# 'The Evolution of Social Institutions': Review and Prospect

## Gary M. Feinman

*Negaunee Integrative Research Center, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago*

**Review of Dmitri M. Bondarenko, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and David B. Small (eds.),** *The Evolution of Social Institutions*. **Springer, Cham, Switzerland, 2020.**

## 'IT IS INSTITUTIONS THAT HELP US TO PRESERVE DECENCY' (SNYDER 2017: 22)

'The Evolution of Social Institutions' is a tome with a significant message, composed of 28 chapters by 23 authors. Arranged in three sections (Theoretical Approaches, the Old World, and the New World) and bracketed by a foregrounding Introduction (Bondarenko) and forward-looking Conclusion (Small), the collection sets forth a new and significant analytical lens on the study of long-term structural change and comparative history. The book is global in scope with contributions that span from hunter-gatherers to industrial settings, from premodern to contemporary contexts, with authors drawing on a range of empirical sources that include archaeology, documents, ethnography, historical linguistics, and sociology. Focused explicitly, though not exclusively, on institutions (as opposed to individuals, polities, or holistic cultural units) and how they articulate and interrelate across time and geographic space to provoke change, the components of the volume offer convincing conceptual rationales and case-based exemplars that illustrate the intellectual rewards potentially accrued from an intensified scrutiny of institutions. Nevertheless, as the titular theme of the book is distributed somewhat unevenly across its 661 pages, I am afforded, through re-

view, this opportunity not only to highlight key findings and arguments that specific authors bring to fore but to contextualize them in a longer stream of comparative approaches and theoretical debates that characterize social evolutionary thought. That discussion follows a brief detour required by transparency. In the spirit of full disclosure, I elect to make clear that the editors and a good number of the authors in this work are collaborators, colleagues, and friends of mine. Also, the publisher of the volume, Springer, is the imprint for the journal that I have edited for decades. Although I profoundly hope and have tried to not let these associations obscure or skew my assessments, readers should be aware that these personal ties exist.

Context also underpins this assessment of the volume as a whole and its central focus on institutions as an analytical prism to examine deep historical processes of structural change. Toward that end, the remainder of this piece is divided into two sections. The first, largely definitional, reviews how the volume contributors, to a large degree in chapters by the editors, frame their institutional focus. Toward the end of this section, I position institutional analyses in the broader theoretical stream of social evolutionary thought. Here, the perspective is as much or more my own than directly derivative from the volume. That discussion is followed by a second section that elaborates additional key findings from the collection, both those derived through directed institutional investigations as well as other research frames. In conjunction, the individual chapters and this volume as a totality illustrate that advocacy for a more explicit analytical focus on institutions is not meant as a replacement for archaeological investigations at other analytical scales, but as an important supplementary vantage. The intent of this review is a discussion of the book's principal theme and its implementation and expression across component cases, and not an orderly roster or assessment of each specific chapter.

## INSTITUTIONS: WHAT AND WHY?

The justification for this volume is set forth in its first two pages. The book's first editor outlines what has now become clear empirically: social evolutionary change is non-linear, operates at different tempos, follows distinct historical and regional pathways, and cannot be meaningfully categorized in a laddered list of discrete organizational stages, such as bands-tribes-chiefdoms-states (Bondarenko, pp. 1–2). After this forthright come to terms, Dmitri M. Bondarenko calls for a refocused lens, and new analytical units, to investigate and explicate the long arc of comparative social evolution, or human cooperative arrangements, per Charles Stanish (p. 555). The connective twine that

threads this edited work is a thoughtful and reasoned argument that the examination of social institutions and their interconnections makes conceptual and pragmatic sense as a core feature of cross-cultural investigations of long-term structural changes in human social formations and their aggregates up to the scale of global systems.

