State Formation: Not by War Alone

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As a socio-political organization, the state has been an enormous success and has come to dominate the entire world. Its expansion has been mostly the result of war and conquest. But that obscures the fact that in many places and in many human societies state formation has not occurred. On the other hand, states have a great variety of precursors and thus many origins (cf. Hallpike 1986). Carneiro reduces the causes of state formation to a set of factors, which coincide with state origins, and which circumscription is one of the most important. But he also observes: 'coercion, warfare, is at the heart of the process'. He describes the process as essentially the conquest of villages by other villages under the leadership of 'warchiefs' who in due course of time become institutional political leaders. Thus, warfare is in his view the driving force of state formation. A number of problems, however, remain.

Carneiro gives no definition of the state. The state is not only a political phenomenon, but also a socio-political one. The presence of a state, in my opinion, implies administrative institutions, a ruling stratum, and the legitimation of its rule. The great majority of historical and all prehistoric states did not possess the overwhelming military means of suppression which a modern state like Assad's Syria disposes of. An essential aspect of the state is its lasting character, its permanency during at least three generations. If we do not take these aspects into account, we may reduce the problem of the origin of the state too far. Or, does Carneiro want to distinguish 'origin' from 'formation'? In that case, he should make that explicit.

Legitimation is a necessary, although not a sufficient condition for a newly established state to last. That is not the same as to say that ideology causes the origin of the state. In Claessen's model of

complex interaction, ideology is one factor among others: economy, societal format, and the socio-political organization (*e.g.*, Claessen and van de Velde 1985; Claessen 2000: 153–157). Ideology is most conspicuously absent from Carneiro's set of population pressure, environmental or geographical circumscription, social circumscription, resource concentration, and warfare. Carneiro obviously rejects Service's idea of state formation as a result of management and Blanton's and Feinman's concept of corporate strategies (Service 1975; Blanton 1998; Feinman 1995).

These alternative approaches suppose the presence of rather stratified societies before the state formation can occur. Evidently, Carneiro departs from a lower level of social organization (the village). There are, however, three different evolutionary phenomena which, although they are connected and often interrelated, must be distinguished: the growth of social complexity, the origin of social stratification, and the formation of the state. Carneiro seems to discuss rather the evolution of so-called 'intermediate or transegalitarian societies', wherein, however, not warfare, but dominant personalities and feasting and debts incurred as a consequence of the organization of feasts and ceremonial activities and social obligations may play a greater role than warfare (Hayden 1995, 1996).

Warfare may be such a general phenomenon that as an explanation factor it is only of limited value (Claessen 2006). Only the presence of centralized political communities, sophisticated military organization, and preparedness guarantees expansion and state building (Turney-High 1949; Otterbein 1994). In other words, a certain degree of social complexity is necessary for state formation by means of warfare and subjugation. The Mae Enga seem rather sophisticated and competent warriors, but warfare among them leads only to the reshuffling and redistribution of people, groups, land and pigs, but not to state formation (Meggitt 1977). There must be an internal authority structure before real conquests can start. The presence of a 'chief' is not enough. Besides, Yoffee has shown that the concept of chief and chiefdom as such is highly problematic (Yoffee 1993).

With (environmental) circumscription and population pressure, it is the well-known problem of the chicken and the egg. Anyhow, it seems to me that population size should not be considered an independent variable. On the other hand, I find the idea of environmental and social circumscription as an explanatory factor very

attractive, although I do not see how the origins of states in early medieval Europe can be explained in this way without much special pleading. But the control of ways and nodes of communication, both geographical and social, and networks of communication and exchange, can be at least as important as a starting-point of state formation. It may have played an important, if not a decisive role, in the origin of the state in early dynastic Egypt at Hierakonpolis (Wilkinson 1999: 46–47; Bard 2000; the Fayum had nothing to do with that). The origin of the state in South Mesopotamia, which was earlier, apparently was strongly stimulated by environmental constraints caused by the changing environment, control of watercourses and the struggle for arable land (Nissen 1983: 44–45). Yoffee here emphasizes, however, the 'bottom-up aspects of power', the effects of 'urbanisation/ruralisation' and '[the] creat[ion] and marshal[ling of] symbolic and ceremonial resources' (Yoffee 2005: 2, 60, 33–34).

In Archaic Greece warfare was not, as is often thought, a decisive factor in the formation of the polis-state, neither was population pressure (van der Vliet 2011). In the beginning, warfare was rather a matter of predatory raiding oversea than of battling for land. The only example of military expansion and conquest here is Sparta, and its successful subjugation and conquest of a neighboring territory and its inhabitants happened as a consequence of Spartan state formation. In Athens, political integration was achieved by ritual, as well as by symbolic and ceremonial means. Finally, the essence of Bohannan's remark in my opinion still remains true. Notwithstanding that we are now archaeologically much better and with much more sophistication informed about process of societal evolution, the interpretation of archaeological data, however, remains what the word says: interpretation. All our definitions of archaeological correlates of big men, chiefdoms, Early States, *etc.* in the end are hypotheses which we cannot confirm by hard means. That fact remains.

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