Chapter 3

THE EVOLUTION OF THE STATE

About 5,500 years ago, on the fertile floodplains of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is today Iraq, there developed a type of society unique to its time. After millennia in which humans have gradually turned from migratory foraging toward seasonal settlements based on a few domesticated plants and animals, and then toward year-round farming villages, there came into being the world’s first true cities, and with them a novel form of political organization. Previously, society had been structured according to kinship networks; now there appeared a permanent administrative bureaucracy that demanded loyalties transcending lineage and clan. Local chiefs relinquished much of their authority to a ruling class who had the power to gather the agricultural surpluses and call forth the labor necessary to create large-scale irrigation projects and monumental architecture. Fortified cities, such as Uruk and Ur, boasted populations of upward of 40,000 “citizens.” A full-time caste of priests presided over a complex temple religion. Craft specialists manufactured the obsidian knives and gold and silver figurines that would tie vast areas together through webs of trade. The state had been born.

Today, when national populations are counted in the hundreds of millions and power is so concentrated that the word of a president can send huge armies scurrying to any part of the globe, it may be difficult to realize the significance of the 13 or so small city-states collectively known as Sumeria. Just as it is legitimate to speak of an agriculture
revolution or an industrial revolution to suggest quantum changes in human social complexity, so too can one speak of a state revolution. Various authorities might argue the defining characteristics of the early state, but none would demean its importance; for it was a new kind of society—a seed bearing the genetic code for the giant nation-states of the modern world.

The Mesopotamian state developed through a long series of adjustments to a particular environment and a specific set of social problems. In retrospect, however, the process seems almost inevitable, for similar adaptations are found leading to similar sociopolitical structures in Egypt, the Indus River Valley of India and the Yellow River Valley of northern China, Mesoamerica, and Peru. These “primary” states are illustrated in Figure 3.1. Although these six states appeared hundreds or even thousands of years apart (see Figure 3.2), and there was minimal commerce between a few of them (such as India and Mesopotamia), each seems to have originated independently of the others. This poses a problem: if the state evolved autonomously not once but six times, can fundamental processes be discovered that were common to all?

Although far removed from the state, the rudiments of human social evolution can be found in human’s closest animal relatives. Among higher primates characterized by marked sexual dimorphism (differences in size and musculature between sexes)—such as baboons and gorillas, is found strong male dominance, specialization for defense, and various patterns of ongoing family organization. Some primate species reveal extremely complex elaborations of social structure. Cynocephalus baboons, for example, live in stable groups of 40 to 80 individuals, and these bands exhibit clear hierarchies of status and considerable specialization of function among both males and females. Hamadryas baboons forage in small one-male groups, but join together in troops of several hundred for sleeping. Some primates pass on significant learned skills from generation to generation and reveal remarkable cooperation in rearing the young, collective defense, grooming, and sexual behavior. However, only the genus Homo has extended such basic primate adaptations by cultural means. The most significant of these are symbolism, through which humans communicate and embellish both individual and group ideas, and sharing (reciprocity), which underlies the division of labor, creates the potential for increasingly elaborate social organization, and ties kinship groups together.

More than 99 percent of human’s two- to three-million-year sojourn on Earth has been spent in small bands—flexible, egalitarian, nomadic groups comprised of several extended families. Because contemporary
Figure 3.1
Primary States
hunting-gathering peoples occupy only the most marginal environments, care should be taken with regard to generalizing their social organization to remote ancestors who lived in more hospitable places and climes. Yet archeological evidence from Paleolithic times suggests little elaboration on the basic band form. One reason that this structure may have persisted for so long is that it was an evolutionary dead end. The hunting-foraging adaptation requires an almost perfect ecological balance, in which pop-
ulations must be maintained below the food supply; thus, there would have been little selective pressure for change. What requires explanation is not why such an excellent adaptation should have lasted so long, but rather why a few groups of people—very few, at first—abandoned it for more complex forms of subsistence and society.

Radically new types of social structure appeared only with the sedentary lifestyles and greater population densities brought about by the domestication of plants and animals. It should not be supposed, however, that this revolution was sudden, or that it immediately led to the formation of the state. Agriculture and animal husbandry apparently developed independently in a number of areas throughout the world, but only a few of these went on to evolve states. In the Tehuacán Valley of Mexico, the period of development from hunting-gathering bands to agriculturally based states was more than 7,000 years (Flannery 1968). In other areas of primary-state development, too, centralization of government was long preceded by sedentary agriculture, permanent villages, and even extensive irrigation works.

