Was the State Inevitable?

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This article poses the problem to what extent the emergence of the state was inevitable.

According to some anthropologists the development of the (early) state was the inevitable outcome of the evolution of political organization. The sequences developed by scholars such as Service (1971), and Fried (1967) place the state at the highest level of development, and suggest, moreover, that under normal circumstances the state level would be reached. This orthodox view has come recently heavily under fire. Practically all contributors to the collection volume *Beyond Chiefdoms. Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Keech McIntosh, ed., 1999) reject this unilinear view, and state that numerous developments can be pointed out that produced complex societies, but not the state (for similar views: Crumley 1987, 1995). Instead of the development of hierarchy, these authors point to the development of heterarchy, i.e., a society in which power and leadership is divided over several groups or persons, or, as Crumley (1995: 30), formulated: 'a system in which elements are unranked relative to one another or ranked in a variety of ways depending on conditions'. And indeed, the ethnographical record shows many cases of heterarchy – but also of states. In the recent volume *Alternatives of Social Evolution* (Kradin, Korotayev, Bondarenko, De Munck and Wason, eds., 2000), several of the contributors describe evolutionary developments that led to heterarchical forms of sociopolitical organization – though other contributors to the volume do not neglect state formation.

According to other anthropologists the development of the state might even have been prevented, if only people had been more aware of its danger. Society could have resisted the formation of the state. The work of Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'Etat* (1974), might have been a good example, but its promising title notwithstanding, it does not describe efforts to prevent the formation of the state, but the efforts of some Brazilian tribes to prevent hierarchization – which is not the same. The Brazilian efforts thus did not prevent the development of the state.

From the foregoing it follows that, in the evolution of a great variety of more or less complex types of sociopolitical organization, at least in some cases an early state organization emerged. The state as type of organization appeared to be most viable, and nowadays it is all over the world the dominant form of polity. This leads to the question if, and if so, to what extent, state formation was inevitable. I will first define the two central terms of this question. 'Inevitability' expresses the fact that, given specified circumstances, the emergence of a certain phenomenon cannot be prevented; it is sure that it will happen or appear. The definition of 'state' is less easy to formulate. This may seem strange, for there are numerous definitions of 'state'. The problem with most definitions is that they are based on ideological considerations. Already in *The Early State* (1978) Peter Skalník and I pointed to the existence of a veritable watershed between the definitions formulated by people who thought the state was wrong and despicable, and those formulated by people who considered the emergence of the state a major achievement of cultural evolution, opening up most promising perspectives to humankind. I will try to evade the pitfalls of both approaches, and formulate a relatively ideology-free definition of the state. In order to do so I will first state some facts about the state. The state is a phenomenon which first appeared only several thousand years ago. The state, being a product of social relations must not be reified, personified or sacralized. It is a specific kind of social organization, expressing a specific type of social order in a society. It gives expression to the existing social, economical and political relations in that society and to ideas pertaining to power, authority, force, justice, and property (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 4). Or, as Friedrich Engels put it more than hundred years ago:

> The state has not existed from all eternity... At a definite stage of economic development, which necessarily involved the cleavage

of society into classes, the state became a necessity because of this cleavage. (1884/1972: 232).

According to Patricia Shifferd (1987: 47 ff.) the course of state formation did not run smooth, and caused problems for many of its inhabitants:

> The emergence of the state, whatever its benefits, carried economic and political costs for most of the individuals and corporate groups in the affected societies. The enlarged coercive, expropriative, and imperialistic potential of the state, even the very early one, was paid for by some loss of independence and discretionary action by the majority of the people.

She continues – and I think the following statements of hers are most important for our discussion –

> ...continued centralization, although clearly observable taking human cultural evolution as a whole, is certainly not inevitable for individual cases. In fact such continued centralization was the least common outcome in the sample at hand.

Or, stated in a different way:

> The probabilities of all the necessary conditions being present in any single case are doubtless quite small.

From these statements we may conclude that: – the development of the state is only one of many developments, and
– only when certain, 'necessary conditions' are present, the state will emerge.

I will limit my analysis to the emergence of early states, for all later types of states developed out of earlier forms. As a definition of the early state I take (with some minor modifications) the one formulated in *The Early State* (1978: 640):

> The early state is a three-tier (national, regional, local level) sociopolitical organization for the regulation of social relations in a complex stratified society, divided into at least two basic strata, or emergent social classes – viz., the rulers and the ruled – whose relations are characterized by political dominance of the former and the obligation to pay tax of the latter, legitimized by a common ideology of which reciprocity is the basic principle.

