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The Development of Modern States

The development of modern states in America and Europe emerged over several centuries following important developments in the Age of Discovery. The evolution of states from feudal monarchies to democratic republics followed the discovery of the Americas, Australia, and other previously unknown lands. The global interconnectedness that followed set the stage for the creation of powerful states. Large bureaucracies could be funded by the extraction of resources from all over the world. Globalization affected the development of modern states from 1500 to the present because the trade networks created in the 16th century made the merchant class wealthy and influential and they benefitted greatly from the power and protections of early state structures.

Beginning in the 15th century with the Age of Discovery, European nations began to expand their holdings to previously unknown lands in the Americas, the Caribbean, and beyond. Global trade became a more pronounced and entrenched part of European life. With the advent of the printing press just decades earlier, knowledge had also become more available and widespread. New ideas spread along newly established trade routes as well as within the confines of the Old World. Many of these new ideas would challenge traditional beliefs and power structures which had been mainstays of European identity for centuries. The Protestant Reformation divided many Europeans along religious lines, sparking numerous conflicts and religious wars between Catholics and Protestants.¹ Finally, the Enlightenment era would bring about concepts of freedom, liberty, and justice that had a deep and profound influence on the beliefs and attitudes of the common people. Where once kings had professed to be divinely

ordained rulers, people began to contemplate the possibility of self-governance.² As all these new and exciting circumstances evolved, the ability for the average European person to choose their own destiny increased. The newly established global markets would allow many poor Europeans to make their way in the world via mercantilism and early capitalist endeavors.

One interesting consequence of the Protestant Reformation in Europe was a shift in prevailing attitudes regarding profiteering, accumulation of capital, and the loaning of money. The Catholic church had long considered these aspects of business to be detrimental, or even sinful. In extremely Catholic countries like Spain for example, money lending and banking were largely left to Jews and Muslims to practice since these practices were frowned upon by the Church. Protestant views however were more liberal and making and lending money was viewed as a virtue and the natural result of hard work and dedication. This allowed a more unfettered form of mercantilism to prosper in Protestant nations like England, The Netherlands, and the United States.³ In these lands, where commerce was largely unobstructed by papal interference, industry soared, creating wealth that could be taxed. Those taxes could help to fund an expanding bureaucracy that could in turn protect and grow opportunities for business, contributing to even more growth.

The economics involved in the development of early state structures are inextricably linked to the rise of global trade networks that resulted from the exploration and discovery of new lands as well as the establishment of new routes to Asia. The subsequent access it offered for new opportunities to gain resources for those who could seize them would make many kings and entrepreneurs exceedingly wealthy. The British colonies in America, for example, grew huge amounts of cotton for export to Britain and French and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean and South America exported luxury goods like sugar and indigo back to Europe where the cultivation

of such crops was not possible.⁴ In addition, Europeans living after the Columbian exchange had access to several healthy new food crops which helped to dramatically increase the population of Europe. Trade networks, new access to goods and resources, and the rise of capitalism created new classes of free merchants who gained power and wealth outside of traditional hierarchies.

Newly successful merchant classes, a more literate and educated populace, and the rise of revolutionary ideas rooted in the Enlightenment necessitated a shift toward self-determination in large swaths of Europe and North America. Having largely governed themselves for several centuries while still technically under the dominion of the English crown, Americans revolted against the monarchy in the late 18th century, declaring themselves to be a free and sovereign republic. In many ways America's successful revolution set the stage for the French revolution, the first successful attempt by a European nation to throw off the shackles of its monarchy, not from the safety of a distant land, but in their own country. As societies shifted away from inherited wealth and status and more of the population became literate, they began to demand more rights for themselves and a lessening of power for the traditional elites and structures such as monarchies and the church.⁵ The revolutions that followed all over Europe and the Americas would be key to establishing the early forms of modern states as they exist today.