American and Dutch anthropologists have tackled the problem of the origin of the state with enthusiasm (the British and French tend to ignore evolutionary questions). Until recently, such theorists carefully distinguished the six primary states from secondary states (those that developed out of or through contact with already existing states). Because virtually all theories focused on the former, evidence was exclusively archeological. Today, some researchers have abandoned the primary-secondary distinction for a typology that allows for the inclusion of recent states, such as the Ankole of Uganda, as long as they remained pristine. We will examine some of this important research later, but first we must look at the classical theories of state origins.

INTERNAL CONFLICT THEORIES

The doctrine that the state evolved through class struggle is implicit in many of the writings of Karl Marx. However, these ideas were not fully worked out until Frederick Engels’ major work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* ([1891] 1972), which was published after his mentor’s death. According to Engels, who borrowed heavily from American evolutionary anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, the earliest form of social organization was communist: resources were shared equally by all and there was no strong concept of personal possession. Technological innovation gives rise to surplus, which allows for a class of nonproducers to develop. Private ownership is simply a
concomitant of commodity production. Once established, private property stimulates an inexorable chain of cause and effect that leads to an entrepreneurial class—owners of the means of production and buyers and sellers of human labor. This, in turn, results in differential access to resources, and thus to vast discrepancies in individual wealth. In order to protect its interests against the masses of active producers, who understandably want to share in their own production, the elite must erect a structure of permanent centralized force to protect its class interests.

Given its time, this analysis is sophisticated and subtle. In it is found the perception that the primary means of economic exchange in band and tribal society is reciprocity, and that more complex systems involve concentrations of wealth and redistribution through a central agency, be it chief, king, or bureaucracy. Engels artfully applies Marxian materialism to long-term social evolution; the basic causes of change are held to be technological and economic, not ideational. There is also a clear recognition that social stratification is one of the defining qualities of the state.

Unfortunately, as Elman Service (1975: 283) has observed, “there is absolutely no evidence in the early archaic civilizations themselves, nor in archeologically- or historically-known chiefdoms and primitive states, of any important private dealings—e.g., evidence of capitalism.” Indeed, the very concepts of communism and capitalism seem absurd when projected onto band and chiefdom societies, so different from modern industrial states.

Morton Fried (1967), who bases his evolutionary typology of political systems on the degree of individual access to resources and positions of prestige, offers a variation on the class-conflict model. Once true stratification exists, Fried notes, the state is already implicit because the maintenance of a class system requires that power be concentrated in the hands of an elite. By its very nature, this creates conflict within the society. Differential access to resources and the exploitation of human labor create pressures that are quite unknown in less complex societies. Conflict arising out of social stratification should not be thought of as the cause of state formation; rather, such conflict is merely a prior condition for the development of the state. Incipient social stratification is so unstable that a society that finds itself at such a stage must either disintegrate to a lower level of organization or continue its process of centralizing political power. In other words, once classes begin to separate themselves from hierarchies based on individual or kinship status, power must be fairly rapidly assumed by the privileged elite if the true state is to come into existence.
EXTERNAL CONFLICT THEORIES

In the Biblical version of social evolution, the development of cities is a direct result of Cain’s primordial murder of his brother Abel. This idea, that states are born in blood and war, was given scientific respectability with the emergence of Social Darwinism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Herbert Spencer, chief spokesman for the more violent interpretations of evolutionary theory, applied the idea of survival of the fittest mainly to individuals, but it took little imagination to extend this concept to societies. The stronger, more militaristic organizations would inevitably prevail over weaker groups, uniting them under a powerful centralized government with a monopoly on the use of force. Militarism alone, even without warfare, would be sufficient; merely the existence of an external threat that required a large standing army could push a loosely structured society in the direction of strong centralized leadership. Implicit or explicit in such theories, of which Spencer’s was one of many, is the idea that state government is modeled on military organization in terms of its hierarchical structure and centralized control of physical force.

A nineteenth-century tendency to oversimplify and overgeneralize is evident in these theories, which are based on a gross misunderstanding of physical evolution. Darwin’s rather prosaic idea that the mechanism of evolution is differential reproduction (parents with the most surviving offspring pass on more traits) was transmuted into the law of tooth and fang, with imagery of big tigers devouring little tigers with much sound and fury. When applied to society, such a theory could—and did—provide the philosophical justification (“Law of Nature, you know!”) for colonialism, imperialism, monopoly capitalism, and every other form of exploitation.