With regard to this definition some comments are necessary. In the first place the reciprocal obligations between rulers and ruled have, of course, an asymmetrical character; put in a simple way, it is an exchange of goods for 'Good'. The existence of a common ideology does not necessarily mean that rulers and ruled have an identi-

cal ideology. The views on Christianity of elite and commoners differed greatly in medieval West Europe – and yet, they shared the same Christian doctrine (Duby 1985). As long as there exists a certain overlap between the views of both categories, small differences in ideology will not endanger the legitimacy – and thus the stability – of the (early) state. Secondly, a sound economy does contribute greatly to the acceptance of the rulers; as long as there is available sufficient food and goods for all, the legitimacy of the government will be easily accepted and maintained, as Donald Kurtz (1984) points out. There were, of course, early states where the economic situation was poor; only by applying brute force the elite could exact the food and goods they needed to live in luxury (e.g., Cohen 1991 on pre colonial Bornu; Van Bakel 1991 on Hawai'i). A precarious economic situation seems to have been more the exception than the rule, however, for – speaking generally – some prosperity is needed to make it possible for a state to function (Claessen 2000). Thirdly, prosperity or no prosperity, there is always found great inequality in (early) states. Some people, the happy few, are rich and powerful and all others, the great majority, are poor and powerless. This is the situation that made Aidan Southall ask 'how people succeeded in deceiving themselves into accepting the rise of the state round and above them, until the point was reached when they no longer had any choice and had lost the power to reject it' (1991: 78; for a similar view: Paynter 1989).

The answer to this question is that such a choice never was presented to people. The state developed gradually out of earlier forms of organization, such as chiefdoms, large big-man conglomerates, or *poleis*, where existed already social inequality, the obligation to pay tax, the obligation to work for the leaders, and the necessity to obey rules and regulations (for examples of chiefdoms: Earle 1991, 1997; Carneiro 1981; Kirch 1984; for big-men systems: Vansina 1991, 1999; for the Greek *polis*: Van der Vliet 1987, 2000). The legitimation of leadership, whether in chiefdoms, *poleis*, or in states, was not a matter of deceit on the side of the rulers, as Joyce and Winter (1996: 37) suggested, but a matter of shared beliefs and convictions. It was common in those days to believe that some people had better relations with the gods, spirits, or ancestors than others, and because of this they were expected to be better placed to act as intermediaries between the people and the supernatural

forces than whoever else in that society. This type of convictions lay at the bottom of their higher social and political status (Claessen and Oosten 1996; Thomas 1990: 26–33; Claessen 2000).

In the discussion so far several elements came to the fore that were important in the development and acceptance of states. Most important seems to be the fact that already long before the state came into being people lived in well-organized societies, and were accustomed to leadership, rules, taxes, obligations, etcetera. The development of a state out of such a form of organization depended upon the emergence of some 'necessary conditions' (as Shifferd has called them). In some cases the 'necessary conditions' emerged in but a short period of time, and consequently the formation of the state took only a short time. This holds for example for the state of the Betsileo in Madagascar (Kottak 1980; Claessen 2000).

The Betsileo lived at the east side of the island, where they cultivated rice in the coastal plains on irrigated terraces. Their existence was threatened when in the early seventeenth century slave hunters tried to capture people. To protect themselves against this danger they erected hill top forts, and defended themselves from there against the slave hunters. In this way they were able to stay near their rice fields. Because of the relative safety of the hill forts great numbers of people sought refuge there. This led to population pressure in the hill top settlements, and strong administrative measures became necessary to maintain order within the forts. This demanded stronger leadership than was customary. In Betsileo society there existed already clan leaders, endowed with some form of sacred legitimacy. From their midst persons came to the fore who took the necessary measures to organize social life in the forts. As clan leaders they possessed already a sacred status, and, together with their increasing powers, they soon became considered to posses this quality in a stronger measure than the other leaders, and they were elevated above all others. The growing complexity of the society made it inevitable to develop mechanisms 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.

The case of the Betsileo presents several clues to the identification of the 'necessary conditions' under which state formation occurs, such as an imminent danger, the necessity to organize some defense, some collective building activities, the necessity to keep

order in densely populated settlements, the need to produce food supplies; in the course of these activities the need for more developed forms of legitimized leadership came to the fore.