As might be expected in a volume of more than two dozen chapters, written by an array of accomplished, international scholars spanning several disciplines, no single definition of social institutions is applied uniformly across the collection. Nevertheless, the basic definitional parameters are largely consistent across many of the chapters, and as Small (p. 661) recognizes, 'we need to seriously consider tailoring our institutional units to the questions we are asking.' The most succinct and clear delineation is stated by Stephen A. Kowalewski and Jennifer Birch (p. 31), citing an earlier publication that they co-wrote (Holland-Lulewicz *et al.* 2020, p. 1): 'Institutions are organizations of people that carry out objectives using regularized practices and norms, labor, and resources.' Their purpose is to connect individuals to other people with shared goals and objectives (Kowalewski and Birch, p. 31). As Stanish (p. 555) outlines, human communities, as well as larger sociopolitical affiliations, face key challenges known as the collective action problems – how to keep people working together for their individual and common good. Institutions, underpinned by norms and social compacts, are created to meet objectives and enhance survival in the face of landscapes dotted by trials and tribulations. What we refer to as societies are in actuality sets of institutions (Bondarenko, p. 2), and the interplay of articulating and changing institutions helps account for 'the non-linear, alternative-pathways character of social evolution' (Kowalewski and Birch, p. 31).

Stitched across this volume's chapters are a series of persuasive rationales for why a comparative focus on institutions is timely for the study of deep history. Although the cross-cultural study of institutions has a rich record across the social sciences, it generally has not been a principal theoretical or methodological concern for archaeology (Kowalewski and Heredia Espinoza, p. 495). Consequently, refocusing will entail a certain amount of rethinking, recoding, and reconceptualizing data, units of analysis, and investigation (Kowalewski and Birch, pp. 33–34). Nevertheless, many, though clearly not all, institutions have a spatially delimited footprint, a built environment potentially suitable for archaeological investigation. A sharpened analytical lens on institutions has comparative advantages in relation to less precise, undisciplined narratives while it also avoids 'the abstraction and misplaced concreteness of conceptual units' such as cultures, identi-

ties, or elites (Kowalewski and Heredia Espinoza, p. 495; see also Feinman and Neitzel 2020; Holland-Lulewicz *et al.* 2020).

Furthermore, if we are to draw on the full extent of human history and cooperative arrangements, their sustainability, and outcomes meeting challenges, then archaeology's language (its units of analysis and how its data are packaged) must be mutually intelligible with those found in sister disciplines, the ecological and social sciences. Archaeological units and concepts 'should bridge between the population-based concepts of biology and ecology, and the sociological concepts of people doing things in groups' (Kowalewski and Birch, p. 30). An institutional focus allows archaeologists to excise the constraints and limitations of over-used, common 'taxonomic containers' (Birch, p. 420; see also Feinman and Neitzel 2020), while it facilitates linkages to potentially relevant bodies of contemporary social science theory in disciplines including institutional political science, institutional economics, and social network analysis (*e.g.*, Abrutyn and Turner 2011; Hodgson 1998; Peeples 2019; Thelen 1999).

In taking an institutional approach to social evolution, researchers also recognize that broad patterns of change in human interpersonal formations and aggregations should be conceptualized and explained in terms of the dynamic relations among individuals and institutions, also composed of (and constructed by) people (Kowalewski and Birch, p. 36). 'For our species, getting things done is always social' (Kowalewski and Birch, p. 30), as are provoking change and innovating new. When one dissects historical processes, the root causes generally are centered in the dynamics of human and institutional relations. Convincing, overarching explanations for change rarely can be found solely in external factors or even in the actions of singular individuals.

Institutional analyses aim to highlight parallels, differences, and changes in a Mertonian middle-range tier of theoretical analysis (Holland-Lulewicz *et al.* 2020; Merton 1968; Smith 2011). In opposition to many generalizing conceptual frames in archaeology, prime movers, unilinear sequences, and universal causal models are not foci for institution-based, comparative research. Rather, an institutional frame offers a means of inductively defining and organizing data in ways amenable to interpretation and compatible with mid-tier conceptual approaches that outline recurrent processes (*e.g.*, Fargher *et al.* 2019). In this collection, the most explicit example is a comparison of two Iroquoian confederacies (Birch, pp. 419–435), which superficially shared features of governance but were incorporated through different mechanisms in which the component entities were networked in distinct ways. Variance in the developmental histories and social ties between