As we shall see, cross-cultural research does support the hypothesis that war and conquest are important factors in the development of some states, but there are two important objections to the theory that war is the primary cause: (1) a society can marshal forces only according to available levels of population and organization and, thus, warfare might be better viewed as a function rather than a cause of a given level of social integration; and (2) warfare among tribes and chiefdoms is more likely to prevent state formation than to cause it, because groups will simply disperse when threatened by a power greater than themselves (Price 1979; Service 1971).

This latter point is a salient consideration in Robert Carniero’s (1967, 1970, 1978) theory of environmental circumscription. Because warfare
is virtually universal and usually has the effect of dispersing people rather than uniting them, conflict could only lead to centralization in particular situations. After examining primary-state development in both the Old and New Worlds, Carniero notes that a common denominator is that they are all areas of circumscribed agricultural land; that is, they are bounded by mountains, sea, or desert. When there is no such circumscription, population pressures on the environment can be expanded outward, and losers in a war can resettle in a new area. This is not possible in cases in which the only arable land is surrounded by unproductive land. Population pressure must then be resolved by unification and by increases in productive capacity (both characteristics of the state), and losers in a war—lacking means of escape—must submit to their conquerors. Amazonian Indians waged frequent wars for revenge, the taking of women, personal prestige, and the like; but these wars never resulted in widespread conquest by a central power because new areas of forest could always be found in which to start a new village. However, the riverine valleys of coastal Peru—surrounded by sea, desert, and mountains—offer no such options. As the small, dispersed villages of the Neolithic grew and fissioned, the narrow valleys became increasingly crowded. Intensification of agriculture, through terracing, for example, would only solve the problem temporarily. Revenge warfare would turn to warfare over land, with one group trying to increase its productive capacity at the expense of others. However, for the weaker in these conflicts, there would be no place to escape that could provide even minimal subsistence; submission to a dominant force was the only viable survival strategy. In this way, a number of independent chiefdoms would be brought under a single hierarchical military government.

Circumscription need not be strictly physical; it can also be social. The Yanomamo of the Venezuelan jungle are not physically circumscribed, but village fission and expansion into virgin territory is easier for those at the periphery of the tribal group than for those near the center. According to Carniero’s theory, we would expect that central villages, surrounded by other warring villages, would tend to be larger and have more powerful headmen than do peripheral villages, and this is indeed the case. Although the Yanomamo are far from the state level of cultural integration, the socially circumscribed villages do exhibit greater tendencies toward centralization.

Carniero subsumes these processes under the principle of competitive exclusion, derived from evolutionary biology. This principle states that two species occupying and exploiting the same portion of the habitat cannot coexist indefinitely; one must ultimately eliminate the other. In
applying this idea to societies, Carniero observes that throughout history, chiefdoms have been united into states and states have gone to war to create larger states, with competition and selection increasingly moving toward larger and larger units. In plotting the decreasing number of autonomous political units in the world from 1000 B.C., Carniero predicts the political unification of the entire planet by about the year 2300. (However, the breakup of the Soviet empire and the tendency for the world community to intervene to halt interstate wars suggests that there may be countercurrents working against sheer hugeness.)

**POPULATION AND IRRIGATION**

From about 23000 B.C. until 2000 A.D., world population has grown from an estimated 3.5 million to over 6 billion and from a density of 0.1 persons per square mile to 124 per square mile (Campbell 1979: 462–63). The correlation between this increase in population and the rise of the state has been noted by virtually all evolutionary cultural anthropologists. Robert Carniero (1967) plotted the relation between population density and social complexity in 46 societies and found a significant statistical correspondence between the two variables. Although the correspondence held, at least loosely, for arithmetic density (i.e., the average number of people per square mile over an entire territory), a much stronger relationship is found when economic density alone is considered. Economic density is the relation between population and sources of production. For example, in Egypt, the vast majority of people are concentrated in a narrow strip of arable land on either side of the Nile.

