

Rethinking Premodern Governance: Passing the Torch

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ABSTRACT

*During his long, prolific career, Henri J. M. Claessen was a major contributor to the comparative study of political organizational change. Starting with *The Early State* (1978), edited with Peter Skalnik, Claessen's writings served to broaden and enrich evolutionary approaches in anthropology by recognizing key axes of diversity in political forms and variation in temporal sequences. Furthermore, he recognized that studies of long-term political change required multiscale concepts that included analytical lenses larger in size than single polities. Claessen drew on his encyclopedic knowledge of ethnographic and historical cases in challenging and expanding the mid-twentieth century approaches to social evolution. With his passing, now is an appropriate time to build on the theoretical advances that Claessen forged, most specifically by taking fuller account of what archaeological research has discovered during the years coincident with his academic career. Grounded in these findings, further steps toward a comparative framing aimed at understanding diversity and change in human political organization and cooperation are advanced.*

Keywords: *collective action, cooperation, governance, social change.*

Henri J. M. Claessen was in his own words, 'a genuine armchair anthropologist' (Claessen 2022: 139). During his lengthy and prolific academic life, Claessen directly engaged the topic of human political organizational change from a perspective that he explicitly defined as

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comparativist and evolutionary (Claessen 2014: 4). Nevertheless, from the landmark tome, *The Early State*, edited with Peter Skalník (Claessen and Skalník 1978), Claessen repeatedly introduced elements of variability and historical specificity into his conceptual framing that served to challenge and broaden mid-twentieth century neoevolutionary thought (e.g., Carneiro 1970; Fried 1967; Sahlins and Service 1960; Service 1971). Here, in this essay, part of a collection that celebrates Claessen's career, it is my privilege to recognize and contextualize what I see as some of Henri Claessen's key conceptual contributions and to endeavor to build on them, leveraging new empirical findings from the past half-century of archaeological research. The aim is to continue to recast comparative approaches to long-term political change and human cooperation in ways that diminish presumptions of linear progress and essentialism, and that continue to strip away the biases of nineteenth century colonialist thinking that long have been embedded in Western social science (e.g., Bhambra and Holmwood 2021; Blanton *et al.* 2022a).

THE EARLY STATE AND BEYOND

In compiling 21 accounts of historical states, Claessen's (1978: 533) initial goals for *The Early State* volume were to highlight cross-cultural resemblances rather than differences. In parallel, a key realization of the volume was to define a general stage-based sequence of political forms to categorize the transition from incipient states to more mature political formations (Claessen 2022: 142). As he recounted, Claessen's (*Ibid.*: 139–140) desires to construct a categorical sequence of political forms, based on the empirical comparison of numerous historical cases, stemmed in part from his earlier thesis research, which aimed to refine a general definition of what constitutes a premodern political state. Throughout his career, Claessen (2006) never lost sight of (and continued to refine) the dialectic between more general and specific features of political forms, mainly states. In a sense, his ample writings across his long career can be seen as an effort to address the overarching research question expressed by Bruce Trigger (2003: 3): '(t)he most important issue confronting the social sciences is the extent to which human behaviour is shaped by factors that operate cross-culturally as opposed to factors that are unique to particular cultures.'

Nevertheless, despite these foundational aims, perhaps the greatest contribution of *The Early State* and the streams of synthetic effort (and theoretical introspection) that it provoked was in regard to the

variability of state forms of governance and different ways and paths through which they were established (Claessen 2006, 2010, 2014, 2022; see also Feinman 2008). Perhaps, ironically, although Claessen continuously dialogued with and never lost sight of basic themes in general neoevolutionary thought, his written arguments were a consistent foil to assertions that universal prime movers accounted for the rise of states or expectations that episodes of historical change should take unilinear, or even unidirectional paths. For Claessen, '(s)ocial evolution is multilinear' and multidirectional (Claessen 2006: 15–16). 'Stagnation, decline, and collapse are as characteristic of the development of human culture as growth and florescence' (*Ibid.*: 6).

