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# On State Formation and Territorial Expansion – A Dialogue\*

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## ABSTRACT

*In 2010 Charles Spencer proposed the theory that there is a causal relation between state formation and territorial expansion. In the present article we formulate some objections against his views.*

In 2010 the archaeologist Charles Spencer published a substantial article on Territorial Expansion and Primary State Formation in the online journal *PNAS* (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences). The major line of argument in the article concerns a causal connection between primary state formation and territorial expansion. Spencer bases his article mainly on his archaeological research of Middle American Monte Alban and shows that in the development of this state territorial expansion – conquest – played a major role. Subsequently, he applies his territorial expansion model to five cases of presumed primary state formation and finds in each case indications of territorial expansion.

In this article we would like to contribute to this discussion by more closely examining this theory and the data on which Spencer bases his views. Basic to his theory is the assumed causal connection between state formation and territorial expansion. It is not clear to us from his expose what comes first: the development of a state organization and then, as a consequence, conquests – or the other way around: was the formation of the state a consequence of territorial expansion?

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In addition, on the one hand, early states are known where territorial expansion did not play a role in their formation (*e.g.*, many of the city-states of Mesopotamia, and several of the Greek *poleis*, according to Griffith and Thomas 1981). On the other hand, there are chiefdoms where territorial expansion did not lead to state formation (*e.g.*, the Huron and the Iroquois described by Trigger 1990).

In any case the emphasis on territorial and spatial developments is not doing justice to the complexity of the state formation process. It should be added here that, as far as we know, none of the theoretical approaches of state formation have denied the possible importance of territorial expansion.

Spencer uses the term 'territorial expansion'. This term does not necessarily imply military activities or conquest. Yet, the examples he presents are strongly related to warfare and battles, suggesting that territorial expansion and military activities coincide. The use of the term conquest instead of territorial expansion thus seems justified. It should be pointed out that the idea of a connection between state formation and conquest is not new. In 1909 the German sociologist Oppenheimer, following Gumpłowicz (1899) put forward his well-known conquest theory (*Ueberlagerungstheorie*) in which pastoral peoples defeated and subjected the more sluggish agriculturalists. For Oppenheimer the state was an instrument of oppression, designed to confirm social inequality (as stated already by Engels some twenty-five years earlier [1884]). The conquest and subjection of neighboring peoples had no other purpose than the economic exploitation of the defeated. The organization required to accomplish this was the state. So, in Oppenheimer's view, first came conquest and then, as a consequence, the state.

Oppenheimer's views were severely criticized, amongst others by Lowie (1927). Lowie showed that conquest did not always lead to state formation, and that some states seemed to have developed without the aid of conquest. This led him to the conclusion that conquest cannot be the only mechanism responsible for state formation. Notwithstanding this assumption, the conquest theory con-

tinued to attract scholars. Thurnwald (1935) elaborated and improved the theory somewhat, mainly with the aid of African data. Westermann (1952) also made extensive use of the conquest theory to explain state formation in Africa. All in all, there seems to be no objection to reason that the development of the state in some cases was deeply affected by conquest, but as a general explanation this theory is rather unsatisfactory as appears from the following example. When the rulers of small early states in ancient Angkor set out to conquer neighboring polities their efforts usually succeeded for only a short time. Due to distance, difficult traveling, the wooded terrain, and the lack of a strong legitimation, they were usually not able to continually subject the defeated neighbors, and the conquered regions soon became independent again (Hagesteijn 1989: 88, 89). These views find confirmation in Stark's recent study of political developments in Angkor (Stark 2006).

As Spencer limits his views to the so-called 'primary' states it seems necessary to pay some attention to this type of states. The concept of the pristine (or primary) state was launched by Fried (1960; 1967: 231ff.).<sup>1</sup> In his opinion, pristine states were different for they had developed without examples for the rulers on which to orient themselves. For a correct understanding of the problem it should be pointed out that states do not think or act; it is people, leaders, who do act and think (Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Kurtz 2004, 2006). We thus should ask ourselves: what did induce, long ago, some rulers (chiefs, big men?) to undertake activities that led to the development of a state organization. A definitive answer to this question is difficult to get. There are no written sources from which one might obtain some insights. This leaves us with only the archaeological remains of these pristine states with the help of which one might formulate some hypotheses about their origin and subsequent developments. It therefore seems advisable first to see to what extent recent studies on the origin of states can throw some light on the problem at hand. These studies teach us that several conditions must be fulfilled first before the development of a state can take place. There must be a sufficient number of people to form a complex, stratified society (cf. Grinin 2009:

102–109). The society must control a specific territory. There must be a productive system yielding a surplus to maintain the specialists and the privileged members of the society. Finally, there must be an ideology, which explains and justifies a hierarchical administrative organization and socio-political inequality (Claessen 2002: 107–109). It is assumed that for the formation of pristine states similar conditions must also have been present. Stated differently: if one or more of these conditions was not met, the formation of a (pristine) state would have been very difficult, even impossible (for similar views see MacNeish 1981: 128ff.; Claessen 2010: 25). The occurrence of these conditions is in itself not sufficient to cause state formation. To come that far some events that trigger the development into statehood are necessary (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 624, 625; Claessen 2002: 111). From historically known cases of state formation it appears that an event such as a shortage of food or goods, population pressure, war, the introduction of new ideas can be considered as a threat or a danger (Hagesteijn 1989), while the necessity to protect trade and markets, or the coming into power of an ambitious ruler can also be perceived as such. In short, some expected or unexpected fact occurs and induces the ruler to act and to come up with an innovation. Intensification in agriculture and horticulture (without territorial expansion) should not be underestimated as important factors in state formation (Fall *et al.* 2004). There thus seems to be no reason to consider the origin of the pristine state as a phenomenon fundamentally different from the origin of other early states – except, perhaps, their earlier existence. That the pristine states (and all other early states) show resemblances in their organization and lawgiving is not surprising. We refer here to Haas (1995) who pointed out that the type of problems met by central governments (taxation, defense, communication *etc.*) were everywhere the same. And, as but few solutions proved to be effective, there is also a great similarity in the solutions applied by success full early states (cf. Claessen and Skalník 1978).

Once the pristine state is formed, so it is assumed, all other states have been basing their development in one way or another

on the example of the pristine state and are thus secondary (cf. Haas 1981: 83). Bronson (2006: 138, 140) distinguishes several types of influence, such as stimulus (some ‘unsubstantiated rumors’) or template (which refers to a well recorded model), which ‘serve to convince leaders that a higher degree of centralization is possible and to make that centralization more palatable by wrapping it in a mantle of a glorious past’ (*Ibid.*: 138). This all is, though quite logical, too simple a view that overrates the possibilities of acculturation greatly. Renfrew (1983: 17) even considers the division into pristine and secondary states as unacceptable diffusionistic, offering a facile taxonomy in place of serious analysis. We could not agree more. When the cultural or political differences between the ‘giving’ and the ‘receiving’ party are but small, there is a good chance that diffusion on a large scale will take place. When the differences are considerable, diffusion will be limited, however. An illustration (though not connected with a pristine state) is the different ways in which the Roman culture was accepted, on the one hand, by the already highly developed peoples of Central Gaul, and the way in which the tribal German groupings of the Northwestern Europe reacted. The peoples of Central Gaul were able very well to copy the Roman administrative culture, while the Germanic tribes were not able to come to an understanding with Caesar – with as a consequence that the Romans exterminated the greater part of these tribes (Nash 1978; Roymans 1983).

A more important argument against the diffusionist view is that several later formed early states reached that level of socio-political development as a consequence of internal developments, or in reaction to developments in their region – without having had anything to do with a former pristine state. A good example of such a development is the old desert state of Ghana (for a general background see Bovill 1968; Amborn 1984; Connah 1987). Since the fourth century AD, the origins of Ghana are connected with caravan trade. Several families dominated the trade in the region of Ghana and most probably the most powerful of these families vested some dominance over the other families. Connah (1987: 114) suggests that ‘a continuing process of the accumulation of social wealth and power’ led to the growth of the indigenous

Ghana kingdom already before the eighth century. To quote Bovill (1968: 55): 'such empires had no precise boundaries, for the ruler was not interested in dominating territory as such, but in relationships with social groups upon which he could draw to provide levies in time of war, servants for his courts and cultivators to keep his granaries full'. Only in the course of time the loosely knit early state of Ghana developed into a stronger organized one. Levtzion (1973: 22) states that by the end of the eighth century Ghana was known in the Muslim world as 'the land of gold'. The gold of Ghana made possible the trade in salt, cloth, and slaves by traders from the Maghrib. Salt, especially, was crucial as a trade good, as many of the peoples of the Sahara had a serious shortage of it. The kingdom had a 'double' capital settlement, Koumbi Saleh. One part was a large Muslim town where trade and markets played a central role. The other part was the royal city, where the king and his court lived in an entourage of gold and splendor (Levtzion 1973: 24; McKissack and McKissack 1995: 28–32). He was – like all rulers of African early states – a sacred king, which legalized his rule (cf. Claessen and Skalník 1978: 555–559). It thus can be safely stated that the early state of Ghana developed out of the wish and the need to protect the caravan trade, the markets and the goldmines. There is no trace of connections with earlier states in the region.

