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## Variability in States: Comparative Frameworks

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It is my great pleasure to have this opportunity to reflect on the importance and broad scholarly influence of *The Early State* (Claessen and Skalník 1978), now roughly three decades after its publication. In this essay, I elect to take a somewhat different tack than some of the other papers in this volume and do not focus directly on the concept of the 'early' (as opposed to 'mature') state or its academic use. Neither do I engage many of the important findings of this seminal work. Rather, I consider a more overarching, yet relevant, topic, the cross-cultural variation of states, or more properly, variability in those societies ruled by state governments (see Bondarenko and Korotayev 2003: 111), as well as comparative frameworks that we employ for communicating about and understanding them. I consider how we look for and categorize that variation, the appropriate domain for dialogue and comparative investigation, and the kind of theoretical frame that ultimately will be necessary to understand the variability and history of the state.

I have chosen to consider the diversity of state institutions and the societies that maintain and sustain them for a number of reasons. Perhaps, the most significant is that when first reading *The Early State* decades ago as a graduate student, it was the documented and tabularized variation in the 21 described states (and their historical/societal contexts) that most intrigued and inspired me. In fact, in looking back reflectively, I suspect that the specific findings as well as the systematic approach outlined in *The Early State* had a stimulating influence on the comparative perspective that Jill Neitzel and I adopted in our consideration of variability in middle-range (tribal/chiefdom) societies of the Americas (Feinman and Neitzel 1984).

I also recognize that there is a somewhat ironic element in electing to focus on the variability of states since the expressed, central aim in *The Early State* was to highlight cross-cultural resemblances rather than differences (Claessen 1978: 533). More specifically, the core aim of that 1978 work was to establish the general structure of the early state,

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the predecessor of the modern state (Claessen 1989: viii). Nevertheless, as exemplified in his more recent works, Dr. Claessen (2000) also has a great concern with the focal issues outlined here, the variation of states (and other political formations), how this diversity in states is dialogued about, conceptualized, and studied, as well as the multitude of pathways that have been taken by different populations and societal groups during the course of the human career.

#### **VARIATION IN STATES: EXPANDING THE SCOPE**

One of the most impressive aspects of *The Early State* as an intellectual contribution is the breadth of influence that the book has had across disciplines over the past decades. As an archaeologist, it has long been apparent that many subsequent comparative works (e.g., Feinman and Marcus 1998; Hansen 2000 ed.; Nichols and Charlton 1997) that are focused on pre-modern states have built upon the findings and approaches outlined by Claessen and Skalník (1978). Yet before preparing this essay, I was less aware that *The Early State* also has had an impact on the framing of investigatory problems and the comparative study of later medieval (Davies 2003) and even modern states (Mann 1980; Spruyt 2002). In fact, *The Early State*, along with subsequent and related works by the editors, has been linked to a reemergent concern with the state in the social sciences (e.g., Evans *et al.* 1985; Mann 1980: 297).

What is both exciting and challenging about this multidisciplinary scholarship is that in academic fields as distant as political science, archaeology, classics, economics, history, anthropology, and geography, many of the comparative research questions posed about states are rather similar, although the specific administrative institutions may vary greatly in their scale and strength. To name just a few, central questions concern not only the circumstances surrounding the formation of these hierarchical governing institutions, but the structures through which they are ruled and the affect that different modes of power sharing, rule, and bureaucratic organization have on governmental practices. Also critical are the relations between the state and the wider web of networks (such as markets), interest groups, and populations that compose the larger societies in which state institutions are embedded. Key shared questions also concern the relations between contemporaneous states and the cycles of state power, conquest, collapse, and regeneration that have so often been noted through time and across space and regions.

Yet the challenges begin with the dearth of dialogue across academic fields. For example, those of us interested in preindustrial states have for decades examined and theorized comparatively regarding the formation of states (Wright 1986, 2005), their collapses (Yoffee and Cowgill 1988), regenerations (Schwartz and Nichols 2006), processes associated with the

building of empires (Alcock *et al.* 2001), as well as the specific variation in their characteristics and properties (Trigger 2003), without much recognition in the literature of more contemporary states. At the same time, few archaeologists are aware that state formation and related questions are also a bone of contention in regard to medieval (Davies 2003; Jones 1999; Reynolds 2003) and more modern times (Doornbos 2002; Milliken and Krause 2002; Spruyt 2002; Tilly 1985), where the questions may be framed in rather similar terms to those employed by archaeologists and ancient historians. As a consequence, not only are insights and opportunities lost (see Jones and Phillips 2005 for a parallel argument), but due to inadequate information exchange researchers in all mentioned disciplines forego the chance to develop comparative frameworks and theoretical principles that might subscribe to global history's 5000 years of statecraft.