In order to find additional data on the 'necessary conditions' a survey of the evolution of some Polynesian societies will presented now. These island societies have a more or less similar economic and ideological background. For our goal it is important to realize that from its very beginning, Polynesian sociopolitical organization had a hierarchical basis (Kirch and Green 2001). There are in Polynesia small scale local societies, as well as large, well-organized chiefdoms and early states (Kirch 1984; Van Bakel 1989; Claessen 2000). The main incentives behind the sociopolitical developments are on the one hand the size of the island and the percentage of arable land, and the number of people on the other. The little atolls, where only a few hundred people did live on a few square kilometers, are characterized by small scale societies, where sacred headmen exercise modest forms of leadership. In such face-to-face communities, with only limited resources are but few tasks for leaders. In case of communal fishing parties they give instructions, and in ceremonial matters they had a say (see: Alkire 1977; Mason 1968; Huntsman and Hooper 1996). On larger islands, such as the Marquesas, conditions for the development of more complex forms of leadership were favorable. Here the relatively large population put too great a pressure on the available resources. Therefore the sacred chiefs were no longer able to fulfill the expectations of their people that they would procure fertility and well-being, and the people lost their faith in them; the chiefs lost their ideologically based legitimacy, and soon after that the political system collapsed; sacred chiefs made place for warring big men (Van Bakel 1989; Thomas 1990; Kirch 1991). On the large, fertile islands of the Samoa group the political organization remained embryonic. The actual power lay with the village community, and the village leaders had to consult all family heads before any decision could be taken. If decisions were not acceptable to some villagers, they could go away, and settle into another village. This unique situation is connected with the low density of population here (Van Bakel 1989, 1991; Bargatzky 1987; for a different view: Tcherkézoff 1997). In the large islands of Tahiti, Tonga and Hawai'i early states developed. In these islands a large population, concentrated mainly in the coastal plains, and a rich economy made the development of a large ruling class possible –

though it seems that on the Hawai'ian Islands the limits of the resources were reached, for irrigation works and artificial fishponds were needed to feed the population (for Tahiti: Claessen 2000; for Tonga: Douaire-Marsaudon; for Hawai'i: Tuggle 1979; Sahlins 1992 presents a less pessimistic view, but describes also irrigation works and fishponds).

The combined data on the Betsileo and Polynesia enable us to formulate in a more general way the 'necessary conditions' under which (early) states emerge (see also Claessen and Oosten 1996: 5):

– **There must be a sufficient number of people to form a complex stratified society**. The necessary number of administrators, servants, courtiers, priests, soldiers, agriculturalists, traders and so on, can only be found in a population running into the thousands. Even the smallest early states on Tahiti numbered at least some 5,000 people. Such large numbers of people, living together in one society has a number of consequences, the most important of which is the need of more developed forms of leadership. An explanation of this need is given by Gregory Johnson. First he demonstrated that in larger groups a greater mass of information becomes available; few people are able to manage such a stream of data. This promotes the position of those who posses this quality (1978). He then explains that when a large number of people live together in one society, some form of decision-making is needed. If no persons come to the fore who are entitled – or capable, or sufficiently strong – to take decisions, the large group will fall apart (Johnson 1981). The atoll societies of Oceania clearly were too small to need a strongly developed form of leadership. The Samoan case shows that as long there is a possibility to 'escape' strong leaders, such a leadership will not develop. On the large islands, such as Tahiti, Tongatapu, or Hawai'i complex sociopolitical organizations emerged, societies that qualify as early states.

– **The society must control a specified territory**. The territory is in first instance the place where the society lives. In the long run such a territory can be no longer sufficient for the maintenance of the population. In the Marquesas Islands pressure on the means of subsistence, made worse by devastating wars, led to hunger and misery, and the chiefly organization collapsed. Elsewhere, as was the case with the Aztecs (Hicks 1986) or the Vikings (Sawyer 1982) conquest, plunder, or trade were the means to amend for its shortcomings. In both cases the society in question maintained its original territory.

– **There must be a productive system yielding a surplus to maintain the specialists and the privileged categories.** The specialists may be political, religious and administrative functionaries, but also craftsmen, traders, servants, etc. The collection of the surplus may be in the form of taxation, tribute, or even plunder (see Hicks 1986; Claessen and Van de Velde 1991: 11–12; Cohen 1991). As long as sufficient means are collected to 'pay' the chiefs, the kings, the priests, the servants, and eventually the needy, a complex socio-political structure can be maintained, even enlarged. A poor economy simply prevents the maintenance, or even the emergence of such a type of society; a more complex political organization eventually will collapse by declining income, as was the case on Easter Island (Claessen 2000).