demographic segments culminated in vastly different outcomes for the groups during the tumultuous colonial era. Beyond this volume, in a study of 30 pre-modern polities (Blanton and Fargher 2008), a strong relationship was noted between the reliance of political institutions on internal resources (generally local agrarian and craft production, taxes from local markets) and more collective forms of governance. The recurrence of this relationship holds despite significant institutional variation in the specific institutions of production, tax collection, and leadership, which looking forward could account for the relative sustainability of different collective governance regimes in a framing approach that isolates both parallels and differences.

A vantage on institutions also provides a path through a theoretical debate and conundrum that has ruminated for more than fifty years in archaeology. In the oft-cited 'A Theory of the Origin of the State,' which dovetails in time with a renewed comparative commitment in archaeology (and cognate fields) to understand and explain the emergence of large, human political affiliations, Robert Carneiro (1970) cogently juxtaposed two main streams of thought (voluntaristic and coercive) relevant to social evolution. Both streams have deep philosophical roots. Emphasis on voluntarism underlies functionalist and systems frames, while coercive logics underpin Marxist theories and the suite of social evolutionary frames derivative from them. In a sense, each stream gives credence to only one dimension of humanity's character. Voluntarism stresses humankind's propensity for altruism, empirically bolstered by the ability of our species to cooperate with non-kin in larger aggregations than any other form of life. Yet, as Carneiro (1970) himself recognized, people neither generally nor uniformly act for the good of the whole or others. In contrast, coercive theoretical streams rest on humanity's propensity for selfishness and individual agency. But coercion at polity scale is costly and nearly impossible to sustain (*e.g.*, Roscoe 2013).

Furthermore, the default condition for humanity is neither selfishness nor altruistic virtue. Humans have agency and also are excellent cooperators, and because we, as a species, are capable of both, cooperation tends to be situational and contingent, a context-related product of interpersonal relations. Neither people in the past nor in the present are excluded from or exceptions to these fundamental properties of human nature. The focus on institutions, by definition, recognizes the essential interactive, social element in the formation and sustainability of human coalitions of any size. Compacts, compromises, and contracts (written, expressed, or not) underlie all cooperative arrangements. Even autocratically organized regimes and social arrangements

are not strategic outcomes dictated by the whims and strategies of singular, powerful individuals, but involve networks of relations that generally include cronies, clients, and the broader, generally diverse, differentiated populace (Beekman, p. 526). The boot-strapping of an institutional lens with collective action theoretical approaches (*e.g.*, Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2016; Levi 1988; Olson 1965) affords a means to bridge the micro-macro problem (Rothstein 1996; Thelen 1999). Humans make decisions (not societies or cultures), but choices and practices are filtered and bounded by interpersonal relations and institutional affiliations.

## KEY CONTRIBUTIONS, INTEGRATIVE THEMES, AND SUMMARY THOUGHTS

In my first reading of the volume, sometimes I lost the thread of the overarching argument as the core elements of the institutional perspective and how to implement them did not have a sufficiently explicit footprint threading the individual chapters. Nevertheless, the introductory chapter and the four chapters in the opening section (Theoretical Approaches) together do provide a clear rationale for refocusing comparativist social evolutionary thought at a middle theoretical range. After Bondarenko sets the agenda, reviews social science perspectives on institutional analysis, and presents an overview of the volume, Kowalewski and Birch define the core underpinnings of an institutional approach and how it makes sense for contemporary archaeological analysis. In his second contribution, Bondarenko outlines an analytical means to compare the relations between institutions, whether they are rigidly ranked or more evenly articulated one to another. A key point is that major structural changes often take place without transformational changes in sociopolitical complexity. Nikolay N. Kradin draws on a compilation of cases from the Atlas of Cultural Evolution (Peregrine 2003) to illustrate both the strong relationship between largest community size and sociopolitical complexity, but also the lack of strict thresholds despite the strong general correspondence (see also Feinman 2013). Through an accompanying historical example from the Russian Far East, Kradin advances the thought that, in part, the lack of fit between large settlement sizes (urbanization) and sociopolitical complexity reflects diversity in the ways that different institutions and modes of leadership utilize the built environment. Christopher S. Beekman also makes a similar observation in his discussion of prehispanic West Mexican political institutions in the book's third section (see also Feinman and Carballo 2018). In his review of social evolutionary frames, Henri J. M. Claessen infers that