From publication of *The Early State* onward, Claessen focused on the institutions and roles of governance, but embedded the study in broader societal contexts, which he systematically recorded to see how other aspects of cultural behavior dovetailed with the forms of governance across sampled cases (*Ibid.*: 5). And yet, reflecting his foundations in categorical approaches, Claessen's (*Ibid.*: 5) analyses often seamlessly switched back and forth between the two distinct meanings of 'the state,' one as the specific institutions and leadership positions of governance and the other being the larger societal context governed by those institutions (Cohen 1973). By not drawing a firmer distinction between the structures of governance and the context in which they governed, Claessen may have inadvertently diminished his own efforts to define the conditions under which the institutions of governance were established and modified (*e.g.*, Claessen 2011: 18–19).

In conceptualizing change, Claessen constructively recognized the importance of expanding his spatial lens, inventing his own term (Claessen 2022: 145), *complex interaction model*, to account for the critical interrelations between societies (and their members) that he generally found to be instrumental in the development of early states. In acknowledgment of the diversity of historical processes and sequences of transition in different global regions, Claessen (*Ibid.*: 146) also coined the concept of *evolutionary streams*, which was a recognition that the paths or courses and processes of change were not equivalent in distinct global macroregions, which he hypothesized was due to different ideological constructs and other historical and environmental factors. To his credit, Claessen (2006: 15) during his career came to see clearly 'that the evolution of complex societies is even more complicated than thought till now.'

EMPRICAL FOUNDATIONS

In accord with most cultural evolutionists before him, Claessen in his writings relied heavily on synchronic information or relatively short-term episodes of diachronic data, through which longer-term sequences of structural changes in governance were modeled. Claessen's (2022) discussions of the causes, sequences, and the cultural features associated with political transitions were bolstered by his deep knowledge of the ethnographic record and role as a synthesizer in which he brought together case studies in edited collections (*e.g.*, Claessen and Skalnik 1978, 1981). Nevertheless, from early in his career (Webster 1980), Claessen's research never fully integrated what archaeologists were discovering over the last 50–60 years nor leveraged their findings, which would have supported, broadened, or modified his perspectives toward further enhancements in our understanding of variation and changes in premodern governance.

In the remainder of this essay, I draw on select archaeological literature and findings to bolster and expand the theoretical thrust of Claessen's arguments. Over the last half-century or more, earth-wrung information from excavations and settlement pattern surveys has provided diachronic data to chart long-term sequences of change for many global regions. For many parts of the world, we can now analytically look forward from the past rather than applying or pyramiding contemporary data to extrapolate supposed paths of transition from the present back in time (Axtell 1979; Lekson 2018: 6–26). Reliance on archaeological information permits us to see much greater variation, not just in sequences of long-term change but in the tempos of transition, and in the differential articulations of diverse cultural features and behaviors (Feinman 2023).

Throughout his career, cross-cultural comparisons were at the heart of Claessen's research agenda and written work, but, at the same time, the thrust of his approach, on early states, took a bit of a 'historical turn' (*e.g.*, Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010) away from unilinear concepts such as 'general evolution' (Claessen 2006: 16), progress (*Ibid.*: 7), and categorical or structural identity in forms of political institutions (*Ibid.*: 26). Here, a 'historical turn' implies that the analyst looks in-depth at historical episodes in which institutions were created or reshaped, but with a close eye on broader comparative implications (*e.g.*, Mahoney 2017; Thelen 1999). Claessen (2020) brought this focus on variability and a degree of institutional granularity to, for example, his comparative studies of Polynesian and sub-Saharan African states.

