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Towards a new historiography of state capacity in South Africa

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Abstract

The dissertation involves a sustained attempt to build the intellectual basis for a new historical social science of state capacity in South Africa, contained in Part 1. In this context, Part 2 consists in theoretical, comparative and historical work which aims to strike at the historical roots of capacity issues in the specifically South African state, presented through and against the case of South Africa's state-owned railways.

In this vein, in Chapter 1 the practical importance of state capacity in South Africa is explicated, its relative neglect in the South African academy is understood, and a reorientation in how the problematic of state capacity is institutionalised in the academy is justified. The next two chapters attempt to systematise the work on state capacity in South Africa that has been done, and draw various lessons therefrom. Chapter 2 critically surveys work that attempts to understand the historical origins of state incapacity in contemporary South Africa. Chapter 3 surveys work on contemporary problems of state incapacity. Chapter 4 considers the uses of social scientific reflection upon state incapacity, and highlights the specific importance of historical investigation.

Part 2, then, involves the implementation of programmatic principles contained in Part 1. Chapter 5 provides the theoretical, historical and comparative basis for the analysis of the emergence of the modern South African state. Drawing upon the experiences of Europe and the United States of America, a key period in the modernisation of the South African state is defined, and its key features discerned. In Chapter 6 the modernisation of the South African state in the age of primary industrialisation is investigated, through the use of primary and secondary material, and through comparison then with other British settler colonies. It is

argued that at the same time that industrialisation forced the state to bureaucratise, in the party systems that it created it set up countervailing pressures that would definitely stall bureaucratisation in the central administration by 1930. In the railway administration bureaucratisation would nevertheless proceed, but another politics would result in its being structured in inconsistent ways, defining South Africa's response to road motor competition, and therefore key features of the trajectory of South Africa's railways up until the present.