### **CRITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE ARCHAIC STATE**

As noted recently (Hutton 2007), 'all societies are linked to their past by umbilical cords – some apparent, some hidden'. Given this evident benefit of the *longue durée* or a diachronic perspective (see Adams 2004: 349) when studying the state and a multigenerational scholarly vantage on the world's earliest states, I find it mildly curious that frameworks and findings derived from the comparative examination of archaic states (see Smith 2006) are so rarely engaged by scholarly treatments of later generations of states. Clearly a wide-ranging dialogue, if not even an overarching set of ideas comparing states and statecraft and the cycling (ups and downs) of state power (see Muller 2002: 97), would be highly informative and could enhance the kinds of patterned variation recognizable in the corpus of states, past and present.

Given the constraints of the data, comparative efforts directed at ancient states have often been uneven and messy due to the lack of case comparability (Smith 2006). Nevertheless, fundamentally the comparative archaeological investigations of states share this limitation with most other comparative treatments. At the same time, archaeologists must grapple with the same fundamental premise that other comparative analyses of the state must probe. As succinctly stated in *Understanding Early Civilizations* (Trigger 2003: 3): '(t)he most important issue confronting the social sciences is the extent to which human behaviour is shaped by factors that operate cross-culturally as opposed to factors that are unique to particular cultures'. Yet, given the reemerging call for comparative studies of the state (*e.g.*, Smith 2006; Trigger 2003: 688) and building on *The Early State*, perhaps it is now appropriate to assess and reconsider how anthropological archaeologists generally have framed the issue of similarities and differences in archaic states. I propose that a repositioning of

this theoretical perspective might bring archaeological approaches more in line with similar comparative efforts in sister disciplines while opening up the potential for more overarching frameworks for the study of the state.

In Anglophone anthropological archaeology, most comparative and neoevolutionary approaches have been grounded for the better part of five decades in the reconciliation engineered by Sahlins and Service (1960) of seemingly contradictory evolutionary approaches advanced previously by White (1959) and Steward (1949). This mediation (see particularly Sahlins 1960) has been discussed, dissected, and amended by many theorists (*e.g.*, Claessen 2000: 191–195; Flannery 1983; Muller 2002: 96–97; Sanderson 1990: 131–138; Segraves 1974; Trigger 1989: 292). It basically defined two aspects of a neoevolutionary research agenda, general and specific societal evolution. Basically, general evolution was envisioned as a focus on the broad, shared societal patterns directly associated with increasing organizational complexity (such as the definition of the core features of Service's [1971] band-tribe-chieftdom-state), whereas specific evolution was defined as the focus on the remnant and presumably rather unique aspects of societal variation linked to specific regional traditions and case-specific adaptations to varying local conditions. The focus of specific evolution is the variant pathways followed by each sociocultural grouping or society; in contrast, the main concern of general evolution is the definition/identification of the patterned variation (*sensu* Drennan and Peterson 2006) associated explicitly with stepped increases in organizational complexity. From this theoretical frame, which has been at least implicitly employed in many archaeological analyses, cross-cultural similarities are generally searched for and recognized as indicators or properties of distinct levels/tiered modes of hierarchical complexity, whereas variation within these modes is presumed to have a basis in more historical or idiosyncratic factors.

#### **RETHINKING THE INTERPRETATION OF CROSS-CULTURALLY PATTERNED VARIATION**

Although the basic premises of Sahlins and Service (1960) theoretical reconciliation have been widely influential in the interpretation of similarities and differences by anthropological archaeologists over the last decades, this basic perspective has had much less impact in other disciplines that study states. To begin a dialogue regarding the structural parallels and transformational histories of states, early and modern, certain basic theoretical principles or elemental axioms ideally should be broadly shared and not just favored by one set or discipline of scholars. More importantly, and in accord with the wide body of knowledge on states from numerous academic disciplines, it is clear that key structural similarities or cross-cultural patterns of

variation cannot be exclusively tied to stepped tiers of hierarchical complexity or so-called general evolution.