But, in my opinion, by not more fully incorporating new archaeological findings and relying almost entirely on published ethnographic and historical accounts, Claessen's approach remained too grounded in the categorical as opposed to the processual aspects of change, especially in his adherence to conjectural stages or step-ladders of evolutionary change (incipient–mature states), as well as the categorical distinctions linked to culture history (what Claessen termed evolutionary streams). Of course, categories and processes are both elements of any comparative analytical framework (*e.g.*, Carneiro 2011; Claessen 2014; Lewis and Greenfield 1983). And yet, as universal, unilinear, and uniform (overgeneralized) models find diminishing empirical support in the investigation of human histories, our aims should be refocused to cross-cultural patterning at a somewhat lower level of generality. Rather than continuing to look futilely for silver-bullet prime movers, social laws, or a general sequence of change, it would now seem more productive to focus on constructing, refining, and assessing middle-range theories (Merton 1968; Smith 2011a), such as the examination of social mechanisms – patterned relations between key variables that underpin episodes of institutional change (Hedström and Swedberg 1996).

Political organization in the past varied along more dimensions than just categorical stages and evolutionary streams (cultural traditions). Archaeology is providing us with the opportunity for more fine-grained institutional analyses through which we can examine governance at multiple scales, both spatial and temporal. Claessen, as a self-described armchair theorist, was mostly reliant on historical and ethnographic findings gathered by others from which he assembled comparative trait lists and categorical modes. Although to a lesser degree than many other evolutionists, the inertia of received ideas narrowed his framing toward more taxonomic stage-based thinking and away from process, institutional change, and individual actions.

In contrast, contemporary archaeology, now enriched with decades of newly collected data, is beginning to allow us lenses to examine how people and institutions were articulated over time and space at multiple spatial scales from the neighborhood to the settlement, region, macroregion, and beyond. At the same time, ‘archaeology's language has to be mutually intelligible with that of ... sister disciplines, the ecological and social sciences... it should bridge the population-based concepts of biology and ecology, and the sociological concepts of people doing things in groups’ (Kowalewski and Birch 2020: 30). In accord with the political scientist, Margaret Levi (1988: 7–8), our

studies of political variability and change must focus on institutions and individuals: ‘Institutions ... are the consequence of human actions. It is individuals who act, individuals who think. Individuals create institutions – although, of course, institutions, structures, and macro-states also influence individual preferences and behaviors.’ What we traditionally have called society is ‘the field of interactions between institutions’ (Kowalewski and Birch 2020: 30) and individuals.

PREHISPANIC MESOAMERICA: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

For one premodern region, prehispanic Mesoamerica, eight widespread institutions have been defined – states, cities, neighborhoods, rural communities, marketplaces, temples, households, and water-management units (Kowalewski and Heredia-Espanoza 2020: 498). Although these institutions were present in most, if not all, sedentary prehispanic societies, the different ways that they were manifested and how they articulated with each other underpinned the marked diversity of Mesoamerican societies, even within single Mesoamerican regions and macroregions across time. Past categorical approaches, most of which projected back from the present or more recent eras, such as the direct historical approach, culture history, terms such as Formative, Classic, and Postclassic (when they referenced more than time), and even the imposition of Marx's Asiatic Mode to another non-Western world, all inadequately account for the organizational diversity that was prehispanic Mesoamerica (*e.g.*, Blanton *et al.* 2022a; Feinman and Carballo 2018; Feinman and Nicholas 2012). Alternatively, if we conduct archaeology looking forward (as well as back), focused on the suite of key institutions in each premodern world and recognize that they were to degrees ‘autonomous having separate reach, resources, objectives, and personnel’ (Kowalewski and Heredia-Espinoza 2020: 512–513), then we stand a far better chance to describe and explain the diversity that was prehispanic Mesoamerica. Governance occurred at multiple scales and these levels were not necessarily always in sync. Recognizing that, we can begin to examine past political organization/governance not just in terms of (or in relation to) societal scale and political complexity, but also along the axis that is perhaps the most critical for modern governance today – the extent to which power is concentrated or distributed (*e.g.*, Bump 2022).