According to the early nineteenth-century economist Thomas Malthus, population is negatively checked by disease, famine, and war as it threatens to outgrow the food supply. However, if this were the only principle operating, population growth would have stabilized at a much lower level than today’s. Certainly, one possible response to population pressure on food supply is exactly the opposite of the Malthusian checks: the food supply itself may be increased through some sort of intensification of production, often involving the development of a new technology or the refinement of an existing one. Irrigation, terracing, fertilization, using animal labor, cultivating more types of crops, and exploiting previously unused lands can significantly increase the carrying capacity of a given territory. The resulting increases in population density require more complex forms of social and political organization. This correspondence between population and social evolution was most extensively elaborated by Ester Boserup (1965). In a slight variation on the theory, Michael
Harner (1970) argues that population pressure is not only directly responsible for some form of intensification of food production, but also leads to unequal access to resources and subsequently to increasing social stratification.

The importance of irrigation to state formation was recognized as early as the writings of Marx and Engels, who noted that a major difference between small-scale agricultural communities and state societies was that the latter required the support of extensive irrigation systems. More recently, Julian Steward (1955) has emphasized irrigation as the fundamental mechanism of state development, because water control permitted sufficient agricultural intensification to create large population densities, and the construction of massive hydraulic systems required new levels of social organization, power, and coordination of labor.

It was Karl Wittfogel (1957) who elaborated the hydraulic theory in such detail that his name is now associated with it. Neolithic farmers in the areas of primary-state development, such as Egypt or the riverine valleys of Peru, were dependent on flood irrigation; their fields were watered once a year and new soil was deposited by the annual flood. Flood irrigation is quite variable, however, and even in the best of times it provides only one crop per year. Slowly, farmers began to exercise control of the floods with dikes and reservoirs, preserving and taming the precious water that could then be released as needed through a network of canals. Early irrigation systems were small and primitive, involving only the labor of a few neighboring farms, but as the productive capacity of the land increased and the human population burgeoned, irrigation works grew in size and complexity. A group of specialists emerged to plan and coordinate the construction of these systems, and later to control the flow of water. This group, whose hands now quite literally held the very life of the community, developed into an administrative elite that governed despotic, centralized states.

This model has fared surprisingly well. Irrigation seems to have been important in all of the primary states. The lowland Maya of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico were believed to be an exception until recent aerial photographs revealed that this civilization, too, was reliant on elaborate irrigation systems. However, the hydraulic theory should not be interpreted in too rigid a cause-and-effect manner: in some areas, complex irrigation systems long preceded state development, whereas in others (such as Mesopotamia) large-scale water control systems only developed well after state development. Furthermore, in the American southwest and other areas, large hydraulic systems existed for centuries without
political centralization. Finally, the theory has only the most tenuous application to secondary states, many of which possessed the most rudimentary irrigation.

These objections may be beside the point. Marvin Harris (1977) has noted that Wittfogel’s theory is not really about the origin of the state per se, but rather about the development of certain types of managerial systems. To postulate centralization of despotic power around the management of water supplies is not to deny the importance of population density, trade, warfare, environmental circumscription, and other factors that have had key roles in the increasing integration of society.

Harris, in *Cannibals and Kings* (1977), incorporates population pressure, hydraulics, and environmental circumscription into a complex argument in which social organization and ideology are viewed as the results of a society’s technological adaptation to its physical environment. Harris begins by noting the main objection to population pressure theories; namely, that populations usually tend to stabilize comfortably below the carrying capacity of the land. Indeed, all societies have cultural means of supplementing Malthusian checks on population. Hunting-gathering groups maintained relative population equilibrium for tens of thousands of years, and the few such societies that survive today depend on balancing population to food supply. In all preindustrial societies, such practices as female infanticide, two- or three-year long taboos on sexual intercourse with a woman after she has borne a child, and prolonged nursing (which delays ovulation) serve to keep population in balance with food production. It is only in modern times that population has been allowed to grow unchecked. If population equilibrium was the norm in most premodern societies, then why would population increase to the point where it would force more complex forms of social organization?

Harris’s explanation to this question is that during the Pleistocene Era, which lasted until about 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, hunting bands had come to rely on an abundance of large game, and populations had stabilized at levels made possible by such resources. At the end of the Pleistocene Era hundreds of big game species became extinct, for reasons still not entirely understood, with the result that people had to rely increasingly on alternative sources of food. Wild plants susceptible to domestication had always been available but had been rejected for cost-benefit reasons: without population pressure, hunting and foraging was more expedient for expending a minimum of calories. Now, plant domestication raised the carrying capacity of the land, allowing popu-
lations to increase. Population would tend ultimately to stabilize, but over time—perhaps hundreds of years—a gradual and inevitable decrease in productivity occurs as agricultural land loses nutrients and game is overhunted to supply animal protein. In other words, pressure is created not only by population growth, which might be quite slow, but also by a natural decline in the productivity of the land.