Where societies occupy a large territory, but people live in small village communities, having no more than a simple subsistence economy, and but limited contacts, a stratified sociopolitical organization usually does not emerge. There is simply no need for chiefs or administrators. Households care for themselves, and there are but few overarching institutions (sodalities, as Service 1971 called them). Good examples of such societies are the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), or the Plateau Tonga (Colson 1968). The implication of this is that there must be **tasks** for leaders will it be possible for them to develop positions of power and status. In this respect Johnson and Earle (1987) speak of risk management, and see that as one of the crucial tasks of sociopolitical leaders. This does not contradict Johnson's theories on the development of leadership, but rather adds to it. Such tasks will develop, for example, when economic activities demand co-operation on a more permanent scale, when religious convictions ask for temples or sanctuaries, or when a growing need for water demands irrigation works. I am aware that in several places irrigation works were constructed without the intervention of chiefs or kings – *e.g.,* in the island of Bali it were the village communities that constructed irrigation works (Grader 1984; Geertz 1980) – yet, generally speaking, management is a great impetus for the development of leadership, and many times the servant of the community grew into its ruler (Engels 1960: 219; Wittfogel 1957).

– **There must exist an ideology, which explains and justifies a hierarchical administrative organization and socio-political inequality**. The existence, or the development of such an ideology

makes it possible for the less fortunate to understand and to accept their modest position. If such an ideology does not exist or emerges, the formation of a state becomes difficult, or even outright impossible (cf. Clastres 1974; Earle 1997), and other types of sociopolitical organization will emerge. Many of such societies can be characterized by the term heterarchy – mentioned already at the beginning of this article. Such heterarchical societies can be quite complex, and they are found all over the world. Asiatic societies, such as the Kachin, belong to this category (Friedman 1979; Hagesteijn 1989), as well as the Northwest Coast Indians (Suttles 1990), and many African societies (Keech McIntosh, ed. 1999). The African Mbundu are a good case in point. Here a large population lived under favorable economic conditions, and there were several efforts to organize overarching religious and/or sociopolitical structures. None of these efforts succeeded, however; the egalitarian ideology of the population was too strong to accept the domination by a centralized administrative apparatus (Miller 1976).

The development of a convincing form of legitimation is crucial for the establishing of more complex forms of leadership. The concept of legitimacy was introduced into the social sciences by Max Weber (1964: 24 ff.), who stated that legitimacy of a leader was based in the first place on the beliefs of his people. If a ruler acted conform to the beliefs of his people he acted in a legitimate way. Though also to Beetham (1991: 11) the sharing of norms and values by rulers and ruled is a necessary condition, he thinks that also the legal validity of the acquisition and exercise of power has to be established. This seems a valuable addition to Weber's views (see also Cohen 1988).

The ideological legitimation appears to have a strong materialistic component, however. As stated above, Kurtz (1984) refers to the obligation of a government to fulfill the economic needs of the people; as long as that is done, people will obey the demands and rules the ruler issues. Stated differently: the people has obligations toward its ruler, but the ruler also has obligations towards his people. This relation is a reciprocal one: we, the people, work for the government, the government has to take care of us. In Polynesia and Micronesia the legitimizing ideology is based on the belief that the founder of the group – the oldest descendant of the oldest line – is a direct descendant of one of the gods. This birth endows the

founding father with sacred qualities. These qualities pass over to the eldest son, and his eldest son, and so on. Because of this these descendants were rightfully the leaders of the group. Only they could approach their divine forefathers directly, and procure fertility and well-being for all. In reciprocity the commoners gave food, labor, and women to the leaders, and obeyed their commands (Thomas 1990).

In many African cases leadership was connected with the idea of 'the first'. It was believed that the person who was the first to open the earth (for agriculture) met with the earth spirits, with whom he concluded a kind of contract, and in exchange for certain rituals, he could procure fertility for women, cattle, and land. According to the myths this earth priest lost in several regions his political prerogatives to the 'hunter', a person assumed to have come from abroad and who is connected with the distribution of meat. By marrying the daughter of the earth priest the hunter and his descendants became sacred political leaders (Claessen and Oosten 1996; Muller 1999; Keech McIntosh ed., 1999).

