

The Multiple and Material Legacies of Stephen Skowronek

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Stephen Skowronek's *Building a New American State* remains one of the most influential books in political science and history of the last two decades. In political science, *Building* engendered a set of deep disciplinary transformations that simultaneously sent scholars sprinting into the history books for new cases with which to ply and test theory, goaded them into rethinking what it meant for the United States to possess a "state," and welcomed them in embracing the study of institutions as a worthwhile endeavor in political science. In history, Skowronek's book challenged scholars to reconceive the Gilded Age and Progressive Era as a fundamentally distinct period of governance, a peculiar challenge to the institutional forms that had dominated nineteenth-century American politics. Two decades later, disciplinary historians and political scientists are still laboring to answer Skowronek's call.

The reach of Skowronek's effort remains singular and daunting. *Building a New American State*, I wish to claim, helped to launch not only the turn to political history in the social sciences, but also the turn to institutions in political science. The book's individual narratives also commissioned a fresh engagement with business regulation, the military and civil service politics. Much of this legacy remains underappreciated by Skowronek's readers.

As concerns his core argument – that the state structure of the United States was fundamentally transformed during the Progressive period by political and administrative officials, a transformation dependent upon previous institutional arrangements that had enduring but unintended consequences – I shall claim that Skowronek was right in ways his critics have yet to comprehend. “State-centered” accounts of institutional change need not conflict with rationality, need not deny the centrality of legislative action, and need not remove individual agency from the analysis – as critics of American Political Development have claimed about the field. Indeed, all three features (rationality, legislation and agency) lie at the center of Skowronek’s rich tale. I shall also point to some of the shortcomings of the book. The triumphs and shortcomings have both provided abundant fruit for later scholars, occasioning two decades of fervent effort in the political historiography of U.S. institutions.

Topical Legacies Grand and Tributary

It would risk considerable understatement to say that *Building a New American State* has been influential. A better tack is to examine the nature of that influence: topical and argumentative. The topical legacy of Skowronek’s effort towers imposingly over the discipline. *Building* sounded a stentorian call to political scientists to turn their imagination to the past, and the discipline followed. In the two decades since *Building’s* publication, political scientists and historians have written hundreds of books and articles on the development of political institutions in the United States. Along the way, we have witnessed a

number of award-winning and highly-cited works by political scientists and historians, all of them engaging with Skowronek's central claims regarding the emergence of an American state – Theda Skocpol's *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (1992), Richard Biesel's *Yankee Leviathan* (1990) and his *Political Economy of American Industrialization* (2001), Richard John's *Spreading the News* (1995), Robert Lieberman's *Shifting the Color Line* (1996), Elizabeth Sanders' *Roots of Reform* (1999), Suzanne Mettler's *Dividing Citizens* (1998), Scott James' *Presidents, Parties and the State* (2000), Daniel Carpenter's *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* (2001). The many thousands of citations to *Building* in these works and others are evidence that this immense output would surely have been far smaller in the absence of Skowronek's quiet headship.

In step with their turn to history, scholars have also engaged political institutions. Like the turn to history (which was in part due to the influence of Theda Skocpol, David Greenstone and Karen Orren), the turn to institutions in political science is also partially attributable to other writers (William Riker and Kenneth Shepsle in the rational choice tradition of political science, James March and Terry Moe in the organizational tradition of political science, Louis Galambos in history). Skowronek's weight in the study of institutions has been comparable to that of these scholars, however. While congressional scholars followed Riker and Shepsle's call to approach legislative institutions like the committee system with mathematical game-theoretic models, and others reinvigorated the organizational study of bureaucracy following March and Moe,

Skowronek re-opened the fertile territory of civil service administration, business regulation and military organization as legitimate and alluring subjects of analysis in political science.