parallel forms of human organization or institutional arrangements need not indicate historical borrowing or shared lineage, but may reflect formations that work in certain contexts, a notion that parallels the aforementioned focus on recurrent processes (Hedström and Swedberg 1996; Mayntz 2004).

The volume's two remaining sections include twelve Old World chapters and ten that focus on the Americas and the Pacific Islands. Kingship and leadership are the theme for Alexander A. Nemirovsky (Late Bronze Age Assyria) and Alexander V. Marey (thirteenth-century Castile). The processes of colonialization (Malawi) and decolonialization (Ghana) in Africa are the respective topics for Ariadna P. Pozdnyakova and Tatiana S. Denisova. Sociopolitical institutions and change in Polynesia are covered by Henri J. M. Claessen, whose focus is the relationship between population and arable land, and by Albert I. Davletshin, who undertakes a comparative linguistic analysis, while Paul Roscoe critiques the essentialization of gender roles in his examination of patriarchy in New Guinea.

Many of the book's case studies illustrate longstanding, yet flawed, tenets that underpin archaeological practices, which traditionally have endeavored to trace bounded cultural or societal units through stepped categorical sequences of social evolutionary transformation. Through the adoption of macroscalar vantages, Andrey V. Korotayev (northeast Yemen), Aleksei S. Shchavlev (tenth-century Ukraine), Bondarenko (Benin), Kradin (nomadic peoples on the Eurasian steppes), Birch (Iroquoian confederacies), David H. Dye (Indigenous southeastern North America), and Gleb V. Aleksandrov (colonial New England) collectively document the importance of interregional networks for understanding variation and changes in more local institutions, scalar and temporal diversity in regional organizations that do not align with the traditional social evolutionary stages, and temporal sequences that do not conform to the neoevolutionary trajectory of change. Aleksandrov points out that although early towns in New England had basic parallels with similar-sized towns in the mother country, they had markedly distinct organizational and institutional features due to the larger worlds in which they were networked. Nam C. Kim also brings a broad-scale lens to the emergence of Co Loa, a large walled settlement that expanded markedly in the Red River valley of northern Vietnam during the last centuries BCE. Kim argues that changes at Co Loa were neither the direct product of northern intrusions nor entirely independent of such links.

Kradin's comparison of nomadic peoples documents that greater mobility was generally correlated with less hierarchical political institutions. In parallel with the finding in his earlier paper, as sedentary com-

munities increase in size, humans create new institutions or make institutional adjustments, although the nature of those shifts are by no means uniform. This relationship is further amplified in Lucille E. Harris's study of hunter-gatherer populations (on the North American northern plateau). She finds that the range of house size variability increases (with some domiciles larger than any found in small communities) in larger settlements. Across economic modes, temporal epochs, and regions, as the scale of human sociality and interaction expands, economies of scale and rates of innovation increase (*e.g.*, Smith 2019). But, at the same time, how we recognize and interrelate with each other changes. There are constraints on our cognitive capacities (Hill and Dunbar 2003). Social relations become based mainly on 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973), that is, categorical rather than biographical (face-to-face, deeply personal) familiarity (*e.g.*, Coward and Gamble 2008). Potential impediments and threats to social cohesion and community sustainability increase with 'scalar stresses' (*e.g.,* Johnson 1982). To reap the benefits of larger, more permanent aggregations, new institutions are created to foster interpersonal ties and enable things to get done.

