
State Origins: Clarifications and Reformulations

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Carneiro's origin of the state theory appeared in 1970, three years after I began my career in 1967. Like others I found it fascinating. I taught it in courses on political anthropology. In the 1980s and 90s I taught a five week 'mini' course, 'The Origin of the State'. I discussed it in my book *Political Anthropology: Paradigms and Power* (Kurtz 2001).

There is little in this paper that is significantly different from the original reformulation and I disagree with some of it. The theory accounted best, though not exclusively, for the origin of pristine states. The thoughtful parsimony of regularities in the variables that constituted the original model is not enhanced remarkably by this reformulation. Originally, Carneiro introduced social circumscription and resource concentration as auxiliary variables. Now they are of equal importance with the other variables. Warfare becomes a 'prime mover'. And he introduces the *pendragon* as an agent that evolved into the paramount chief of chiefdoms, precursors to the state.

Long ago, I elevated resource concentration to a critical variable in the theory; social circumscription worked best circumstantially, usually in the secondary state developments. I thought Elman Service had deflated the idea of 'prime movers' long ago. Like Carneiro's original theory, my application of its variables – environmental and social circumscription, warfare, population increase, resource concentration – constitute a systemic model that interacted synergistically in a positive feedback resulting in chiefdoms that ultimately culminated in state formations. In my formulation, as in Carneiro's original, warfare is not the independent

variable. It remains a product of shifting synergistic relations with other variables which may or not evoke warfare.

Carneiro is a devout materialist. I concur that ideology is not a primary force in state evolution. But he rejects any influence of 'ideas' on the process. Elsewhere Carneiro asserted that 'ideas are not uncaused causes'. Subsequently I argued (Kurtz 2004) ideas may be causal when they are materialized as factors in practices that evoke state evolution. For example, irrigation may not trigger the origin of the state. But irrigation works were from their inception the result of ideas on how to improve energy efficiency which, as those works expanded, required management that relied on the ideas of agents which, in some instances, helped material forces coalesce as state formations. Ideational and material factors interact more than he credits.

Compared to the original theory this paper lacks epistemological rigor. Despite his attention to the Olmecs, Carneiro supports his ideas with indiscriminately gathered ethnographic examples. A controlled comparison of state formations and the theory's variables would be more convincing, and in agreement with the positivist premise that imbues the theory.

Regardless, the 'circumscription theory' (that title is satisfactory) remains compelling; those who apply it can decide the priorities of its variable. I diverge from Carneiro's and argue for additional dimensions to the theory because I am a political anthropologist first and an aficionado of the state second. Because the state is a political entity, politics, the use of power by political agents to attain goals, becomes a sub-component of the theory that explains the evolution of states and political organizations.

The worth of any theory depends on its subcomponents. The sequentially deeper components from relativity to quantum mechanics, to string theory, to Higgs boson by which particle physicists seek a unifying theory for the origin of the universe is a case in point. Carneiro allowed this 'sub-particle' introspection when he introduced the pendragon, a temporary war chief whose authority and power are ephemeral. In Carneiro's reformulation the pendragon is a precursor to the evolution of 'chiefdoms' from which states usually evolve. When politics becomes a factor the critical transition is not from chiefdom to state. Instead it is the evolution from a leader with an *ephemeral status* with limited

power and authority (pendragon/big man) to a *political office, the repository of power and authority accessible legally and legitimately only to the incumbent of the office, a chief, head of state, or state bureaucracies* (see Kurtz 2004). Access to the powers of an office enables incumbents to respond to and manipulate the relationship of Carneiro's variables to impel the evolution (institutional differentiation and specialization) of more inclusive political entities, the end result of which will be a world state formation (Carneiro elsewhere predicted this occurrence by 2300 CE).

Carneiro's (1970) definition of the state is better than most. He attributes political agency and power to the state's government and does not anthropomorphize the state. This begs the question: from where does that power emanate? I contend it comes from the *offices that constitute the state*. For me, *the state is an abstract structure of offices vested with powers and authorities that empower their incumbent who constitute the state's institutional organization or government*. States (offices) differentiate and specialize along with governments (institutions) as political agents – incumbents – use the office's material and ideational powers to expand and/or contract these offices.

Carneiro's original theory was satisfactory. His reformulation lacks the eloquence of the former and does not enhance it. But it does open the door to complementary explanations of the evolution of state and government.

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