In tribal societies, populations are often controlled through a “male supremacist complex” that develops out of constant warfare. A premium on masculine fierceness diminishes the value of women, so that female infanticide—certainly one of the most effective means of population control—becomes virtually normative (some societies have institutionalized the killing of the firstborn, if it is a female). Agriculturalists have another option: instead of reducing population, they can increase their workload or add a new technology to augment production. This leads to agricultural surpluses, which are collected and redistributed by “big men” who use their role to gain and maintain status and power. These redistributive chiefs—often war chiefs as well—take on the role of a centralized coercive force. At this point, Harris brings in both Carniero’s circumscription theory and Wittfogel’s hydraulic theory to show the conditions under which centralization will continue until the state is formed.

To Harris the initial kick for this whole process is population; but, in a reverse on the Boserup theory, he sees a relatively stable population adapting to a diminution of food supplies. A major element of the theory—one not too auspicious for the future of civilization—is that any form of productivity will gradually lead to depletions of primary resources, with the result that all societies must sooner or later face the alternative of collapsing or moving to a new level of intensification. Once the domestication of plants and animals becomes the basis for subsistence, there can be no long-term stabilization.

Harris’s argument, although appealing, is open to challenge. State development occurred so long after the end of the Pleistocene Era—thousands of years—that the relationship is tenuous at best. Population pressure on resources cannot, in every area that became politically centralized, be related to declines in productivity. Also, Boserup may be more correct in placing her emphasis on population growth rather than resource depletion. Even relatively minor changes in nutrition can radically alter the size of a population. Food supplies are quite elastic and can easily be affected either by a redefinition of usable food resources or by slight changes in technology. As Harris and others have pointed out, population growth may indeed need explaining, but not very much explaining.
THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF LEADERSHIP

In *Origins of the State and Civilization* (1975), Elman Service proposes an integrative theory. After an extensive review of the rise of the six archaic primary states and a number of modern primitive states, he rejects all conflict theories. Warfare and conquest, he points out, are too universal in human experience to count as causes of a particular form of social organization, and “the only instances we find of permanent subordination from war are where government already exists” (Service 1975: 271). Arguments based on irrigation or other forms of intensification admit too many exceptions. In ancient Peru, for example, agricultural intensification was achieved through canal irrigation 1,500 years before the first truly urbanized state. The idea that population pressures create conflicts that can only be solved by centralized government is rejected partially on the grounds that such pressure could just as well lead to increased sharing.

These negative conclusions derive from a particular reading of the data; they would hardly be convincing to an ardent proponent of any of the theories rejected. Indeed, although it is conflict theory that is specifically rebutted, implicitly what is being rejected is cultural materialism. What Service has done is to shift the argument from ecological determinants to strategies of decision making.

Service traces a logical development from the basic inequality inherent in human society to formalized and centralized inequality. In all societies, even the most egalitarian bands and tribes, certain individuals stand out by reason of their exceptional talent, intelligence, strength, or beauty. Although it is completely natural to confer status upon such people, the resulting inequalities remain individual, rather than class-based, and do not confer privilege or wealth. Certain circumstances tend to favor centralization of effort—for example, when a variety of local ecological niches forces specialization of production and symbiotic trade, or when collaborative work on public projects requires a division of labor. Such circumstances also favor centralized redistribution, which will naturally be handled by the exceptional people of the society (such as the Melanesian big men, who are usually war chiefs). Because such centralization offers obvious benefits, there will be a snowball effect leading to increasing concentration of administration. This enhancement of leadership, although economic, is not based on ownership, as Engels would have it; rather, it is “the result of a form of dependence that in primitive society results from generosity, from favors given” (Service 1975: 293).
Such leadership is unstable because it depends on an individual who may get sick, die, or simply run out of luck, and there is no normal method of succession. In order for a society to maintain the benefits of centralization, temporary charismatic leadership must be transformed into a permanent hierarchy. When this stage is reached, then a chiefdom has developed—the first true institutionalization of power, which is also an institutionalization of inequality. As this power center grows, so does the need of the newly developed ruling class to protect its privilege. One method of doing so, aside from the use of force, is to legitimize the power elite by connecting it with the supernatural, by giving it divine sanction. The use of force, then, far from creating the state, actually represents a temporary failure of the state to function responsibly by providing such benefits as protection, redistribution, and coordination of trade. Thus, “political evolution can be thought to consist, in important part, of ‘waging peace’ in ever wider contexts” (Service 1975: 297).

