

---

## Henri Claessen as a Passionate and Genuine Scholar

---

**Leonid Grinin**

*HSE University and Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian  
Academy of Sciences, Moscow*

I met Claessen personally only once, it happened at the conference ‘Hierarchy and Power in the History of Civilizations’ in Moscow in 2000, and our meeting was rather fleeting. Despite this, Henri became one of a few people who had a noticeable influence on me. We have been in constant contact with him for more than twenty years, and we exchanged opinions more than once on theoretical problems associated with the early state. In addition, we were united by the journal ‘Social Evolution & History.’ Claessen welcomed the start of such a journal, which was lacking in political evolutionary anthropology. Of course, our journal has a much broader subject matter, but it started from this topic and remains faithful to it. Claessen wrote that ‘This new journal soon became one of the leading journals in the field’ (Claessen 2008: 12). Knowing how difficult it is to run such periodicals, he was worried that we could get tired of it and that difficulties could affect the fate of the journal (in his congratulatory remarks on the anniversary of the journal he wrote that, ‘It is good that this journal exists – and I can only hope that it will continue its great service to social sciences and history for many years to come’).

For us, Claessen's participation in the journal, as well as his contributions and opinion on various issues were of utmost importance. At first, he gave us very useful advice. His opinion was very important for me and other editors of the journal. Thus, several times after his mild remarks on the publication of insufficiently finalized articles (due to our modest editorial experience at that time), we significantly changed our editorial policy. I think SEH was important for Claessen in a number of ways. I hope he was pleased that the journal continued to develop the direction to which he devoted a very noticeable part of his life, and to which the interest had greatly decreased in European

(not to mention American) anthropology by the time the journal was launched. In addition, ‘several former participants in the Early State Project now found themselves publishing articles in the new journal’ (Claessen 2008: 12). The journal was essential to him for the opportunity to publish his articles, to be aware of current opinions (he took part in all our special issues and sections), and to receive feedback. He published 16 articles in our journal, that is, he published one article in a year or two. His every article was an additional contribution to the theory of early state or social evolution, where he reacted to what was published in the journal, including my works (his reaction particularly to my approach is most noticeable in articles in 2006, 2010, 2016).<sup>\*</sup> Henri wrote not only on the topic of the early state. He continued his research in the field of evolution (Claessen 2006), in 2011 he wrote an article on chiefs (Claessen 2011), and in 2020 on the Neanderthals (Claessen 2020).

Henri Claessen, together with Petr Skalník, made a very important contribution to the development of political anthropology, creating the theory of the early state, which appears to have been the last among the great epoch-making political-anthropological theories of the 1960s and 1970s, which did more than just giving a new consideration of socio-political evolution, its stages and models. One may even say that these theories succeeded in filling the evolutionary gap between medium-complexity and complex societies, the pre-state forms and the state, which had formed in the academic consciousness by that time. In the theory of the early state it was fundamentally new and important from a methodological point to define the early state as a separate stage of evolution essentially different from the subsequent stage, the one of the full-grown or mature state. ‘To reach the early state level is one thing, to develop into a full-blown, or mature state is quite another’ (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 22).

They not only declared this idea, but also revealed the evolution of such polities from inchoate to mature forms. Moreover, they managed to unite the teams of scholars around a common idea to fill this theory with various ethnohistorical evidences and variations of particular historical development of early states. This gave a great impetus to the development of evolutionary political anthropology in general and Russian anthropology in particular. Thus, several very productive international conferences ‘Hierarchy and Power’ were held in Moscow, and several significant collections on the topics of multilineal political evolution were published. Finally, the creation of the SEH journal was also directly related to the influence of this theory. To a certain extent, the journal was a place to develop the ideas of Claessen

and Skalník as well as of other anthropologists. For me personally, the theory of the early state, the socio-evolutionary context associated with statehood and its evolution has become the most important field of my research for quite a long time. So I consider myself a disciple of Claessen and Skalník.

And in terms of developing the theory of social evolution, Henri Claessen made a significant contribution, which I continue to rely on in my research. Until the end of his life, Claessen along with another well-known evolutionist and active contributor to our journal, Robert Carneiro, held in his hands the torch of evolutionism which, unfortunately, many are eager to put out. It is worth quoting his words on evolutionism.

Evolution and evolutionism are important, not to say crucial, concepts in the social sciences and history. One may differ in opinion of whether these concepts are great theories, or just research strategies but I think, this is not an important difference. It is the results of the research based on evolution and/or evolutionism that count. The contents of *Social Evolution & History* make clear the importance of evolution studies.