In other words, there are broadly recognized and cross-culturally patterned elements of variation in states that are not tied to or a product of tiers of hierarchical complexity. There are patterns of variation that cross-cut and define modes in the corpus of known states. For example, there are properties that relate to the size or scale of states. Many researchers would concur that states that are small and part of regional networks (often sharing a common cultural tradition) tend to have features (such as high degrees of connectivity with neighboring states, smaller bureaucratic infrastructures) that are different from those of larger territorial states (*e.g.*, Friedman 1977; Hansen 2000a; Nichols and Charlton 1997; Trigger 1993). In the same vein, there are certain properties of empires (size, ethnic/cultural heterogeneity, formed through conquest/coercion) that are widely viewed as distinguishing them from other states (*e.g.*, Alcock *et al.* 2001; Doyle 1986; Sinopoli 2001: 444–447). Likewise, legal/formal sovereignty and more finite borders (defined territories) are two of a number of features that tend to differentiate modern states from those of the deeper past regardless of their relative size (Claessen 1985; Spruyt 2002). Industrial-era states generally claim effective legal sovereignty over a territorial domain and its population in the name of the nation in a manner less common for states deeper in the past (Hansen and Stepputat 2006).

Recently, Grinin and his associates (Bondarenko *et al.* 2002; Grinin 2003, 2004) have noted that some ancient political formations (including but not limited to certain Greek poleis and the Roman Republic) had more democratic political formations than often are associated with early states. These more democratically organized societies lacked unitary executives or supreme rulers, yet in other respects they shared many properties of chiefdoms and states. These arguments bear key parallels (although there are also points of difference) with the distinction drawn by my colleagues and me (Blanton 1998; Blanton *et al.* 1996; Feinman 1995; Feinman *et al.* 2000) when contrasting corporate versus exclusionary (or network) modes of politico-economic organization. Among other features, corporate organizations, in parallel with Grinin's 'early democracies' are recognized to exhibit greater political participation/shared power than the ruler-centric organization (exclusionary/network) often presumed to fit all pre-industrial states and chiefdoms (although see Renfrew 1974).

Importantly, both of these theoretical discussions of organizational diversity in the past observe that wider political participation/power sharing (and the consequent de-emphasis on an individualizing ruler found in democratic or corporate contexts) also tends to coincide with less marked degrees of socioeconomic stratification. Independently, the positive association between high political participation and relative economic equality

also has been noted in a cross-national study (Russett 1964) and a large cross-cultural ethnographic sample (Ember *et al.* 1997). That these patterns hold in the latter static/synchronic samples is significant since factors such as relative income inequality reflect long intergenerational histories of wealth creation and transfer in specific historical contexts. As Skalník (1978) convinced us decades ago, state building is a process, so the relationship between lesser degrees of socioeconomic stratification and broader political participation (as well as the converse) is really patterned variation that might be expected to shift in concert over a diachronic sequence or time series (as opposed to the comparison of static cases).

For example, I suspect that the increasing concentration of executive power and a growing disparity of wealth, which have both occurred over the last decades in the contemporary United States, are not purely serendipitous, unrelated trends (American Political Science Association Task Force 2004). This is a key point because it implies that such governmental and economic practices are not 'culture bound', but rather are the product of the interplay between history and traditional practice and the socio-environmental forces that engender change. Correspondingly, mathematical modeling directed principally at contemporary societies illustrates how strong unitary executives reliant on personal networks to enhance their own power (through economic transactions) are advantaged in contexts already characterized by marked income inequities (Acemoglu 2005; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Acemoglu *et al.* 2004). It is these relations that can shift power and wealth even within a given society or state over time.