It should be evident that this is not merely a shift of emphasis from population pressure, irrigation, or environmental circumscription, but rather a shift in the kind of theory offered. The “considerable exaltation” a leader’s successes could produce “in the minds of his followers” (Service 1975: 291) would be of little relevance to Robert Carniéro or Marvin Harris, who view whole social systems as reacting in survival terms to material environmental determinants. Service’s theory shifts the weight of argument from environment to cognition; that is, to the people’s perception of accruing benefits. Service also uses models based on cooperation and integration, whereas most other theories have held conflict and instability to be the fundamental conditions out of which the state develops.

Service’s point of view is refreshingly innovative, yet conflict and integration are definitely not mutually exclusive; all societies are involved in both, alternately and simultaneously. Similarly, societies are materialist and cognitive at the same time. Each perspective offers much in the way of explanation, but to claim exclusivity for one or the other is rather like claiming that a glass of water is half full rather than half empty.

SYSTEMS THEORIES

Few anthropologists today would hold to a single-cause model of the evolution of states. (It should be pointed out that those theories regularly referred to as unicausal—Carniéro’s, Wittfogel’s, and Boserup’s—are really singular only in emphasis.) All involve interactions between such
factors as population, environment, technology, and irrigation. Synthetic models, like that of Marvin Harris, make these interactions more explicit. However, all such models are based on the idea that given certain preconditions, particular causes will lead to particular effects in a more or less sequential manner.

Unlike theories that designate specific causes, systems models are based on sets of principles, drawn mainly from physics and biology. These include negative and positive feedback, initial kick, system self-maintenance, and system self-development. Negative feedback is the process by which a stable system minimizes any deviation from equilibrium. For example, in a hunting-gathering society, an increase in the birth rate will be balanced by higher infant mortality rates if the population threatens to overgrow the food supply. Positive feedback is just the opposite: a small deviation may set in motion a process of increasing change. If the response to population growth is intensified agriculture, the result will be further population growth that will in turn generate more intensification, and so on until some limit is reached. The initial kick that transforms a negative feedback system into a positive feedback system may be very small. Kent Flannery (1968) hypothesizes that in the Tehuacán Valley of Mexico, the processes leading to the development of civilization were set in motion when nomadic foraging bands began to take care of a few edible wild plants. Over generations, this human intervention caused genetic changes that allowed for increased dependence on these semidomesticated foods, and this led to more sedentary lifestyles and larger populations, which in turn increased dependence on domesticates. This chain of events led eventually to the people settling into year-round farming villages. Stable societies are self-maintaining insofar as they are constantly making small adjustments to changes in the physical and social environment. Once positive feedback processes are set in motion, a society becomes self-developing as population growth, agricultural intensification, urbanization, and political centralization feed on one another in constant circular causality. It should be noted that this is almost the exact reversal of the Newtonian principle that every action must have an equal and opposite reaction; with positive feedback, the most minute initial kick can, over the long run, lead to massive change. It is no longer necessary to explain the origin of the state as the effect of some equally momentous cause.

A number of different systems theories of political evolution have been developed. Some of these focus on environment and technology, whereas others employ a decision-making perspective. Common to all, however, is the idea that societies respond adaptively to many conditions.
The goal of explanation, then, is not to pinpoint one or two factors that cause change in all cases, but to specify the processes by which social systems will alter their internal structures in response to selective pressures. As Ronald Cohen (1978b: 142) puts it, “The formation of a state is a funnel-like progression of interactions in which a variety of prestate systems, responding to different determinants of change, are forced by otherwise irresolvable conflicts to choose additional and more complex levels of political hierarchy.” The opposition between force and benefit theories, between materialist and cognitive paradigms, and between conflict and integration models becomes blurred, because a systems model can incorporate these various perspectives simultaneously.