Another example of an early state that developed without the inspiration of other states is the state of the Betsileo of Madagascar, described in detail by Kottak (1980; summarized in Claessen 2010: 28–29). The Betsileo lived at the east side of Madagascar in small villages, where they cultivated rice in the coastal plains on irrigated terraces. Their existence was seriously threatened when in the early seventeenth century slave hunters tried to capture people. To protect themselves against this danger they erected hilltop forts, and defended themselves successfully against the slave hunters. In this way they were able to stay near their rice fields. Because of the relative safety of the hilltop forts great numbers of people sought refuge there. This led to population pressure in the hill top settlements, and more and more administrative measures became neces-

sary to maintain law and order within these forts. This demanded stronger leadership than was customary in the original villages. In the Betsileo society the phenomenon of clan leaders, endowed with some form of sacred legitimacy, already existed. From their midst persons came to the fore who took the necessary measures to organize social life in the forts. As clan leaders they had already some sacred status, and, together with their increasing powers, they soon became considered to possess this sacredness in stronger measures than the other leaders, and they were elevated above all others. The growing complexity of the society made it inevitable to develop measures to ensure that rules and regulations were carried out – if necessary by force. In this way a reasonable degree of order in the overcrowded forts was reached and safety as well as a sufficient flow of food and goods was ensured. At the end of these developments the Betsileo fulfilled all criteria for an early state organization, a consequence of decisions made a long time ago, which were never intended to create a state (cf. Claessen and Skalník 1978: 624 for an elaboration of this view).

Due to an archaeological approach, anthropological aspects of state formation do not receive sufficient attention in Spencer's article. For instance, the importance of the legitimacy of the ruler, connected with the ideological convictions of his people should not be underestimated (for a general discussion see Cohen and Toland 1988; Beetham 1991). From comparative research it appears that the existence of an ideology which explains and justifies the division of power in the society is indispensable for the development and maintenance of a centralized power. Where the position of the ruler (or the central government) is legitimized by the dominant ideology of his people, his rule is secure. Where such a legitimizing ideology is not found, the development or maintenance of a state does not occur or becomes very difficult (Hagesteijn 1989, 1996; Miller 1976). Moreover, in several of the cases of primary states discussed by Spencer, a legitimizing ideology was found to be of crucial importance. This holds for example for the **Harappa / Mohenjo Daro** state for which Ratnagar (1991, 1996) convincingly demonstrated the existence of a wide spread ideology in

which a sacred ruler and a number of priests played crucial roles. To what extent the many unicorn emblems discovered over a large territory is sufficient to demonstrate a large territorial expansion remains to be seen, however. In **Egypt** was the ruler, the *pharaoh*, from the earliest times considered as highly sacred and the state religion dominated social and economic life as described in detail by Trigger (1993). The *pharaoh* was seen as the son of the god Horus, and thought to be the giver of fertility and prosperity. This belief last mentioned had as a consequence that when a serious drought scourged Egypt, the then *pharaoh*, Pepi II, was accused of inability and lost as a consequence not only his legitimacy, but also his sovereignty and the early state of Egypt (the Old Kingdom) collapsed (Morris 2006: 60–62). For **Mesopotamia** we refer to Adams (1966: 121), who stated that ‘the probability of a primary religious focus to social life at the outset of the Urban Revolution, while often somewhat naïvely exaggerated, appears to be the decidedly most reasonable reconstruction of the available evidence’. Recent research has relativized this statement somewhat, but none of these publications denies the importance of priests and temples in the emergence and development of the Mesopotamian towns (Veenhof 1988). There is still some dispute over the precise meaning of the titles *en*, *lugal*, and *ensi* (Emelianov 2004; Van Driel 1992; Curvers 1993: 114–116), but probably each town had its own way to indicate the highest functionaries. The same differences of opinion are found with regard to the ranking of the towns. Uruk is often indicated as the most important one, but others refer to Lagash, Ur, Eridu, or Nippur. The growth of Uruk as the dominating power in Mesopotamia was, according to Adams, a gradual process, and there are reasons to think that after some time Uruk became replaced as the leading state by Ur III, which after ecological degradation lost the hegemony to Babylon (Veenhof 1992; Redman 2004).