Scholars of diverse persuasions soon sprung upon these subjects with renewed vigor. Skowronek's analysis of the rise of business regulation occasioned a flurry of studies ranging from Gerald Berk's *Alternative Tracks* (1994), to articles by Thomas Gilligan, William Marshall and Barry Weingast (1989), to Elizabeth Sanders' *Roots of Reform* (1999) and Scott James' *Presidents, Parties and the State* (2000). (Skowronek was, of course, wading into an earlier debate populated by the likes of historians Robert Wiebe and Gabriel Kolko, but these scholars were themselves responding to the classic works of political scientists Pendleton Herring and Samuel Huntington.) His analyses of civil service transformations before and after the Pendleton Act led other scholars, from Ronald Johnson and Gary Libecap's *The Civil Service and the Problem of Bureaucracy* (1994) to my own *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* (2001), to reexamine the politics of bureaucratic staffing.¹ His analyses of the frustrated consolidation of the American military history were taken up by Bartholomew Sparrow (1995) and more recently by Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefter (2002).

There are two regrettable features to *Building's* topical legacy – neither the fault of Skowronek himself. First, scholars following Skowronek (including myself) have become preoccupied with the Gilded Age, Progressive Era and

New Deal periods, so much so that the study of American political development has become, in the words of my good friend Scott James, “the political history of the United States from 1865 to 1945.” As a result, numerous antebellum developments and contemporary political regularities remain woefully understudied in political science.² Second, and far more troublesome, scholars have consistently analyzed institutions at the expense of emergent patterns of citizen behavior and organization. As a result, crucial transformations such as the abolition movement, ethnic voting in the early republic and the Progressive Era, and the early feminist movement remain grossly understudied in our discipline. With the advent of new historical analyses of civic engagement by Theda Skocpol (1992, 2000) and Suzanne Mettler (1998), plus earlier studies of voting by Eileen McDonagh and Paul Kleppner, these effects seem reparable.

The Argumentative Legacy of Building a New American State

Beyond its unearthing of new topics for analysis, *Building* also offered a nuanced argument about the transformation of political institutions in the United States. There were two arguments at the core of Skowronek’s theoretical endeavor – an historical claim and a general theoretical claim. The common argument – owing to thinkers as diverse as DeTocqueville, Hegel and Marx –

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² There are some emergent exceptions to this trend. The studies of John Aldrich, Robin Einhorn, John Gerring, Jeffrey Jenkins, Richard John, Scott James, and others have focused attention upon the antebellum period, just as the analyses of Paul Frymer and Julian Zelizer have refocused attention upon the postwar period. Skowronek himself lured political scientists and historians into a study of antebellum and contemporary presidencies in *The Politics Presidents Make*.

that the United States lacked a “state” in the absolutist and European sense was, as Skowronek discovered, wrong throughout. A national state existed in the antebellum period and ever after, Skowronek alleged. Only its structure was inconstant. The state of the early republic was one suffused by parties that supplied its very organizational and procedural fiber; federal courts served as its coercive interface with antebellum society. This “state of courts and parties” was a state in every sense of the word. It conquered, monopolized and bartered in land. It regulated a burgeoning industrial economy while protecting and promoting its most febrile sectors. It erected a highly partisan and morally conservative form of social policy long before the Progressives and New Dealers came into play. It had a swift and rather rapid apparatus (partisan rotation in office) for staffing the agencies of government.

The Progressive Era spawned a structural replacement for nineteenth-century government. Party rotation was traded in for a European-style merit system. Judicial governance of the industrial economy was agonizingly discarded in favor of regulation by independent commission. A fractured and balkanized army was overhauled into a centralized military operation. The sum of Skowronek’s historical claims, then, is that the United States has never been a stateless society, just a society of diversely organized states.