One such approach has been developed by Clifford Jolly and Fred Plog (1979). In their specific example of the Valley of Mexico, population growth was the initial stimulus, but theoretically any other stimulus that put exceptional stress on the equilibrium system would have been sufficient to cause significant change. Several options were available, given such stress: to reduce the population through infanticide or other cultural means, to disperse the larger settlements, to migrate to new areas, or to intensify agricultural production. Of these alternatives, only the latter would have led to the formation of the state. There are several conditions under which the option for intensification might be chosen: agricultural land might be circumscribed so there would be no place to disperse; farmers could drift into intensification without realizing it, perhaps through a slight new technology such as small irrigation canals; or the people might be forced by a conquering group to pay tribute and thus to increase production. In any case, once the option is chosen, it will lead by a series of feedback loops to nucleation, stratification, differentiation, and centralization.*Nucleation*(roughly synonymous with urbanization) will become necessary for large cooperative labor projects; in turn, as people concentrate in relatively small areas, pressure on local resources will be aggravated, requiring further intensification of food production. Economic*stratification*develops as more productive farming techniques amplify slight environmental differences, so that a person possessing even marginally better agricultural land will become richer relative to his neighbors. These forces also promote*centralization*of decision making, because such concentration is more effective for planning large-scale projects and organizing labor. Farming becomes more*differentiated*as entire fields are turned over to a single crop in order to increase the efficiency of plowing and irrigation. A surplus of food ensures that some do not need to work as farmers at all, and this permits the development of craft*specialization*. Finally, each one of these factors
stimulates the others. The model developed by Jolly and Plog is shown in Figure 3.3. This model uses many of the same elements as the so-called unicausal and synthetic theories. However, a major difference between this model and that of, say, Marvin Harris is that Jolly and Plog are much less specific about the actual train of events. The processes with which they deal, such as nucleation and differentiation, are abstract and can involve stresses deriving from any number of sources. Society is viewed not as a row of dominoes falling in a predictable pattern, but as a flexible, adaptive system making constant internal adjustments to various stresses. These adjustments modify the environment, which requires further adaptations of the social system in a self-developing process.

THE EARLY STATE: THE CROSS-CULTURAL EVIDENCE

*The Early State* (1978), edited by Henri J. M. Claessen and Peter Skalník, brings together cross-cultural data on 19 formative states, ranging from Egypt in 3000 B.C. to the contemporary Kachari of India. The distinction between primary and secondary states is ignored. This omission is both deliberate and legitimate. So much emphasis has been placed

---

**Figure 3.3**

*Systems Model of State Development*

---

on primary state development that the rich evidence of social evolution provided by other historical states—even those that developed with a great deal of autonomy—has been too often neglected. However, because most of the theories discussed here were originally applied almost exclusively to primary states, it is difficult to appraise Claessen and Skalník’s evaluations, based as they are on evidence drawn from a different set of societies.

In any case, this massive work offers a wealth of data and conclusions from a wide range of social systems that fall within the authors’ definition of “the early state” as “a centralized socio-political 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 tributary obligations of the latter, legitimized by a common ideology. . . .” (Claessen and Skalník 1978: 640). This definition, which summarizes many of the regularities found in the sample, supports the view that class stratification is a primary quality of the state, but it is not necessarily a cause, because differential access to material resources may exist long before the state comes into existence. Indeed, social stratification together with an economy that is capable of producing a surplus are considered predisposing factors without which the early state is impossible.

Four factors are singled out by the authors as directly causal: (1) population growth and/or population pressure, (2) war or the threat of war, (3) conquest, and (4) the influence of previously existing states. Most early states seem to have developed out of a combination of these, interacting with each other and appearing in no particular sequence. Wittfogel’s (1957) hydraulic theory is not supported, since less than half the sample was clearly dependent on extensive irrigation systems. However, both Carniero’s environmental circumscription model and Boserup’s (1965) population pressure theory would be supported, but only if assimilated into some sort of systems model in which these factors are viewed not as primary causes, but as elements interacting with many other elements. In Table 3.1, the characteristics of 21 early states are outlined.

