
Questions to Spencer's Bulldog

Khaled Hakami

University of Vienna

I could not agree more with Carneiro on his notion of anthropology as a Science and the necessary (cultural) materialist principles, which are the prerequisites for this nomothetic enterprise. His article *A Theory of the Origin of the State* (Carneiro 1970) might be considered one of the most notable examples of the usefulness of this epistemological and theoretical approach.

As far as I know, Carneiro has written only one other article that deals with this theory explicitly. In *The Circumscription Theory: Challenge and Response* (Carneiro 1988) he challenges his critics' arguments while giving his theory a more precise shape. Until recently, these two articles seemed sufficient to lay down the key points of the theory, which made me curious what a third article on this topic could add to the theoretical fundamentals.

Let me start by reviewing Carneiro's arguments against voluntaristic (or, more precisely, idealistic) explanations of state formation. The theories he cites by Vansina, Schaedel, Robinson and others are doubtless far from any materialistic approach. I am with Carneiro in rejecting them altogether. But I think one example is different. As cited by Carneiro, Henri Claessen says that '[t]here must exist an ideology, which explains and justifies a hierarchical administrative organization and socio-political inequality'. Carneiro might be right in qualifying Claessen's general approach as idealistic, but if we take only the quotation that Carneiro cites, we could say that he is right. To be sure, I am a bred-in-the-bone cultural materialist like Carneiro, but when it comes to ideology, materialists sometimes tend to confuse systemic with causal statements. What do I mean by this? Seen from the perspective of general causality, it is obvious that ideas are the effect of material circumstances, and chiefdoms are truly not the product of an idea (Carneiro 2004a). But in the light of the systemic principles of cul-

tural materialism, ideological elements play an important and constitutive role, given that a specific political ideology serves as a necessary function of structural and infrastructural components of a given system (Harris 1979: 72). Infrastructural and structural conditions, therefore, cannot be thought without superstructural ones, and a chiefdom-society cannot be conceptualized without a chiefdom-ideology. Systemically, it is fruitless to ask which came first. And it seems to me that in the quotations that Carneiro provides, Claessen is not saying anything different.

But there is more to this topic. As it is well known, superstructural elements tend to spread more easily and faster than infrastructural and structural ones (Sahlins and Service 1960: 89). Correspondingly, less developed societies borrow superstructural elements from more developed societies, when the internal evolution of the former is in an appropriate phase (Price 1978). Because of the diffusion of superstructural elements, societies do not have to invent all the superstructural elements themselves (which could explain the higher tempo of secondary state formation). Needless to say, this only makes sense if these political ideologies come before the establishment of political structures, because the establishment of political structures is the very reason the former have been imported. The orientaling phases of most ancient secondary states in Europe provide a good example of this process. At specific moments, the early Romans adopted oriental elements like divine kingship in order to enhance the evolutionary fitness of their social structure (Cornell 1995). We know of many cases when kinship-based societies with relatively egalitarian structures respond to infrastructural pressure by adopting foreign political ideologies that are based on the idea of absolute hierarchy. The historical phases of indianization of many primitive societies in Southeast Asia provide examples (Hagesteijn 1996). In short, diffusion does not cause social evolution, but it makes it more efficient. Nothing of what I am saying violates cultural materialist principles. The theoretical principle clearly states that structure determines superstructure, but as applied to a concrete case, ideology might come first (Ferguson 1995). By not restricting themselves solely to the idea that ideology is secondary, materialists are able to explain why ideologies sometimes come first.

Now, the question to Carneiro is if this process – here only attributed to secondary state formation – also applies to pristine state formation, that is for the interaction of villages and chiefdoms. Why should not this kind of diffusion take place on lower evolutionary stages, too?

Now to my second point. In general, most of arguments in the recent article recapitulate and elaborate what was included in the previous two, but there is one exception. As Carneiro admits, his earlier view was ‘that chiefdoms arose by direct and successive military conquest of one village after another by the strongest one among them’. Using the figure of the *pendragon*, he now wants to show us that through social selection, the supra-village chieftaincy that came later was more the outcome of an alliance of autonomous villages than of forced incorporation. I do not regard this explanation as invalid, but it surely provokes some questions.

At first sight, Carneiro's ‘new sequence of events’ might lead us to the conclusion that one of his main principles is violated here, namely, that no autonomous community ever gave up its sovereignty except due to war or the threat of war. But from his new theory it follows that an average village that is ready to ally itself with another village is obviously under threat by a third party, and so the principle holds. If this internal process characterizes not only one, but most or all of the chiefdoms involved in a single state formation process that leads to the conclusion that up to the level of chiefdoms, there are either no or very few actual incorporations of people through military conquest. As Carneiro states, ‘[d]riving an enemy off his land ... seems to have continued into at least the earlier stages of chiefdom-level warfare’. Agreed, but what about later stages? Is a simple chiefdom a product of alliance, while a compound chiefdom is more a product of forced incorporation? Or is a compound chiefdom merely the outcome of an alliance of chiefdoms with a supra-chiefdom chief? During the process, however, more and more people have to be forcefully incorporated, while at the same time the relative number of potential allies will decrease. So the crucial question is at what level does forced incorporation displace alliance as the main mechanism of growth?

To be sure, I think that this new aspect raised by Carneiro is of much value, but I would be thankful if he could elaborate more precisely the theoretical and empirical relationship of alliance and forced incorporation.

Seen from a broad theoretical perspective, these are only minor critical remarks. As I share nearly all the scientific heritage and principles with the author, I can only compliment Carneiro on this article. In times when mainstream Anthropology still lacks any scientific standards and is occupied by postmodern and eclectic approaches, articles with Carneiro's kind of conclusive argumentation are more than welcome. There are still enough scientists and materialists alive and well to value them.

However, to cite Marvin Harris as a supporter for the theory, as Carneiro does, might not be the best choice. On the rare occasions when Harris talked about state formation, he clearly leaned toward Wittfogel's ideas, while discussing war elsewhere (e.g., Harris 1977). In contrast to the evolutionist Carneiro, Harris was much more a diachronically-oriented functionalist, though a brilliant one.

Finally, let me recall what Carneiro (2004b: 279), too, is ready to concede, namely, that his theory was anticipated by Herbert Spencer many decades before – even if Spencer did not elaborate it any further (see also Hallpike 1986: 83). Spencer's influence on Carneiro is no big secret; it is, perhaps, best exemplified by Carneiro's well-considered use of analogies to physics, which is a hallmark of Spencer's work. But it is worth mentioning that Carneiro's theory builds almost entirely on Spencer's master principles of evolution. I would argue without hesitation that, in return, Carneiro's theory (and his work as a whole) demonstrates that Spencer was ultimately the better Darwin – even if the rest of the world might disagree.

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