The broader generalization of *Building a New American State* is that transformations of state structure depend crucially upon the actions of “state

officials” operating within the confines of “existing institutional arrangements” (e.g., *Building*, 285-6). The actors driving state transformation, Skowronek contends, are politicians and administrators, less business elites (Gabriel Kolko), radical agrarians (Elizabeth Sanders) or reformist intellectuals (Martin Sklar). The aims to which they aspire and the strategies they employ to these ends are mediated by the structure of the state in which they operate – the privileged and organized actors of that state, the tools available to these actors (including formal and informal powers and coalitions), the procedural and institutional constraints they face, and so on. In a book noted more for its conceptualization and narrative than its positivist theory, Skowronek’s core model of political development was one that clearly specified the types of actors who matter most and the types of constraints that would prove decisive in a contest over the form of the state.³

Both of these arguments – the historical periodization of American state and the general claim about state building – have come under attack in recent years. Historians have been quickest to pounce on the notion of the antebellum state as one of “courts and parties.” Led by Richard John, Colleen Dunlavy, Merritt Roe Smith and William Novak, historians have argued that a strong

³ By positivist theory I mean attempts to build theoretical models from fundamental concepts and principles, derive hypotheses or propositions from the theory, and assess them with narrative or quantitative evidence. Skowronek might shrink from a description of his work in these terms, but his nuanced and compact theory of state transformations specifies crucial actors, offered a set of propositions about how the state-building process unfolds, and was accompanied by deep and careful interpretation of the “data” that would be used to assess such theorizing. Of course, Skowronek’s effort achieved much more than this. Yet its affinity with other social science work has been understated.

federal government presence existed in the antebellum period. Pointing to the postal system, the federal armories at Springfield and Harper's Ferry, early railroad regulation, and the massive presence of municipal and state regulation, these and other scholars have unearthed a mass of evidence that the antebellum government was a strong "agent of change."⁴

While John and others are technically correct in their portrayal of antebellum federal agencies as agents of change, little if any of their work effectively challenges Skowronek's claim that the nineteenth-century republic was, compared to earlier and later instantiations of the American state, a regime of courts and parties. Skowronek, of course, never argued that the early United States was "stateless." He simply characterized the republic as a different kind of state (*Building*, 19). Moreover, all of the significant policies to which recent historians have gestured – military purchasing, postal operations, land management, municipal and state regulation – were forcefully shaped and delimited by the two very forces that Skowronek identified: the politics of mass parties and the strictures of federal courts. The mass parties deeply shaped nineteenth-century postal operations, a point revealed in John's *Spreading the News* (1995), in Samuel Kernell's recent research (1999), and in Chapter Three of my *Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*.⁵ As scholars from Morton Horwitz (1977) to

⁴ See John (1995), Dunlavy (1995), Novak (1997), and John's (1997) summary essay.

⁵ See John's chapter "The Wellspring of Democracy."

Richard Bense (2001) have noted, municipal and state regulation of the industrial economy was severely hampered by conservative, pro-business jurisprudence of the late-nineteenth-century federal courts. The partisan character of land acquisition and military development has been confirmed by scholars ranging from Donald Pisi (1981, 2002) to Ira Katznelson and John Lapinski (year).

While historians have taken aim at his periodization, Skowronek's fellow political scientists have questioned whether "state officials" were really at the center of Progressive institutional change. Elizabeth Sanders has argued cogently in *Roots of Reform* that radical agrarian farmers made their deepest inroads into Congress well after the McKinley-Bryan debacle of 1896, producing dozens of forceful regulatory statutes. Samuel Kernell and Michael McDonald (1999) have echoed Sanders' point that the central action of Progressive state formation took place in Congress.

Here, too, Skowronek's critics have reasonable points but have usually misread him or have misapplied their evidence. The fact that crucial state-building statutes eventually passed our national legislature does not mean that Congress was in charge of the process. Scholars have inflated (1) the true status of Congress as a necessary arena in which most transformations must be entertained into (2) the central agency of Congress in which the congressional median voter (or majority party) must drive all state transformations. Critics have, moreover, missed the centrality of legislative action to Skowronek's

narrative. Much of the central action of *Building* took place in the legislative arena, whether it concerned the Pendleton Act of 1883, the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1913, or the “Cannon Revolt” of 1910. The best example is Skowronek’s wonderful synthesis of the formulation and passage of the Interstate Commerce Act (ICA) of 1887 and subsequent amendments in Chapters Five and Eight.⁶

