

## Anthropology and the Ancient Roots of Some Modern Politics

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**Abstract:** The state and sovereignty are generally presented as matters of political modernity and in sharp contrast to the dynamics of primitive societies. Anthropologists have conveyed political organization through a binary contrast (primitive and modern) or a ladder-like progression (bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states; egalitarian, ranked, stratified). The discourse on states offers a choice between hostile and benign types. I suggest that ‘the state’ and ‘primitive society’ have been oversimplified for dramatic effect and that neither is a coherent entity. The common notion that primitive societies were egalitarian and based in kinship while states are stratified and territorial is not supported by facts. I make the case that humans have ‘always’ been politically modern, drawing on four sets of material; ethnology, Aristotle, a recent rewriting of human political history, and evolutionary studies of human cognition and sociality.

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### STATES AS OBJECTS OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTITY

We are variously urged to respect the state, or smash the state or study the state; but for want of clarity about the nature of the state such projects are beset with difficulties (Abrams 1988, p. 59).

States are generally understood in terms of government, law, and the exclusive right to wield military force (Weber 1946). Sovereignty implies the ability to enforce law as well as to decide on matters of life and death (Agamben 1998). These elements have often been spelled out through a contrast between ‘modern’ and ‘primitive’ societies, with the latter marked as lacking state-organization and the elements of sovereignty. In his book, *Ancient Society*, New York lawyer Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) charted the ladder-like sequence of human social forms from savagery to civilization, and did so primarily in terms of technology and mode of livelihood. In his scheme, Indians (Native Americans) were non-state societies that were not territorial. One basic implication of his study was that Indians were not lords of the land, so to speak, and thus their dispossession was not a case of injustice.

Understandings of modernity and its opposites were part of the colonial-era dynamics of dispossession, in the United States and in many other parts of the world. At the

conclusion of his study, Morgan left his readers at the triple intersection of white racism, colonialism, and manifest destiny:

The Aryan family represents the central stream of human progress, because it produced the highest type of mankind, and because it has proved its intrinsic superiority by gradually assuming the control of the earth. And yet civilization [including the state] must be regarded as an accident of circumstances [but ultimately also the result] of the plan of the Supreme Intelligence to develop a barbarian out of the savage, and a civilized man out of the barbarian (Morgan 1877, pp. 562-63).

Morgan assumed, along with many other writers at the time, that human societies had gone through progressive stages, starting in simple and kinship-based societies. It was only many stages later that societies became territorial. The assumed shift from kinship to territory, or blood to soil, was thought to mark a genuine shift from primitive to advanced or modern social types (Maine 1861). Morgan's analysis was open to various interpretation, including the ostensible discovery of primitive communism in the ancient absence of bourgeois families and private property: Friedrich Engels drew on Karl Marx's notes on Morgan's study to write his *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State: in light of the Researches of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Engels 2010 [1884]).

Along with James Frazer and Edward B. Tylor, Morgan is recognized as among the ancestors of the discipline of anthropology. The next generation of scholars in the UK and the USA defined themselves in many ways in opposition to their ancestors' evolutionary speculation.<sup>1</sup> But along with apparent shift there was considerable continuity in the notion of 'primitive society' as rooted in kinship and egalitarian social relations. This trend is apparent in various works on the anthropology of politics, such as *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), *The Evolution of Political Society* (Fried 1967), and *Origins of the State and Civilization* (Service 1975).

*African Political Systems* rests on the idea that there have been two types of political societies; one type is acephalous (head-less, leaderless, egalitarian) and based in kinship relations, the other is territorial and stratified; states. *The Evolution of Political Society* argues that a linear progressive model captures political evolution, from egalitarian and kin-based societies and on to stratified states. Fried assumes that states arose for the defense of inequality; that they are a mechanism for the preservation of class-based injustice. *Origins of the State and Civilization* posits the same starting-point in egalitarianism and kinship; "egalitarian primitive society lacks formal authoritative offices and formal law" (1975, p. 54).

