

# [Blood and debt: war and the nation-state in latin america](https://assignbuster.com/blood-and-debt-war-and-the-nation-state-in-latin-america/)

Book Review: Miguel Angel Centeno. Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America . Penn State University Press 2002.

Centeno’s book begins with the mystery of absence of interstate war-what he calls limited war-in Latin America, and then goes into the genealogy of state development in South America and the role of war on that continent. His historically contextualized analysis of warfare takes up the imbricated factors of class structure, organizational power, and international restraints in Latin America. He characterizes the Latin American states’ institutional and administrative capacity as not well developed as a result of divisions among dominant class structures, foreign power influence and control, which in turn have contributed to the states’ relatively peaceful history. He succinctly argues that they have been “ relatively peaceful because they don’t have sophisticated political institutions to manage wars” -the no States-no Wars argument.[1]

Centeno contends that the lack of strong state institutions and limited state capacity accounts for these states’ inability to create autonomy and finance these wars through internal revenue; rather, this created dependency on foreign government loans that in turn weakened local capacity to create autonomy and thwarted the establishment of strong central institutions.[2]Foreign loan dependency created the conditions for the weakening of the possibility of creating strong central institutions that resulted in limited state capacity and the associated limited scale of war.[3]According to Centeno, “ limited war”[4]“ do[es] not require the political or military mobilization of the society except (and not always) in the euphoric initial moments”.[5]Foreign intervention based on trade interests also limited the scale of Latin American wars.[6]

Centeno substantiates his argument with assessments of the capacity of Latin American governments to collect taxes, raise troops, and establish effective bureaucracies. Equally important is his argument about the ability of governments to galvanize nationalism, an ethos that creates a “ coherent concept of nation”.[7]Based on comparative insight derived from North Atlantic nations, he argues that compared to Latin American states, these nations have more capacity to mobilize millions of troops to fight, financed through internally raised revenue from taxes.[8]

I believe Centeno’s work is important as it provides a thorough analysis and critique of state-building theory based on empirical study. His work invests more attention in the Latin America region and makes a country-specific study to understand the particularities and nuances of generic state-building theory. His work draws attention to institutional analysis of states. As he writes, “[This] magnificent display of institutional failure deserves further attention”.[9]

Centeno argues that Latin America has fought limited wars and further inquires into the meaning of this in an attempt to better understand the relationship between war and state-making. His work opens the door for deconstructing conventional nation-building theory, which is largely based on a Eurocentric account of war. Grounded in a set of empirical data and rigorous analysis, Centeno’s critical work illustrates how war contributed to the weakening of institutions, paying due attention to the fiscal aspect of the state, and shows how war in Latin America ruined institutions and resulted in more entrenched internal divisions.[10]He discusses the institutional capacity of the state as a central theme to explain and critique the regional history and political development, and he examines war’s impact, how it has shaped state-society relationships, national identity and fiscal development.

Centeno repeatedly emphasizes the fact that states in Latin America did not develop the kind of institutional strength of their Western European counterparts. The author is puzzled by the process and experience and consequences of war in Latin America and how this relates to states’ institutional strength and capacity to undertake war in a way that has shaped their creation. Based on multiple cases, Centeno’s historical development of each case and the experience of war illustrates the exigencies, contextual factors, and relational dimensions that all must be taken into account in order to determine, understand and explain variations and commonalties across the continent.

This theoretical approach and these methodological insights are critical to assessing the development of the state based on European history and experience while complementing the theoretical discussion of the development of the state on both levels—capturing country-specific variations and theorizing or bringing in theoretical explanations for differences and commonalities. Understanding and explaining regional and country-specific variations using comparative methods provides relevant details to critically engage conventional state-building theory. Through this work, I learned that understanding variations and contextualizing analysis case by case is an important approach. The author uses the prism of war-state development “ bellicist model”[11]as an important theoretical framework to problematize and further explain the nuances and regional and country-specific conditions and factors that alter and critique Eurocentric generalizations of the causal relationship between war and state development. Indeed, Centeno uses the counterfactual realties of Latin America to successfully refute the European model of “ state-building theory” that suggests that wars created modern states and enhanced their institutions, creating the capacity for states to exploit resources, monopolize violence and make more wars. In fact, he successfully illustrates how (limited) wars in Latin America destroyed institutions and thwarted nation-state building. Here, he introduces internal factors such as class structure, internal elite divisions and the enduring impact of postcolonial chaos, noting how all contributed, along with the international factors related to how trade interest played out and to debt/loan dependence.

An important lesson we can draw from this book is that the experience of war in Latin America, its role and influence on state creation (both the types and kinds of state formation) are distinct here, different from the significant role war played in the development of some European states. No doubt more cases from Latin America and elsewhere would further refute, contextualize, deconstruct and critique the conventional presuppositions, assumptions and models of state-building theory. The complex historical realties of states problematize and create an elaborated space for other factors, beyond war, providing complementary explanations related to creation of the state.

Centeno’s central message is that the link between war and state-building is contingent on historical specificities and case-specific factors. However, his work does not help us to understand how strong states could develop without wars. The logic in Centeno’s theory and argument is important as it highlights important elements in appraising the link between war-making and state-making as understood in conventional theories, putting the focus on certain contingent factors-history, domestic socio-economic and political structures, and international politics.

[1]Centeno, M. A. (2002). Blood and debt: War and the nation-state in Latin America. Penn State Press. p 26

[2]Ibid p 28 and Chapter 3

[3]Ibid

[4]Ibid p 20-26

[5]Ibid p 21

[6]Ibid p 26 and 72-73

[7]Ibid p. 23, 7 and Chapter 4 and 5

[8]Ibid p 108- 109 & 191 and Chapter 5

[9]Ibid p 17

[10]  Ibid p 142 -145, 14, 6-7 and Chapter 3

[11]Ibid p. 19 and 266