Whether one uses Claessen's terminology, an evolutionary stream, or consider it a premodern world (Blanton and Feinman 1984), Mesoamerican modes of leadership, political organization, and statecraft

were not homogeneous; rather they were highly variable in form and in their sequences of transition. Some of the earliest evidence for supra-household organization occurred at centers on the Gulf Coast (*ca.* 1500–1000 BCE). Although center and polity sizes were small compared to later in time, leadership was personalized as indicated by the monumental carved stone heads and altars found at these settlements (Feinman 2022a; Feinman and Carballo 2018). Nevertheless, across Mesoamerica, most early leadership and governance, even that associated with the first urban centers, was more collective in form (Blanton *et al.* 2022b; Feinman *et al.* 2023). By the last centuries BCE, modes of organization at Gulf Coast centers shifted from personalized rule (Pool and Loughlin 2016) to somewhat more collective forms. Nevertheless, the more collective forms of governance that were established across Mesoamerica (*ca.* 1000–300 BCE) not only were characterized by different institutional arrangements, but the sustainability of these centers was highly variable (Feinman *et al.* 2023).

In Mesoamerica's east, the Maya Lowlands, the monumental, yet relatively collectively organized, polities of the mid-first millennium BCE (Pugh 2022) began to transition toward more personalized, autocratic rulership by the last centuries BCE (Estrada-Belli 2016). By the first half-millennium CE, Maya kingship was in place at least at certain centers, along with associated personalized trappings including ascension rituals, king lists, stone stela aggrandizing lordly events, and elaborate tombs associated with civic-ceremonial architecture (Martin 2020). Compared to most of the prehispanic era, Maya polities of the Classic period (*ca.* 200–900 CE) were more personalized and patrimonial with power concentrated in the ruler. These centers jockeyed for the control of trade routes and alliances/subjugation of lesser lords/centers for centuries before many were partly or largely abandoned late in the first millennium CE. In general, Postclassic Maya polities (*ca.* 900–1520 CE) were smaller and less autocratic than were those of the Classic period. Yet, even during the Classic period, Maya polities in the north and parts of Belize were less ruler-centric, erected fewer stela, and tended to have had distributed power arrangements (Carballo *et al.* 2022; Chase and Chase 2017; Feinman and Carballo 2022).

In stark contrast to the Classic Maya, the earliest urban states in the Mesoamerican Central and Southern Highlands, centered at Monte Albán and Teotihuacan, had highly collective forms of organization in which power was distributed (Carballo 2020; Carballo *et al.* 2022; Feinman and Carballo 2018, 2021; Nicholas and Feinman 2022). And yet, when these cities lost population and power during the first mil-

lennium CE, the subsequent polities were smaller yet more autocratic in form. In the Southern Highlands, after Monte Albán, Mixtec-Zapotec kings ruled small city-states that jockeyed for power (Feinman and Nicholas 2016; Kowalewski 2020). In Central Mexico, late in the prehispanic era, the Aztec empire was established through the Triple Alliance (Smith 2011b). Despite its scale, which was larger than any earlier political formation in this prehispanic world, power was somewhat more distributed (Feinman and Carballo 2018, 2021) than it had been in most of the small city-states that were imperially aggregated into the empire. Coincident with the Aztec empire, their neighboring and rival polity Tlaxcallan was organized as a republic with collective institutions that explicitly distributed power (Fargher *et al.* 2011).

Across the prehispanic Mesoamerican world there was no linear or uniform sequence of change. In the Maya region, Postclassic polities tended to be smaller and more collectively organized than those of the Classic period. In the Southern Highlands, Postclassic polities tended to be smaller yet more autocratically organized than those earlier. Toward the end of the prehispanic era, the Aztec empire was the largest political entity that ever was constructed in this global area, yet there is no telling how much larger it could have grown or how long it could have been sustained, if the European invasion (*ca.* 1519 CE) had not taken place. At the world scale, the organization of the Mesoamerican world also oscillated over time in the relative concentrations of people and political power (Blanton and Feinman 1984) and in the ways that regional components were interconnected (Golitzko and Feinman 2015). Of course, the patterns would be even more diverse if we expanded the discussion of cities and polities to more regions (see Carballo *et al.* 2022; Feinman and Carballo 2018, 2021).

