
Process and Regularity in Human Affairs: A Comment on Carneiro

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I first read Robert Carneiro's *Science* article, *A Theory of the Origin of the State*, soon after it came out. Not, as I would like you to believe, as a prescient toddler but as an undergraduate biology major. And the result opens him, like Socrates, to the charge of corrupting the youth, for this article more than any other set me on a course toward becoming an anthropologist. Since there are few things youth relish more than being corrupted, I offer deep thanks to the editors for this opportunity to be among the first readers of Carneiro's expanded model.

That early article, and the 'circumscription theory' in general are important in several ways. The theory is important ontologically, one might say, in that it offers a good description, even explanation of (at minimum) several of the key examples of the origins of the state. It may well explain, and certainly enriches our understanding of the rest of them as well. It is important, too, in the history of ideas for its influence on the field of cultural evolution to the extent that even those who disagree are more influenced by it than they probably would like.

This sounds like success to me; yet, this was not his goal, nor is it with the current article. The origin of the state, Carneiro said some forty years ago, was 'the outcome of a regular and determinate cultural process. Moreover, it was not a major event but a recurring phenomenon: states arose independently in different places and at different times' (1970: 733). Although Carneiro did not use the language of 'laws' so popular in some schools of archaeology at the time, he nevertheless proposed for our consideration a model in which one primary factor was involved in all cases of primary state formation and very likely other examples as well. It is some-

times forgotten that even in that article he insisted that actually it was a set of conditions that must be met, and that possibly could be met in varied ways. The current article is important because he explores this range of conditions more fully while still seeking a coherent process that can explain all cases.

And it is this latter point that makes Carneiro's thinking so important. It is also this point that has been the focus of much of the ongoing debate, and this for two main reasons. First, it is very hard to demonstrate. And secondly, it is more important than it seems at first. For what is at stake is not 'merely' our understanding of a few dozen transformative historical events around the globe, or even, I believe, the origins of the state question itself, but how culture works. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the arguments here bear on what it means to be human. Carneiro wants to uncover regularities and process in human affairs. And for every one of us who wonders how it could be otherwise, there is another who reminds us, also with good arguments, of the depth and importance of each culture's uniqueness.

This is why I strongly welcome the current article which articulates an expanded version of the original model, meant to encompass the cases which have been considered counter examples, but which, Carneiro cogently argues, actually support the main points. It is in this appreciative context that I offer just three more specific responses to this new article.

First, it may be that the dichotomy between ideologically driven and process driven models is not as great or as intractable as it seems. In his very insightful updated review of models of state formation, Carneiro rejects the voluntaristic approaches of Claessen and Vansina who make ideas the prime mover in the rise of the state (p. 8). In terms of his specific arguments, Carneiro has a point. Thus, while I agree with Claessen that some justifying ideology is needed, it may not be essential for the *origins* of the state, however important it will be for *maintaining* it until it has become a settled way of life. And it does not get around the need for some kind of aggression, for just because people accept the view that kingship (say) is a legitimate idea, there is still the question of why *that* particular person should be *our* king. I could not pretend to be able to adjudicate the issues raised by Vansina in this important historical example, but my point here is that even though it may be

the case that these African kingdoms were built in the mind first, it does not become a counter example to Carneiro's model as presented in this article.

Though I have been framing this as a criticism, it is certainly as much a criticism of those who critique Carneiro, for in this article he also leads the way to the solution via his point that multiple causes could still be unitary. In this regard I think it worth considering the 'scale' if you will, of a line of reasoning. The plain fact that each culture is unique in many ways surely invites us to dig deeply into local knowledge whenever that is possible. But it does not require us to abandon commonalities at a broader scale, to abandon explanations based on cultural regularities and processes, for we are using different scales. Thus, the ideological models and the process models do not necessarily lead to irreconcilable explanations any more than recognizing that each person is unique – and that this is important for understanding human reality – does not deny that there are some things we all have in common, things that can make some of our thinking and behavior – dare I say it – predictable. I am opposed to reducing us to our genes (or is it neurons, now?), and I appreciate that much of great interest will ever be lost to comparative models compared to a life-time of in-depth study of one case, but none of this is reason to resist the possibility that there can be a real, predictive science of culture as Carneiro has argued for a long time.

His stress on the importance of at least one intermediate 'stage' particularly what is usually referred to as the chiefdom, is, I believe, not as widely appreciated as it should be. Interestingly, this might also serve as a useful example of the potential meeting of cross-cultural causation or at least process and of the power of ideas, since the chiefdom is a key step for several reasons. Even though conquest is not what chiefdoms typically do, chiefly authority may be essential for conquest nonetheless; it could well take a chief to muster a warrior group large enough to engage in conquest. But it also prepares the way ideologically in the sense that the 'idea' of one group dominating another would be intolerable, possibly unfathomable, to those used to the egalitarian mindset of many hunter-gatherer groups.

Finally, I am not fully comfortable with the emphasis here on warfare in cultural evolution. 'Warfare' he suggests, 'is the fuel –

the propellant – that powers political evolution’. With this I agree. Even if it is not universally established as a fact, it is demonstrably the case quite often. It is a point worth exploring much more widely, not just at the origins of the state. Probably, it is affecting us at this very moment with greater ferocity than many of us appreciate. Thus, I am not disputing this main point. My concern is based more on the questions it raises about how this might work in practice.

Consider the question of how one might test the role of warfare in the formation of chiefdoms. It is not clear that the move from single to multi-village polity must be a matter of conquest or even defense. Perhaps, some new villages formed by ‘colonists’ from the old never do come to think of themselves as autonomous. This might be especially the case if they were established for subsistence reasons rather than escalating friction among strong personalities in the original village, and may be all the more likely given certain kinship and ritual connections. The original chief might well continue to be acknowledged by the new villages, meaning that they will have become leaders of multi-village polities due mainly to population growth. Carneiro has made a strong case that this move to a multi-village level of leadership is of great importance for political evolution, but in theory it need not have anything to do with warfare.

In theory, this is something to be tested, and we may discover that the scenario I outlined above is unknown, or unlikely for other reasons. One possible example, though, is represented by Avebury in England. Further investigation may prove me wrong, but I suggest that the henge, stone circle and avenues, and roughly contemporary Silbury Hill, are projects too massive to have been undertaken without some level of effective leadership. This does not necessarily mean coercion, and to my knowledge there is no evidence until later of any other element of leadership, such as wealth, at this time; only the building projects themselves.

This example, should it prove to be one of the formation of leadership without warfare being involved, would, I hasten to add, still be a good example of the important point Carneiro makes about how often leadership is called forth in times of need. Surely these times of need are often war or the threat of war, but are they always?

As noted, I am very much inclined to believe there are regularities, processes, and maybe even laws of cultural evolution, so I am not objecting to Carneiro's basic argument. But the regularity might be something more along the lines that leadership is called forth (and in later periods one might say strengthened, extended and so on) by a need that is widely accepted by the people about to be led, a need that may *often* be war, including threat of war. I do not wish to stretch the point too far. Surely warfare is a routine feature of chiefdoms and their relations with each other, so it is likely enough that it was often a part of their formation in the first place.

REFERENCE

- Carneiro, R. L.
1970. A Theory of the Origin of the State. *Science* 169: 733–738.