While political upheaval helped to drive the creation of modern states by cementing new ideas of self-rule and popular sovereignty, years of warfare in Europe also contributed to the rise of larger, stronger states through necessity. Long, complex wars were fought, sometimes for decades, that required the creation of permanent standing armies. Whereas peasants and soldiers were once called up for battle in times of war and then sent home when the fighting ended, eventually there developed a need for full-time professional soldiers. These soldiers had to be well-trained, sometimes requiring years of training before they were ready for battle.⁶ In

addition, constant fighting between military powers in Europe created an arms race that also proved to be costly to each nation's government. In addition to funding to pay for new offensive and defensive weaponry and armor, soldiers would need to be trained to be proficient in using and defending against the new weaponry. All of these efforts cost money which had to be acquired through taxation. Heavy taxation required to fund seemingly endless wars in Europe would prove to be the proverbial nail in the coffin for the French monarchy whose citizenry eventually revolted, resulting in the French Revolution.⁷

In the American colonies, because of their connection to Great Britain, observation of British common law formed the basis of the American political structure. Over the centuries following establishment of the colonies however, Americans began to establish a unique brand of self-government. While technically subject to the laws and regulations imposed by the British crown, Americans were largely left to their own devices given their substantial distance from Great Britain. Bribery, tax evasion, and outright ignoring of British mandates were difficult for the British authorities to identify and prosecute in many cases. Americans would eventually become used to this type of de facto self-government and resist harshly when the King attempted to curtail their independence. American merchants especially resented the interference and taxation by a distant government and many played a large part in arguing in favor of a revolt against the British. Other merchants worried that any fighting between the two nations could interfere with their business and chose to side with the British out of a sense of pragmatism. In the end, the development of the modern United States came down to outrage over a series of taxes which were seen as unfairly burdensome and levied without their consent.

As more democratic nations developed following the revolutions of America and France, other monarchies, fearing the type of revolts and bloody warfare that had accompanied the

revolutions, attempted to pacify their citizens by altering their countries, especially through the process of adopting constitutions that handed over a larger amount of power to the citizens, men in particular, and lessened the power of the hereditary rulers. Many European countries established constitutional monarchies where the sitting monarchs took on more ceremonial roles, giving up most of their power in exchange for holding onto much of their personal property and wealth. Even today, many European dynasties survive but most have prime ministers and parliamentary representatives who are elected by their citizens. Perhaps due in part to nationalistic tendencies and cultural traditions, many European citizens still admire and appreciate their hereditary nobility though most hold little or no actual power aside from popular appeal and the power of persuasion.

The modern state exists in the present to perform a number of important and necessary functions. It exists to establish and enforce the laws of its nation and to uphold a monopoly on the use of force. In addition, the modern state exists to protect its nation's borders and the people within it through the maintenance of a standing army. In theory, the modern state's main purpose is to represent the values of its citizens and to deal with the rest of the world on behalf of its citizens interests. This is merely an idealized view of how modern states should operate however and many modern states do not necessarily behave in this way. States are also capable of subjugation and cruelty toward their own citizens such is the case in many dictatorships and theocracies. Generally though, when we think of modern states in the west, we think of democratic republics with free or semi-free trade of goods and services, and many rights and privileges which are afforded to its citizens.

In conclusion, the development of the modern state is a complex tapestry of cause and effect, the contributions to which are seemingly endless. This comes as no surprise when

discussing institutions and governments which have evolved over centuries or even millennia. In the earliest days of kingdoms, nations, and states in Europe and North America, hereditary leaders owned any land they could capture by force or which they could convince a king to grant them. The hereditary claims of land shifted for centuries, causing countless wars. Eventually the warfare led to the creation of permanent standing armies, large bureaucracies to levy taxes to buy weapons and pay soldiers. Innovative ideas born of the Enlightenment spread across the west as did ideas of religious freedom and tolerance brought about by religious reawakening and reformations. These ideas transformed societies wherever they prospered, shifting power away from elites, away from kings and popes and into the hands of the common people, often at the tip of a sword or barrel of a gun. Searches for routes to Asia and Africa vastly extended markets and access to goods, expanded our knowledge of the landmasses of the world, and set the stage for colonialism which spread European ideas and people all over the world. In many ways, the development of modern states was probably inevitable. The new world that came into being following the Age of discovery and the subsequent centuries of colonization paved the way for entirely new nations to develop, as was the case for the United States and Canada. Those in Europe who saw the possibilities shown by rebellious former colonies like America and Haiti recognized the possibility for change in their own homelands and often chose to fight for those changes. Like a domino effect, nations all over the world saw the benefits of modern state structures and reformed themselves to better align with these structures. It is difficult to pinpoint any particular cause for the development of states and instead we must view it as the result of continuous, incremental evolution of these structures as they are forced to conform to the changing world. Businessmen, bankers, and merchants certainly all benefitted from the establishment of states, but that can be said for all of us as well.

Bibliography

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