It is strange that in some countries (*e.g.*, the USA) the editors of leading journals in anthropology consider evolutionism as ‘outdated’, and ‘no longer a main stream topic’. The only field where evolutionism is still found to play a (minor) role is (inevitably) prehistory. Is this the consequence of the American hang for newism – every ten years a new theory to cultivate? It is, anyhow, a disadvantage for the social sciences over there. Fortunately, many American scholars have found an outlet for their ‘heretic’ or ‘outdated’ views in *Social Evolution & History*.

For me, Henri Claessen has always been and remains the epitome of a true and genuine scholar. Undoubtedly, he was an exemplar in terms of his scientific research, which was always very scrupulous, clearly stated, and distinguished by a good (even exceptional) balance between theoretical and practical (specific) research, as well as by his ability to systematically investigate important phenomena.

But for me he presented a peculiar example of academic ethics and behavior, when scientific truth becomes the pivotal issue. I believe that the true contribution of a great scholar to the development of a particular field of science is not that every word in his research is the ultimate truth (then this would no longer be science, but a sacred writing). Rather that his ideas open the way to new discoveries and con-

clusions. And the more significant are the ideas, the wider and longer is the path for further research they outline. But at the same time, this means that theories and ideas may be not convincing enough at some points, they cease to cover or fail to explain new knowledge and ignore some factors. However, it is always a difficult moment for a scholar to realize that at some points (s)he is not completely right, overlooked or paid no attention to something, failed to perceive the importance of some factors. And in this regard, it seems to me that the ability to recognize the shortcomings and mistakes and to admit fair criticism was one of Claessen's virtues. As a genuine scholar, he was ready to admit that his opponent was right while he was wrong if he felt that the former was closer to scientific truth (of course, no one owns the full truth, you can only be a little bit closer to it or a little further, but in science this 'a little' is very important). Unfortunately, in the age of informatization when attempts are made to occupy all strategic informational heights, the priority of scientific truth in the evaluation of scientific works started to be regarded almost as archaism and as very naive idealism, so in general, it is less and less spoken about. And ideas that are introduced into scientific circulation through massive media and administrative campaigns receive the status of indisputable truths, regardless of their scientific value. And this is very sad, since the deviation from the principle of the priority of scientific truth and the strengthening of the priority of media companies leads to a strong devaluation of science, especially the humanities, so that evidence often stems from the advantages not of arguments, but of the scientific and administrative (or rather political) position of the opponent, his ability to put pressure.

Henri, at least in our relationship, never used his authority. I opposed some of his views and this criticism was aimed precisely at the development of his (and Skalník's) ideas. He always took such criticism very seriously and responded to it very conscientiously. Moreover, he even publicly admitted.

Leonid Grinin presents a stimulating and refreshing discussion of a subject that was sadly neglected in earlier early state studies, namely the phenomenon of the mature state. It is true, in several places in our publications the mature state was mentioned, but nowhere was it made the subject of a thorough analysis. Grinin gives an overview of the places where the term 'mature state' turns up, and he suggests possible reasons why it never got the attention it deserves. ... Grinin, however, does more than only pointing to a neglected subject. He goes deeply into the matter, and shows that the dichotomy 'early-mature' is an incomplete

developmental sequence. According to him there are structural differences between the cases suggested by us, and states with a capitalistic and industrial background (imperial Germany, the United States, and Russia *etc.*). He therefore proposes a sequence of three types, early states, developed states and mature states... We would have reversed the terms developed and mature because in the few places we used 'mature' the term was always placed immediately after the early state. Since Grinin's publications such a reversal of terms is no longer feasible (Claessen, Hagesteijn and van de Velde 2008: 245–265).

For me, the recognition of my ideas by Claessen was especially important and strongly motivated and continues to motivate.

Henri Claessen lived a long life which was full of overwhelming devotion to science. And he remained a genuine scholar who continuing to think and create until the very end. We will all miss him greatly.

#### NOTE

\* Claessen quite often referred to the articles in our collective monograph 'Early States'.

#### REFERENCES

- Claessen, H. J. M. 2006. Developments in Evolutionism. *Social Evolution & History* 5 (1).
- Claessen, H. J. M. 2008. Before the Early State and After: An Introduction. *Social Evolution & History* 7 (1):
- Claessen, H. J. M. 2011. On Chiefs and Chiefdoms. *Social Evolution & History* 10 (1):
- Claessen, H. J. M. 2020. Neandertals – Life, Work, Vanishing. *Social Evolution & History* 19 (1):
- Claessen, H. J. M., Hagesteijn, R. R., and van de Velde, P. 2008. The Early State Today. *Social Evolution & History* 7 (1): 245–265.
- Claessen, H. J. M., and Skalník P. 1978. The Early State: Theories and Hypotheses. In Claessen, H. J. M., and Skalník, P. (eds.), *The Early State* (pp. 3–29). The Hague: Mouton.