Although no previous book has gone so far in classifying the early state or in delineating its common elements, the conclusions regarding the genesis of this form of political organization seem anticlimactic. As the scope of theory broadens from the primary states to the scores of systems that can be classified as early states, fewer generalizations would be expected to hold for the entire sample, and the influence of preexisting states is probably powerful, subtle, and immeasurable. There has been
Table 3.1  
Typology of 21 Early States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples (and period covered in sample)</th>
<th>Inchoate</th>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>Transitional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ankole (Uganda) 1650–1900 A.D.</td>
<td>Angkor (Cambodia) 1150–1300 A.D.</td>
<td>Aztecs (Mexico) 1425–1521 A.D.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway 900–1100 A.D.</td>
<td>Egypt 2950–2500 B.C.</td>
<td>France 900–1100 A.D.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahiti 1700–1800 A.D.</td>
<td>Inca (Peru) 1425–1532 A.D.</td>
<td>Jimma (Ethiopia) 1825 A.D. –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volta (Upper Volta and Ghana) 1400–1900 A.D.</td>
<td>Kachari (India) 1800 A.D. –</td>
<td>Kuba (Zaire) 1850–1900 A.D.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zande (Sudan) 1750–1850 A.D.</td>
<td>Scythia (Ukraine) 400–725 A.D.</td>
<td>Maurya (India) 1100–1275 A.D.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yoruba (Nigeria) 1400–1900 A.D.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Trade and Markets                      | Of limited importance. | Developed at the supralocal level. | Fully developed and of great importance. |
| Mode of Succession to Office           | Predominantly hereditary. | Hereditary and by appointment. | Mainly by appointment. |
| Ownership of Land                      | Private ownership rare. Mainly communal ownership of land and livestock. | Private ownership of land limited, but increasing ownership by the state. | Private ownership of land important for both aristocracy and common people. |
| Taxation                               | Irregular voluntary tribute and occasional labor. | Regular tribute Major works undertaken with aid of compulsory labor. | Well-defined taxation system with complex apparatus to insure regular flow. |

Source: Claessen and Skalnik (eds.) 1978.
progress, of course. The search for a single dominant cause has been abandoned in favor of theories that stress the systemic interaction of many causes. One wonders, however, if systems approaches have really added that much to our understanding, because they mainly combine forces and processes that have been known for a long time. Essentially, what the systems theorists have done is raise the model of the evolution of the state to such a high level of abstraction that it is no longer easy to find exceptions to every generalization. Because of the resulting loss in specificity, one feels the need to fill in blanks in the model and re-establish the sense that what is being discussed are real human beings—living, dying, warring, and struggling to make it against the odds. The generalizations must be taken back to the archeological digs, to the sad pottery shards and broken amulets and old walls of lost civilizations; back to the nascent states of Africa and India where kings and peasants contended in an eternal game of conflict and accord. Theory must hold a middle position in anthropology, for ultimately everything begins and ends in the field.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Claessen, Henry J. M., and Peter Skalná, eds. *The Early State* (The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton, 1978). This massive work (nearly 700 pages) begins with 4 chapters on the theory of state origins, then offers 20 chapters on individual states, and closes with 4 chapters synthesizing these specific studies and making cross-cultural comparisons. The book deliberately avoids the distinction between primary and secondary states and, therefore, cannot deal with some of the most basic theories of state formation.


Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1999). This Pulitzer Prize-winning best-seller is a sweeping prehistory/history of the emergence of civilization. Rejecting racial explanations for different trajectories and rates of social evolution, Diamond seeks out causes in culture, disease, and military might. His discussion of human’s unique ability to exterminate species and destroy entire ecosystems is depressingly convincing.
Earle, Timothy. *How Chiefs Come to Power: The Political Economy in Prehistory* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997). The intense interest in chiefdoms derives from the fact that they are a transitional form, from uncentralized to centralized systems. Thus, understanding the evolution of chiefdoms is crucial to understanding the evolutionary state. This book offers detailed examination of the development of chiefdoms in Denmark, Hawaii, and the Andes, focusing on the roles of the economy, military power, and ideology.

Haas, Jonathan. *The Evolution of the Prehistoric State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). A clearly written and comprehensive theoretical overview that attempts to consolidate the conflict and integrative approaches. The author contends that once the foundations of centralization have been laid, the crucial variable becomes the increasing power of individuals and elites in controlling basic resources.

Upham, Steadman, ed. *The Evolution of Political Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). This volume is not concerned with the evolution of states but with the processes of change leading to “middle-range” polities, such as chiefdoms. The authors challenge various models of state development, without, however, emerging with a coherent theory to replace them. The 10 articles range from the broadly theoretical to specific studies of the Sausa of Peru and the Iroquois.
A traditional Zulu chief drew much of his political legitimacy from the consent and approval of the lineage ancestors. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.