Carneiro's Social Circumscription Theory: Necessary but not Sufficient

D. Blair Gibson
El Camino College

Firstly, let me state what an honor and delight it is to be asked to revisit one of the seminal contributions by a towering thinker of modern anthropology. Robert Carneiro's 1970 paper succeeded in weaving many of the strands of the cultural ecology and neo-evolutionism of the 1950s and 60s into a succinct theory of state origins. This theory in turn influenced and inspired many treatments having to do with the growth of complex societies, especially those of the New World. His 'reformulation' represents the author's effort to reaffirm the basic tenets of the theory and establish its applicability on a global scale.

Carneiro starts his treatment with a summary of the past and present thinking on the origins of the state whereby he categorizes theories of state origins as either voluntaristic or coercive. By dint of these categories it has proven possible to discern a dichotomy in the underlying attitudes of those who have developed theories of social complexity, but these categories are not comprehensive and the examples that he provides are not all apt. The voluntaristic theories of yore presented chiefdoms and states as emerging to resolve some structural problem such as the prevention of food scarcity or the provision of access to unequally distributed resources. To characterize Wittfogel's hydraulic hypothesis as a voluntaristic theory of state evolution is certainly problematic on two counts: Wittfogel was not so much concerned with explaining state origins as he was with detailing the character of the 'hydraulic/apparatus' state, and secondly, Wittfogel states that his theory includes elements of coercion (Wittfogel 1957: 26).

Even more problematic for Carneiro's categories is Henri Claessen's cognitive approach that also seems not to be concerned with the

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evolution of complexity. Indeed, there is a whole class of thinkers along this line such as Timothy Pauketat (2007) and Adam T. Smith (2003) who adopt a structuralist view of states as socially shared constructs of a common consciousness, and thereby not really grounded in or caused by any sort of physical reality. Scholars of this stripe who reject a materialist causality are not to be reckoned as evolutionary in outlook, and these are not theories that explain the origins of chiefdoms or states.

When I encountered Carneiro's theory in lectures or in derivative articles it was presented as a special case theory limited to regions such as coastal Peru where prehistoric villages were strung along linear valleys and hemmed in by geographical barriers such as deserts. Reading both of Carneiro's articles brought to my consciousness the fact that he intended his theory as a general-purpose explanation involving resource concentration in addition to geographical and social circumscription. One can appreciate how a work such as Michael Moseley's *The Maritime Origins of Civilization* (Moseley 1975) may have been directly inspired by the resource concentration dimension of Carneiro's paper. However, for the most part and for good reasons this aspect of *The Origins of the State* is less well remembered.

As Carneiro remarks at the beginning of his article, one take on the term *multicausality* is the recognition that the primitive states of the world were diverse in organization, and therefore it is to be expected that the forces that impelled them to form were not uniform. Carneiro believes this position to be mistaken and sees all states as the product of two underlying factors: population pressure and warfare. Taking such a position forces Carneiro to try unsuccessfully to account for state formation in places like Uganda where populations were not hemmed in by geography or populous neighbors. He also seems cogent of other case studies such as those carried out in the Valley of Oaxaca by Richard Blanton, Stephen Kowalewski, Gary Feinman and their associates that present the argument that leaps in political complexity were associated with population declines rather than advances (Blanton *et al.* 1993: 63–65, 77, 201–203).

Carneiro's response to these challenges to circumscription/resource concentration theory is weak, in large part because the treatment of these topics is too brief to measure up to the enor-

mous scope of the issue. From the few sentences that he allocates to these areas it seems that he is not at all familiar with the literature for these regions. For instance, for the interlacustrine region of East Africa he proffers fish as the resource upon which state-level complexity was attained, whereas even a passing knowledge of the history of the kingdoms of Bunyoro, Toro, Ankole, Buganda, and Rwanda would discount this position. The base populations of all these kingdoms were agricultural, and most were dominated by an upper stratum of pastoralists.

Even in regions for which the geographical circumscription model seems ideally suited it has been called into question. Barry Kemp has argued that status rivalry rather than population pressure propelled state formation in Pre-Dynastic Egypt (Kemp 1989: 62–63). He argues that there was plenty of available unfarmed land along the Nile when villages began to nucleate and coalesce into chiefdom confederacies. These points have been echoed in a number of subsequent treatments of Egyptian state origins (Allen 1997; Wenke 1997), though Carneiro has found a defender in Steven LeBlanc who believes the unfarmed land functioned as buffer zones between warring communities (LeBlanc 2006).

Finally, let me raise two minor points. Though pendragon does occur in medieval Welsh literary sources as an element of the name of the mythic hero Uthyr Pendragon there are no attestations in medieval Welsh sources of its use as a noun (see Davis 2004). The definition of pendragon as 'a name given to a temporary war chief among the medieval Welsh' may be something he has interpolated from Gildas, or more likely Geoffrey of Monmouth. Secondly, I appreciate Carneiro's recognition that simple chiefdoms could be conjoined into 'compound' chiefdoms (or as I called them *composite* chiefdoms [Gibson 1995]). Here he seems to call attention to the unacknowledged contribution made to his circumscription theory by Steven LeBlanc (2006). I would, however, expand upon LeBlanc's statements that the formation of polities of this sort was not always the last step before the emergence of the state. Returning yet again to the topic of multicausality, early states possessed varied organizations, scales, and levels of cohesiveness. Some tiny polities such as Aegean or Mayan *poleis* may have emerged with the reorganization of composite chiefdoms. Other early political systems seem to have emerged gradually from or-

ganizational changes to chiefdom confederacies (Gibson 2011, 2012). Norman Yoffee has claimed a complete absence of chiefdoms as a prelude to the emergence of the earliest Mesopotamian states (Yoffee 1993, 2005). One cannot discount the importance of tradition and culture as significant players along with the important variables of demography, geography, and ecology in processes leading to increased political complexity.

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