These perspectives from studies of contemporary states and their unbundled sectors and segments are encouraging; as they illustrate that the variation in states may have certain structural characteristics (patterned variation) with broad time-space applicability. For example, the co-occurrence of concentrated political power (and associated individualizing behavior), marked socioeconomic stratification, and an emphasis on exchange (flow)-based (as opposed to basic productive) economic activity may have broader relevance than was envisioned originally in the writings of either Grinin (2004) or Blanton (Blanton *et al.* 1996). At the same time, if these studies in concert serve to outline repetitive patterns of variation in states that explicitly do not correspond to broad stepped tiers of organizational complexity, then a new more comprehensive frame for analyzing and explaining the variability in states is needed. We require a research program to define and account for patterned and modal variation in the corpus of states, (over time and space) recognizing that the variation in states is not strictly due to either unique historic pathways or culture-specific, idiosyncratic factors.

### EXPANDING THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE STATE

As outlined above, there is much potentially to be learned from an expansive cross-disciplinary dialogue that explores the variation in states, ancient and modern. We might better see and come to understand patterns of variation that cross the gulf between preindustrial and industrial cases. If such an effort could be launched effectively to test overarching ideas and probe hypotheses on states, focused on variation across time and space, we would owe a great deal to *The Early State* and its legacy of focused comparisons across a wide geographic sweep of preindustrial examples.

As Claessen and Skalník (1978) illustrated decades ago, such cross-disciplinary exploration would require the unbundling or unpacking of the features and properties of states and the societies in which they are part. In other words, it would need to explore (as one example) how degrees of stratification patterned with the relative concentration of political power as discussed above. Such an approach not only would help define axes of variability, but it would enable the recognition of causal connections and dynamics that might account for that patterned variation. This is a critical point as it implies that to understand variation in states it is essential to go beyond the largely synchronic comparisons that composed *The Early State* and other subsequent comparative works (e.g., Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Hansen 2000b).

In a review of *The Early State*, Webster (1980: 426) viewed the book's focus on largely synchronic cases as a limitation. Of course, the quality of archaeological data covering long sequences of preindustrial state formation was markedly more limited in the 1970s for many global regions compared to our present knowledge base. This is evident when contrasting Adams's (1966) valiant and significant effort with what would be feasible in a parallel comparative analysis today. Recently, Drennan and Peterson (2006: 3960; see also Tilly 1984: 14) have made a forceful case that patterned variation in human social formations can only be understood if various cases or examples are examined and compared over long sequences. As noted above, it is the key to analyze how different unbundled features of states change in correspondence with co-occurring changes in other features. When such patterns are explored over a wide range of sequences, then we will gain a better perspective not just on the generalized properties of states and the idiosyncratic features unique to specific histories, but we should be able to find the patterned and structured variation between different states (e.g., corporate vs. exclusionary or democratic vs. ruler-centric). In other words, I suspect patterned variation will often be defined that has little connection to the dimension of hierarchical complexity, but such structured diversity will help identify key axes of differentiation between states. If this effort is to be informative,

our comparisons must extend beyond the specific characteristics of particular states and endeavor to measure the core features that apply to all states (and other human social formations), such as scale, mechanisms of integration, organizational complexity, relative boundary permeability, modes of rule, and the expression of inequality to name some of the most important (*e.g.*, Blanton *et al.* 1993: 13–23).

Although I see diachronic comparisons as the primary theoretical component in an overarching framework to study states and their diversity and their cycles of decline and regeneration, such an ambitious multidisciplinary framework focused on states across space and time clearly would necessitate the boot-strapping (*sensu* Blanton 1990) of an array of different, mutually reinforcing theoretical exercises, approaches, and frames, some of which would be synchronic. Such a theoretical infrastructure may seem overly ambitious to some or incredibly cumbersome to others. Yet a theoretical frame designed for understanding and explaining the differences and similarities in states is in reality a frame for exploring the global history of human societies, certainly a ‘big messy’ highly complex set of interrelated questions. So, it is not surprising that ultimately we in the social and behavioral sciences will require a theoretical frame analogous in form to the boot-strapped theories, some diachronic and others synchronic, that together aim to explain a comparable grand topic or set of questions, the history of life (biological evolution) (see Mayr 1982). Although the theory designed to explain that historical phenomenon (biological evolution) is inadequate (*e.g.*, Gould 1987) to address and wholly account for the research questions of concern to us, I do suspect that a comparable multifaceted structure ultimately will be required and developed to explain states, their histories, and their diversity. In the future when that conceptual framework is built, *The Early State* is likely to be recognized as a key brick in its foundation.

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