The Southeast Asian Kachin believed that a man who produced more food than others, and because of this could hand out more than others, had good connections with the gods, the spirits or the forefathers. When his good fortune remained, people started to give the man small presents, in return for his blessings. In this way – and when his agricultural luck continued – he could become a sacred leader and the gifts became obligatory; Friedman (1979) even connects the development of the Asiatic mode of production with this type of structure. Hagesteijn (1989) describes the further development of such polities into instable early states.

The occurrence of these four conditions at the same time and at the same place is already quite exceptional (see Shifferd 1987), but is in itself not yet sufficient for the development of a state; there is also needed some cause that triggers the developments. **This cause may be considered as the fifth necessary condition**. In the case of the Betsileo this cause was the arrival of slave hunters. Not willing to be captured, but at the same time not willing to leave the rice terraces, the Betsileo decided to withdraw to nearby hill forts, and defend themselves. This 'first step' had the serious – but **not intended** – consequence that an early state emerged here. In other places the necessity to develop irrigation works, or the need to protect long-distance trade demanded stronger leadership. This all was

stated already in *The Early State* (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 624–625):

> ...the development into statehood, in all cases, was triggered off by some action or event which took place a long time before, and was *not directed especially* towards this goal. The other obvious characteristic of the development to statehood is that it always shows something of a snowball effect: once it comes into motion, it grows faster and faster.

In view of the data presented, it is clear that a number of factors should be present, and some influence – internal or external – that triggered the developments. This influence could be a danger, as happened with the Betsileo, a shortage of food and goods, as was the case with the Aztecs, or the introduction of new ideas and beliefs that were crucial in the development of South East Asian early states (Hagesteijn 1989). It should be realized, however, that this combination not always resulted in more complex socio-political organizations; this happened only when the factors reinforced each other; when a positive feedback occurred. When the strength of the factors varied greatly there is every reason to believe that some other type of sociopolitical organization would emerge – a big-man structure, a heterarchy. If, what must have happened many times, the factors contradicted or hampered each other, stagnation was the case (negative feedback), and eventually an early state did not emerge. In the Complex Interaction Model (Claessen and Van de Velde 1985; 1987) we formulated the interrelation of the crucial formative factors – the societal format (i.e., the territory and the number of people), the ideology, and the dominance of the economy. A mutual, reciprocal influencing of each other causes changes in the factors (or groups of factors), creating the conditions under which more complex sociopolitical organizations emerge. Once it has been established, the sociopolitical organization becomes the fourth factor in the model, which in its turn influences the other three and acts as a co-determinant – provided, of course, that no negative feedback prevents or postpones this.

An analysis of historic cases makes clear that in many cases the development of a state was a process of long duration. During the process progress and stagnation could both occur; yet, in the end the state was a fact. The checkered history of the Frankish kingdom is a good example of such a prolonged development. The state of the Capetians emerged only after an eventful history of seven centuries. A history that began with Clovis, who started the process of state formation in the fifth century with the creation of an emergent

early state, and ended with Philippe II August, who in the 12th century rounded off the building of a mature state (Claessen 1985). The history of the Betsileo demonstrates, however, that the formation of an early state can be a matter of some fifty years only (cf. Kottak 1980). And, there are many cases where, even though most of the necessary conditions were present, a state never emerged at all, as the history of the Mbundu of Angola shows (Miller 1976; cf. also Shifferd 1987).

It is in this context that the answer to our question should be sought. Only when a number of specified conditions are present at the same time in the same society, and when some triggering accident occurs, the development of an early state will take place, provided that a positive feedback between the 'necessary conditions' occurs. It is in such cases only that the emergence of an early state was inevitable.

This is not the end of the story. Nowadays everywhere the modern, highly developed state is the dominant form of government, and alternative models of sociopolitical organization are tolerated only as a kind of districts or provinces in modern states. From its very beginning was the state a stronger type of organization than all others; for the surrounding polities there were not many alternatives. They could try to imitate the powerful organization – peer polity interaction (Renfrew and Cherry 1986) – and try to maintain their independence or they would become subdued or colonized after some time. In that respect one cannot but conclude that in the end the state has been inevitable. And, even this seems not to be the end of evolution. We do not know what the consequences of growing globalization and localization will be; prediction in the social sciences is rather hazardous. That, however, the state in the form we know it now will have had its longest time seems not improbable – it is perhaps even inevitable (Kloos 1995).

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