That Spencer does not dwell on the ideological background of the people of **Monte Alban** is not surprising, as it is difficult for archaeologists to disentangle the combination of religious and political symbols (Blanton *et al.* 1999: 77–87, 101–107). Yet Joyce



and Winter (1996: 33) state ‘Elite manipulation of ideology is identified as the key factor in the development of urban society in Oaxaca’. What do they know that Spencer does not? The developments in **China**, finally, are a bit problematic.<sup>2</sup> Spencer decided – on the basis of the work of Liu and Chen (2003) – to select Erlitou as the oldest state in China. According to some Chinese archaeologists, however, the large ruined settlement of Erlitou should be considered the capital of the Xia dynasty, and see the Xia state as the oldest early state in China (Gao Wei 1998: 66–79; Li Xuequin 1997: 279–299). Some Chinese archaeologists consider Taosi as the first (early) state in China (Gao Jiangtao 2007: 13–20). The Dutch historian ter Haar (2009) thinks that the Xia is a kind of a mythical dynasty. For him Chinese history begins with the Chang (1500 BC) (*Ibid.*: 22–25). The Chinese historian Yi Jianping is not convinced that there is strong support for the idea that Erlitou or Taosi ever evolved in the course of territorial expansion. Even Liu admits (2004: 216) that it is not sure whether the scope of diffusion of the Erlitou culture is equal to the territory of the Erlitou state. Yi rightly points out that most of the Chinese scholars who believe there is a causal connection between primary state formation and territorial expansion in China base their arguments on the written texts of hundreds, even thousands of years later, which limit their trustworthiness considerably.<sup>3</sup>

We would like to reiterate that when a suitable ideology did not exist, the formation of a state becomes next to impossible. We refer in this respect to the Mbundu people from the African region of Angola. The matrilineal Mbundu lived in the seventeenth century in segmentary villages, the leadership over which rested in the hands of the leader of the most prominent lineage. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were several attempts to form larger political units. In both cases, however, the segmentary ideology which kept the villages separated was stronger than the powers of those who tried to unite them into a larger political unity (Miller 1976). The developments or rather the lack of developments among the Mbundu resemble in many respects those among the Chibuk, who lived in the Sahel region of Africa (described by

Ronald Cohen 1981: 105–109). Also here strong feelings of independence among the many small, autonomous communities prevented cooperation in political respects.

In Spencer's view, the development of a bureaucratic type of government is of prime importance in the early states mentioned by him, making possible the control of the large territory. He bases himself on Max Weber, who presented an exhausting exposé of bureaucracy (Weber 1964: 160–166). It is, however, highly improbable that in the mentioned states such a type of bureaucracy could already have existed. According to Weber, a bureaucracy is characterized by a hierarchy of specialized functionaries, each having a narrowly defined task, all of them being salaried, and before they are appointed their abilities have been tested. We are willing to accept for the states mentioned (as, in fact, for all early states) the presence of some sort of governmental apparatus, showing *aspects* of a bureaucracy, such as a hierarchical structure, and some specialist knowledge, but Weber's other requirements such as appointment, salaries and discipline, are usually lacking. Comparative research (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 575–584) has shown that a distinction can be made in general functionaries and specialists. The specialists are mainly found in the governmental center, the generalists at the regional and local levels. These functionaries did not receive a salary; at best they got some remuneration. The remainder of their income they had to collect from the people over which they were placed. This made the functionaries relatively independent of the central ruler. This did not usually prevent them to follow the instructions of the central ruler – though there were found differences in degree of loyalty (as demonstrated in Claessen 1987). Crucial in this respect was the (degree of) legitimacy of the ruler. It will be difficult, we think, to demonstrate archaeologically the existence of a true bureaucracy, or the presence of just a governmental apparatus. This would be possible only when written evidence is available.

Summarizing the above views, we maintain that Spencer's emphasis on territorial and spatial developments is not doing justice to the complexity of the processes of state formation. Neither are we

convinced that the limitation of his analysis to primary states does contribute much to the general theory. In fact, we doubt whether the whole concept of primary states (pristine states) has any use at all in the analysis of the emergence of the state.

As Spencer bases himself on archaeological data only, he inevitably misses the contributions made by anthropologists to the problems of emergence and early development of the state. Especially the role of ideology and legitimacy should have been included, for without a legitimizing ideology the emergence of an (early) state will be difficult if not impossible, as the cases mentioned above demonstrated. To function adequately each (early) state needs a governmental apparatus. It is too far fetched, however, to use for such apparatuses the term bureaucracy. For such a type of organization the illiterate states in question simply had neither economic means to finance it, nor technology needed to execute it.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Shortly after Fried's publications Y. A. Cohen (1969) also developed a distinction between pristine and secondary states, which he termed 'incorporated' and 'expropriated' states (Kurtz 1994: 36–38).

<sup>2</sup> Dr Yi Jianping was so kind as to provide us with recent references to the archaeology of Erlitou.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with Yi Jianping, letters, dated March 31, 2011 and April 28, 2011.

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