, leading to *breakdown* or *collapse* in the author's depiction.

The piece does an able job summarizing how these different research emphasize different pieces and conditions that lead to these outcomes. Institutional approaches focus, not surprisingly, on different configurations of domestic economic and political institutions and governance. Socio-ecological approach surface dimensions such as natural hazards. Demographic-sociological theories privilege population dynamics and factors such as youth bulges. World systems theories focus on how states are positioned in broader global economic relationships, of hierarchical political and economic arrangements in colonial, post-colonial and processes of global capitalism. Revolutionary approaches emphasize processes of mass and elite legitimation and contestation over the state.

Some of these authors are aware and cite authors of other traditions, and the piece has a nice flow chart of citations, akin to a mini-network analysis.

There are some helpful tables of authors and cases that the surveyed pieces cite, which span historic time periods and regime types. My main concern is that in trying to cover so much ground that there is some risk of trying to identify generalizable covering laws for state crisis that operate across all time and space. While there are variations in outcomes across kinds of states with different institutions, I think the piece could do more to surface how the configuration of conditions that may lead to different outcomes can change, particularly as the average level of technological innovation and global adaptive capacity across the world may be much improved to what they were in pre-industrial societies.

As Bowsby et al. argue in their studies of conflict and political instability, the factors that led to conflict in the 1980s and 1990s didn't explain the emergence of conflict in the 2000s and 2010s when the Arab Spring manifested.[2] It's not clear that we can draw lessons for state crisis from the ancient world, particularly in the period before modern notions of sovereignty were developed and before nationalism became an animating idea knitting diverse peoples together under a common banner.

Other literatures would fit right in to this piece, and there may be a tension in trying to summarize five different research traditions but not capturing all of the relevant research. For example, there is a rich literature from the 1990s on environmental security and how environmental change can lead to violent conflict. This work fits most neatly in the socio-ecological tradition which focuses mostly on environmental scarcity as a driver of conflict. There are similarly complex causal pathway diagrams and discussions with feedback loops in the works of leading scholars such as Tad Homer-Dixon and Günther Baechler.[3]

The author discusses in passing the literature on the resource curse which makes the claim that abundant resources, particularly how value items like diamonds or oil, can be sources of conflict. There is a wider literature that speaks to these dynamics.[4]

There is a later literature on climate change and conflict that followed on the 1990s environmental security literature, some of which grapple with the abundance versus scarcity as more powerful driver of conflict.[5] A number of review pieces have summarized the literature, a number of which are consistent with the causal pathways laid out by Vesco in this piece. The Mach et. al review piece goes further to situate climate as a driver of a conflict in the wider literature and uses expert elicitation to identify the relative importance of different drivers of conflict, with weak state capacity and low socio-

economic development the most potent current drivers of conflict.[6]

This piece is broader than attempting to explain conflict of course, and it be unwieldy to integrate even more studies in to the flow charts and discussion, but these two literatures have examined a wealth of other cases. My own book on climate and security has more in common with this piece, in that I try to use a generalizable argument to explain the circumstances in which climate hazards (as relatively short-run shocks) lead to different negative security outcomes, including violent conflict but also humanitarian emergencies.[7]

Like the Van Bavel piece cited in the article, I try to surface how different institutional configurations can lead to negative security outcomes such as disasters in some settings and not others. I use paired cases of countries facing similar environmental exposure but experiencing different security outcomes such as why Syria experienced a civil war after drought in the mid 2000s but neighboring Lebanon did not.

I draw on the institutionalist literature that the article cites such as Acemoglu and Robinson and Douglass North, but rather than open or closed institutions, I use the language of exclusive and inclusive political institutions, and how patterns of representation in government and society profoundly affect stability patterns in the wake of crises.[8] These patterns of inclusion and exclusion have taken off as explanations of political violence and instability in the literature and go beyond simple regime type as an explanatory factor, surfacing how some authoritarian regimes such as Ethiopia have been, at times, reasonably inclusive and responsive to the needs of their citizens.

In any case, I thought this piece did a good job in surveying the landscape and identified a number of authors and arguments I wasn't familiar with. I review many manuscripts, and this is certainly one of the better contributions I've read of late.

[1] Alan J. Kuperman, ed., *Constitutions and Conflict Management in Africa: Preventing Civil War Through Institutional Design*, First Edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

[2] Drew Bowlsby et al., "The Future Is a Moving Target: Predicting Political Instability," *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (October 2020): 1405–17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000443>.

[3] Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Günther Baechler, "Environmental Degradation in the South as a Cause of Armed Conflict," in *Environmental Change and Security: A European Perspective*, ed. Alexander Carius and Kurt M. Lietzmann (Berlin: Springer, 1999), 107–30.

[4] Michael L. Ross, "What Have We Learned about the Resource Curse?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (2015): 239–59, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052213-040359>.

[5] Clionadh Raleigh and Dominic Kniveton, "Come Rain or Shine: An Analysis of Conflict and Climate Variability in East Africa," *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 51–64.

[6] Katharine J. Mach et al., "Climate as a Risk Factor for Armed Conflict," *Nature* 571, no. 7764 (July 2019): 193–97, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1300-6>.

[7] Joshua W. Busby, *States and Nature: The Effects of Climate Change on Security*, *The Politics of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108957922>.

[8] Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, Reprint edition (New York: Crown Business, 2013); Douglass C. North et al., eds., *In the Shadow of Violence: Politics, Economics, and the Problems of Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).