

## BOOK REVIEW

# Prosperity and Violence: The Political Economy of Development by Robert H. Bates

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In line with his other works on political economy, development, violence, growth and transformation, Robert Bates, an Eaton Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard University, integrates these concepts in the book entitled *Prosperity and Violence: the Political Economy of Development*. A fusion of political economy and development theories, his work tried to analyze the transition and transformation of societies from the traditional to modern, rural to urban, agricultural to industrial and tries to establish the all-important link between prosperity and violence. According to Bates, it is within this transformation that the variables of violence and threat of violence come into play. He wrote that “development involves the formation of capital and the organization of economic activity. Politically, it involves the taming of violence and the delegation of authority to those who will use power productively” (p. 13). As this is a study of development and transformation, Bates looked back over the course of history to examine how violence paved the way for the modern

state and, along with it, the growth of prosperity particularly in the Western world.

Bates started by describing and analyzing the agrarian societies, maintaining that such societies are dynamic. In these societies, the kin or the family often provides the means of investment for migration leading to accumulation, growth of trade, and eventually growth of income. This “increases the temptation to engage in predation – and the value of deterring it” (p. 27). As “kinship” was the only political institution developed that time, it was the only institution that could prevent violence and provide security. However, Bates noted that the nature of this structure was limited and fragile, relying more often on the concept of “deterrence” and a trade-off of prosperity to maintain the peace.

The rise of wealth and of landowning elite was seen by Bates as an incentive for violence. These phenomena gave rise to feudalism, renowned for the militarization of rural households and the establishment of the monarchy, which would eventually tread the transition from private provision of violence to a public provision of coercion. The monarchy, the primary political institution, placed economic power on economic organizations which managed capital and the eventual rise of revenue. The rise of revenue led to clashes of private armies, which as seen by those holding economic power, disrupted the flow of the economic system; thus, they looked to the monarchy to provide security, demilitarization and peace. The monarchy and its army imposed the “institution of peace” and the subsequent development of political order as seen in the establishment of the judiciary and legislative (the parliament) branches of government, thus the birth of modern Western/European states.

However, not all states were formed and developed the same as the Western/European nations, as Bates acknowledged. State formation and development in the modern era (the post-WWII world) has been relatively shaped and influenced by changes in the international, political and economic environment. During the Cold War, development became an international activity, “a product of international transfers rather than bargains forged with citizens at home”; key institutions, therefore, remained weak. The rise of oil prices in the 1980’s and subsequent recession of industrialized states pitted the developing nations against the trap of their own debt.

Also, Bates noted that developing countries opted for the adoption of protectionist policies even though key institutions and bureaucracies were still weak; as a result, no development occurred.

By the end of the Cold War, the debt crisis, rise of oil prices, and the implication of the end of the bipolar/superpower rivalry world structure greatly molded the political and economic landscape of developing nations. As was the case in Somalia and other developing nations, the United States and the Soviet Union provided them shelter and support in the form of development assistance and aid on political incentives; however, as these nations lost their strategic value, a scramble to stay in power pushed political elites to pursue policy reforms on the path of democratization. However, some have fallen unto the tracks of violence, and inevitably, the conditions of a failed state. For Bates, the political holders of power in these failed states used coercion to prey upon the wealth of others instead of using it to promote the creation of wealth. As Bates concludes: "Political development occurs when people domesticate violence, transforming coercion from a means of predation into a productive resource. Coercion becomes productive when it is employed not to seize or to destroy wealth, but rather to safeguard and promote its creation" (p. 84).

At the heart of Bates' book is the core interaction between politics or the "pursuit of power" and economics or the "pursuit of wealth." The interplay between the two concepts defined the trajectory of the evolution and transformation from a relatively traditional, rural, agrarian society to the modern state, believing that an inefficient state that fails to monopolize power in a way that encourages investment and economic growth is to be blamed for the lack of development in many parts of the world. To have development, therefore, is to have political order; to have political order is to have development. *Prosperity and Violence* provides a non-traditional view of history and an engaging critic of the traditional development studies of development agencies. Indicative of the power and lure of Bates' s analysis is the fact that his thesis seems to capture and explain the quandary of modernization theories with regard to the uneven development of developing countries. With a comprehensive field experience, Bates presented several cases that support his argument: Kenya, Uganda, the Nuer of Sudan, and Somalia, among others.

Even though *Prosperity and Violence* answers several questions regarding development, particularly its link to violence, it fails to answer others. It raises more questions than answers. Some of the examples he cited correspond to small-scale, localized communities, and the question lingers on whether his thesis works for full-blown states, only citing in passing the case of the tiger economies of Asia. Also, there is a missing concept in his discussion, a concept which is central in any political economy of development study – the concept of capitalism. It is surprising to have a study entrenched in political economy without addressing “capitalism” or even merely acknowledging of it. As any political economy and development writer would know, the development of states (i.e. the western and European) is accompanied by the development of capitalism, and for that matter, capitalism evolved and developed unevenly in these states. In the case of developing countries, they are thrust into a “maturing” capitalism and corresponding globalization which creates more variables and factors when considering the link between prosperity and violence; Bates failed to tackle this issue. As Marxist and dependency theorists (Dos Santos, 1970; Cardoso, 1982; Frank, 1995) would argue, in order for industrialized states to survive and prosper, they need to continue accumulating capital surpluses. How developing countries can compete with that and the corresponding violence they encounter on the road to prosperity is one of the questions and issues Bates failed to address.

Nevertheless, the attraction of Bates’s study is its interdisciplinary method. From the beginning, he made use of his knowledge in anthropology and sociology to analyze the workings of kinships and relationships in the feudal ages. Aside from using the political economy and political development approach, he also incorporated and coherently wove other approaches, specifically democratization, culture, rational choice, institutional and structural approaches in analyzing events and in concretizing his thesis. The book, therefore, is relevant and a “must-read” for academics and students alike, particularly in the field of comparative politics.

## References

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