Skowronek does in fact privilege executive and administrative actors in his account, presaging his landmark achievement in *The Politics Presidents Make* (1992). (It is fruitful, in fact, to read his first book through the lens of his second.) Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson emerge from *Building* as the consummate state-building presidents of the early-twentieth century. Yet as Scott James acutely notes in *Presidents, Parties and the State* (pp. 7-9), Skowronek identifies Roosevelt and Wilson as party leaders constrained by legislative and electoral coalitions. These very tensions of the “state of courts and parties” sharply limited Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s grand designs (e.g., *Building*, 186, 191, 195-96, 214, 257-8).

Skowronek’s larger argument – that executive (presidential and administrative) officials lay at the center of the state formation process – has yet to be disproved. As I have argued recently in *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*, administrative officials forcefully set the congressional agenda in

⁶ Skowronek’s narrative in Chapters Five and Eight was, until the publication of Scott James’ *Presidents, Parties, and the State* (2000), the best overall synthesis of the Progressive-Era rise of business regulation in the United States.

postal, agricultural, environmental and regulatory policy in the Progressive period.⁷ Roosevelt's and Wilson's role as political leaders guiding legislation through Congress and reshaping the executive branch has been lost upon his critics. Scott James' exhaustive analyses of the Interstate Commerce Act and Federal Trade Commission Act show that presidents lie at the center of these crucial institutional transformations of the regulatory state.⁸

My main criticism of Skowronek's effort is methodological. Like many of the early works in American political development, Skowronek's effort was rather impoverished in its primary source analysis. Following Skocpol and other state theorists, Skowronek synthesized an already established literature on the federal civil service, military organization and transportation regulation. He did so skillfully and with an interpretive verve that eludes many political historians. Compared to other historical treatments in political science at the time, of course, it was a step forward. Compared to much historical work – I think of Foner's treatment of the ideology of the Republican Party, or Woodward's *Origins of the New South* – it was not. It would have helped Skowronek, I think, to have gathered primary-source evidence for his claims. With such evidence, he might for instance have more richly narrated legislative maneuvers in the passage of the Pendleton Act, the Interstate Commerce Act and other crucial statutes of the

⁷ I do have some particular disagreements with Skowronek's emphases. See the "Introduction" to my *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*.

⁸ Skowronek also gives due credit to middle-class reformers in these regulatory struggles. I thank Julian Zelizer for reminding me of this point.

state-building narrative. In doing so, he might have brought such evidence to bear upon the interpretive disagreements he had with other scholars. Without this evidence, he is compelled to argue that his narrative either subsumes the assumptions of those that compete with his (see his treatment of various interpretations of the ICA in Chapter Five) or to sidestep a deeper theoretical engagement with these statutes (as he might have with the Pendleton Act in Chapter Three, or the Transportation Act of 1920 in chapter Eight).

To their credit, Skowronek, Skocpol and other founders of the APD tradition have engaged more thoroughly with primary source materials in their recent work. Bartholomew Sparrow's *From the Outside In*, Suzanne Mettler's *Dividing Citizens*, Scott James' *Presidents, Parties and the State*, and Daniel Carpenter's *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* have followed this lead.

For this scholar, whose introduction to political science and political history of the United States came through reading Skowronek in graduate school, a note of deep and sincere gratitude is in order. For me, *Building a New American State* was far more than a "must-read" or dog-eared "classic" to be tangled with, critiqued, and incrementally improved upon. In the 1980s, in a discipline dominated by the latest regression technique, the release of another National Election Study or a new class of formal models borrowed from economics, *Building a New American State* was a long-awaited paramour for the political imagination. The beauty of Skowronek's triumph is that the mainstream of political science has finally embraced its fundamental tenets.

Statisticians, formal modelers, gender- and race-centered analysts, legislative scholars all now routinely turn to the past not merely to test but to *reconceive their theories*. And whether or not they recognize it, they all labor in fields first cleared by Skowronek's daring sagacity.

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