Three chapters explicitly trace shifting institutions and their articulations across time and space in ancient Greece (David B. Small), the Andes (Charles Stanish), and prehispanic Mesoamerica (Kowalewski and Heredia Espinoza). The latter is especially noteworthy as it defines eight consequential institutions (states, cities, districts/neighborhoods, rural communities, households, marketplaces, temples, and irrigation societies) that are integral to pretty much all Mesoamerican polities for thousands of years, and yet the specific ways that they were arranged, and how they articulated with each other, undergird great diversity across that ancient world. 'The interplay between human forces organized in institutions that have somewhat different objectives has multiple potential outcomes. Mesoamerica's evolution was uneven, non-lineal, punctuated, and episodic. Periods of growth were followed by collapse at the regional and sometimes wider scales' (Kowalewski and Heredia Espinoza, p. 514).

Articulations between political ideologies/cosmological constructs and associated institutions are probed in two chapters, each with direct ramifications and parameters for the framing of social evolutionary thought. Victoria Tin-bor Hui dissects the long-held presumption that China was fundamentally different from Europe, ruled by despots yet peaceful, due to the teachings and tenets of Confucianism. Through a succinct tracing of this political philosophy across millennia, the fallacy of the false dichotomies that too frequently have been drawn between the West and the rest are dismantled (see also Blanton and

Fargher 2008, pp. 5–11). The author illustrates how Confucianism, like most major bodies of philosophical thought, features contradictory elements, both those that foster peace and others that justify war, both those that check despotism and others that bolster and defend autocratic rule. Chinese rulers and institutions drew on those articles of this political philosophy that legitimized their objectives and practices (sometimes tyrannical, but other times not). In fact, early Confucian thought, birthed during the mid-first millennium BCE, placed checks on imperial authority. Later in Chinese history, there were 'enlightened' episodes when the rights of citizens for material welfare, legal protection, and degrees of free expression were recognized. A take-away lesson is that broadly held ideologies or political philosophies, such as democracy, socialism, capitalism, and modernity, do not in and of themselves define or determine individual or institutional practices, so that historical contexts that fall under the rubric of such terms often are highly diverse.

Ken Baskin adopts a macro-vantage to argue that a seventeenth-century shift in western European cosmology from religion to a mechanistic rationality, derived from the work of Francis Bacon, accounts for the subsequent paths taken (and the excesses) of three modern institutions, Western science, nation-states, and capitalism. Although provocative, I found the bridging arguments to be overly general, vague, and too accepting of the exceptionalist view of Western modernity. I remain unconvinced that rational thought and enlightened views that recognized principles of equity were unique to the modern West (*e.g.*, Conrad 2012) or that a mechanized cosmic rationality was ever uniformly shared by populations across the contemporary West. As I write this review, long sequestered by a global viral scourge in a country (United States) where more than a third of the populace believe faith-based conspiracies, hold extreme nationalist views, and reject an array of rational, consensual findings of science (concerning the virus, climate change, evolution), the causal inferences advanced seem to require a more fine-grained exploration.

In sum, this is a consequential volume for the study of human cooperative arrangements and their variation and changes across time and space. Readers will not find, nor should they expect, a simple script to reframe this transdisciplinary intellectual quest. But they will encounter the fragments of a roadmap that identifies debates, theoretical constructs, and analytical lenses that should be pursued and others that should be retired. Most notable is the focus on institutions, an instrumental perspective for considering how people met challenges in the past (and for that matter, how we address them today). Whether in

regard to climate change (Kowalewski and Birch, p. 30) or the implementation of policies to quell a pandemic or distribute a vaccine – two principal challenges facing the modern world (Else 2021) – the main impediments are not technical know-how, but social, resolving how to build and sustain the cooperative arrangements and institutions to get things done. Likewise, scholarly vantages on social evolution have long privileged external causality, rooted in the physical environment, technology, foreign influences and invasions, or great leaders who mystified or coerced their flocks. But guided by the institutional lens, it becomes clearer that the main drivers underpinning change are (and always have been) us, the complex webs of relations and means through which we coalesce and split apart.

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