

Jean-François Bayart, L'énergie de l'État. Pour une sociologie historique et comparée du politique, Paris (Éditions La Découverte) 2022, 780 p., ISBN 978-2-348-07232-1, EUR 28,00.

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The political scientist Jean-Francois Bayart became known to a wider audience in 1989 with his much-cited book »L'État en Afrique«. This book, in which the author expanded his earlier empirical findings on the state in Cameroon into a continent-wide comparative analysis, was distinguished by its thorough reception of practically the entire Africa-related political anthropology literature as well as by its illuminating terminology (*extra-version*, *association réciproque des élites*, *politique par le bas*, *État-rhizome*, etc.). The central thesis of this book was that while states in Africa each have their own historicity, they can be analysed by the same concepts as other states. With »L'État en Afrique«, and a series of parallel essays, Bayart shaped a particular school of analysis of politics in Africa, which radiates far beyond France and is notably presented in the journal »Politique Africaine« which he co-founded. He later published several comparative monographs on state and identity that went beyond Africa, but did not quite match the success of the Africa book.

The core thesis of the book under review is that today's nation-states are inheritors of historical empires. While the latter have been characterised by the principle of difference, nation-states are based on the principle of (imagined) ethno-cultural homogeneity, so that the transition process (still ongoing and not completed, see Ukraine) has been accompanied by often violent ethnic cleansing and massive population shifts. Within the framework of this general historical movement, individual states each have unique historical trajectories. The author supports this thesis with a vast number of historical examples from Europe, Asia, and Africa. Bayart is particularly fascinated by phenomena such as the French Camembert or the Turkish intercity bus system, in which economic, political, social, and cultural elements as well as local, national, and global aspects are inseparably combined to form a *fait social total*. This argumentation is embedded in a plea for a comparative historical sociology strongly influenced by Max Weber (and whose roots, one could add, go back to the 18th-century German »inventor« of modern ethnology, August Ludwig Schlözer) – an approach that is demonstrated in the book, for instance, by the example of the manifold entanglements of family relations and politics in highly diverse societies. The argumentation is further supported by positions such as that the state represents a process (somewhat cryptically called an *événement*) and not an essence, that the transformation process is a result of contingent, partly contradictory historical developments and does not follow a Hegelian teleological and linear programme, that in historical



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development, different time layers (*durées*) interpenetrate each other, each with their own rhythms, and that in historical development there is, so to speak, no regularity without exception, as the author demonstrates with great enthusiasm for detail.

Bayart thus presents an imposing *somme* of his decades-long reflections on the topics addressed, and as a reader one bows to the impressive effort that has gone into this book. However, the central thesis is not really new, nor does Bayart systematically position himself in relation to other authors who have addressed similar problematics. He engages with some of these authors, starting with the aforementioned Max Weber, but also Michael Mann, for example. Others, however, are only marginally integrated into his reflections, such as Eugen Weber or Benedict and Perry Anderson. Again others are surprisingly ignored, such as James Scott. The latter is criticised for his, in Bayart's view, inadequate use of the concept of moral economy (Bayart prefers E. P. Thompson's), but his important book »Seeing Like a State«, which is highly relevant to Bayart's elaborations on the »abstraction« of the state, is not mentioned at all. Perhaps a look at Jürgen Kocka's »Capitalism. A Short History«, which is a masterpiece of concise brevity and jargon-free clarity – as Bayart notes, one cannot write the history of the state independently of that of capitalism – would have been useful. One would have liked Bayart to have engaged more explicitly with these authors to clarify what may be new about his approach. Conceptual gaps are also conspicuous. For example, the core question of the (possible) European distinct path in the emergence of the modern nation state – regardless of one's position on it – is merely mentioned *en passant* on one page (p. 106–107).

A second objection relates to the unwieldiness and inaccessibility of the book which already results from its excessive length. The numerous empirical examples cited demonstrate the author's erudition, but they also repeatedly distract from the central thrust of the argument, if they do not represent unnecessary digressions, leaps of thought or repetitions. Bayart leaves the reader largely alone in the effort to follow his argumentation. The introduction, for example, lacks the usual road map explaining the chapter division and the further course of the argument. The conclusions are also not helpful in this respect, nor is the index of personal names. On the one hand, it is partly incorrect (e.g. the political scientist James Scott is at one point confused with the fashion designer Jeremy Scott); above all, it does not include the numerous literature references, which appear in the book in outdated form as footnotes (with the frequently confusing *op. cit.*), and not in an integrated bibliography.

More serious is the conceptual opacity of the book. Bayart is fascinated by the French Lebensphilosoph Henri Bergson whose terminology permeates the book, starting with its title which is only rudimentarily explained on p. 701. I leave it to philosophically more competent readers to deal with the question of whether Henri Bergson is at all compatible with Max Weber for the historical-



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sociological analysis of the state. One could also ask whether the essential statements of the book could not have been made without recourse to Bergson. From a German point of view, moreover, it should be noted that the Lebensphilosophie has been severely compromised by its appropriation by National Socialism. In any case, a reader who was not initiated into Bergson's peculiar terminology, as French high school students apparently were until 1968, will repeatedly scratch their head in wonder when reading this book and continually consult all the encyclopaedias at hand, though mostly with limited success. Bayart, or the publisher, seems to have anticipated this difficulty, so that an *index des personnages conceptuels* (a kind of mini-encyclopaedia of central terms) has been appended to the text. It is surprising, however, neither to find the title term »energy« in this index, nor, for example, another enigmatic concept such as *plan d'immanence*, which plays an important role in the argument. I must confess, however, that even after reading the passage in question (p. 712–713), it is not clear to me what is meant by this.

In other words, this is a fascinating intellectual project whose execution unfortunately makes it unnecessarily difficult for the reader. The question of a Geneva student, quoted in the introduction and taken up again in the conclusions, for whom Bayart actually writes, thus proves to be quite relevant and ultimately remains unanswered.



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