At the same time, if you look beyond taxonomic constructs, Claessen's lens on evolutionary streams can serve to provoke thoughtful insights. In general, prehispanic Mesoamerican polities tended to be more collectively organized and less economically unequal compared to premodern polities in Eurasia (Feinman and Nicholas 2020; Kohler *et al.* 2017). Following Richard Blanton and Lane Fargher (2008), the concentration of power in governance is underpinned by a capability to monopolize or control the fiscal resources that fund governing and power. In this regard, it is not surprising that economic production and distribution in prehispanic Mesoamerica was not generally under the direct control of states or other top-down institutions. Production was situated in domestic units, and markets were key modes of exchange (Feinman and Nicholas 2012). In addition, compared to Eurasia,

the advent of metallurgy was much later in Meso-america (*ca.* 700 CE). So easily concentrated resources, including metal coinage, metal adornments, spot resources like precious ore mines, and large animal herds were not monopolizable sources of wealth in prehispanic Meso-america as they were at times across Eurasia. Absent these economic sources, Mesoamerican governance was largely fiscally sustained by what Blanton and Fargher (2008) refer to as internal resources, such as taxes and labor drafts (see also Smith 2015), which generally are correlated with greater checks on the power of principals (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; Feinman 2022b). However, resource distributions alone do not determine governance, and instances of personalized, more autocratic rule – the Classic Maya and the Postclassic Southern Highland kingdoms – were present at times in the Mesoamerican world when the control of interactive elite networks, precious goods exchange, and elite-owned estates could be monopolized by a powerful few.

Compared to Eurasia, resource availabilities may have been a factor that limited the consolidation of power and wealth in Mesoamerica. At the same time, more collective forms of governance that generally are associated with both greater infrastructural investments for tax collection and wider disseminations of public goods may be more costly to maintain at spatial scale. These factors, along with the absence of beasts of burden, wheeled transport, and large-scale waterborne vessels all may have contributed to constraints on the size of prehispanic Mesoamerican polities, which never reached the extent of either the Inka political domain in the Andes or the largest premodern empires in Eurasia. And yet, given the rugged terrain and limits on transport, the Aztec empire was impressively large and the associated exchange networks even more extensive, and certain Mesoamerican polities and cities persisted for centuries and, in some cases, much longer (Feinman and Carballo 2018, 2021). Historical outcomes were not determined by technologies or resources alone, but rather were variable and changeable over time; through social actions and institutions seeming environmental constraints could at times be eclipsed, allowing people to get things done (*e.g.*, Kowalewski and Birch 2020).

PASSING THE TORCH, INTEGRATING ARCHAEOLOGY

Professor Claessen also got very significant things done. Over his career, he consistently pushed back, drawing on data, against the rigidities of the eighteenth and nineteenth century conceptual frames, which remain firmly entrenched in Western social science (Bhambra and

Holmwood 2021; Savage 2021). At the same time, Claessen never let go of (and remained committed to) the importance of comparative approaches, essential if we are to truly understand the past. Through systematic comparisons, Claessen early on was open to seeing variation, and that was a hallmark of his writings, which grounded much subsequent analysis.

Here, I have proposed that the rich contemporary findings of archaeology could serve to fill gaps and build on Claessen's legacy committed to the recognition of historical diversity. As Jonathan Haas (1982: 216) noted years ago: 'Archaeology is the only discipline that can tell us how government began, the nature of the world's first governments, and the role these governments played in the organization of their respective political systems.' By offering a diachronic vantage and a wider array of social fields, many of which can be investigated at multiple analytical scales, archaeologists not only can enrich the empirical record, but their findings help dislodge presumptions long held to be true through extrapolations from the present back to the past. As illustrated in the aforementioned synthesis of prehispanic Mesoamerica, diachronic dirt-derived findings force reconsideration of traditional notions such as that premodern economies were uniformly state-controlled, that non-Western governance before the eighteenth century was uniformly despotic, and that life in precolonial Mesoamerica was almost entirely local due to terrain and transport constraints. Recognition of these conceptual revisions not only expands how we understand prehispanic Mesoamerica, but they necessarily add granularity to our vision of humanity's histories, why they varied, and how they changed.

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