Like Fried, Service was convinced that evolution was a matter of increased complexity and inequality. He refuted the notion that states arose for the preservation of class-based inequalities, suggesting instead that states arose as bureaucracy grew to manage redistribution and administration. States were an evolutionary consequence of a much earlier effort started by informal ('big-man') rulers; "to perpetuate ... social dominance by services to [their] fellows" (Service 1975, p. 308). Service's conclusions to his study suggest some blend of mysticism and naturalism: Political evolution toward the state; "required just the right balance of several conditions and circumstances, like the growth of a rare and delicate new plant. But also like a plant, important determinants of the direction of its growth lay within itself" (Ibid.).

American anthropologists Morton Fried and Elman Service were contemporaries. They were familiar with each other's work, occasionally debated the issues, and they built their analyses from some of the same examples. Both took as axiomatic the notion that small-scale, kin-based and egalitarian social forms were a basic condition for early humans, and that subsequent history manifest a directional change that ultimately produced 'the state.' For Fried, the state was for the benefit of the ruling class. Service appears to agree on inequality in states, but he presents the state as a positive force whose bureaucracy ensures the distribution of benefits to society's members.

Ideas about the object of inquiry, 'the state,' set up how people study it and test their understandings (Jonsson 2018). Fried and Service each ignored or dismissed cases or interpretations that did not fit their respective cases (see Fried 1978, p. 44). This is very much how science plays out, according to Thomas

Kuhn (1970). Dominant understandings inform methods and theories, and they stay paradigmatic until the anomalies are too many to ignore. Then a new orientation emerges, with a separate ontology, and the process continues in a different direction and is spread through the writing of new textbooks.

Scientific practice has never been singular; there is often room for differences and rival camps that sustain the possibility of open-ended creativity that can lead to new understandings. Kuhn's study challenged the common notion that scientific knowledge had evolved in any kind of progressive and linear way of accumulating knowledge. Instead, he showed, there were various stages of stability that were then shaken through 'revolutions' anchored to new and different cosmologies, methods, theories, and items of knowledge.

'The state' as an item of evolutionary speculation, theories, and evidence may perhaps be compared with 'the horse'. This is not about comparing the 'items,' that would be nonsensical. Instead, the point is to recognize similarities in how ideas about evolution have contributed to particular understandings that misconstrue the historical or evolutionary record and its units. Naturalist Stephen Jay Gould (1991) describes how the notion of evolution as a ladder of progressive stages informed what turns out to have been an optical illusion. It was assumed that 'the horse' had started small and with several toes and then gradually it grew in size and eventually had one hoof instead of the previous toes. This was plotted on a stratigraphic map and appeared very compelling and true.

However, the actual evidence tells a very different story. This includes for instance two species that were assumed to represent a particular sequence (one replacing the other) but turn out instead to have coexisted for four million years. The ladder of distinct stages does not capture how evolution works, according to Gould. Instead, evolutionary changes are a matter of bushes, with innumerable branches and twigs with no overall directionality. Nor is there a way to tell that any one branch is more advanced than the others. Our understanding of 'the horse' as a thing of a singular trajectory leads us to dismiss the ongoing production of diversity (and all the examples—genera and species—that don't fit the story of the assumed horse) and to flatten a three-dimensional bush into a two-dimensional ladder that meets our expectations regarding directional changes over time.

The contemporary academic engagement with the state, its character and history, is a continuation of political and moral debates about cities and their relationship to the countryside, that can be traced back at least to ancient Greece. Julio Caro Baroja (1963) explored these debates, and found considerable continuity in how sociologists in the twentieth century were framing peasants and traditional society in relation to urban commerce and modernity. In general terms, the city and the country are plotted in space and time as a directional change with moral weight, in various configurations of tradition and modernity and virtue and vice.

Plato offers one example in his scheme of history as a move from virtue and naïve simplicity among the mountain folk, then a gradual move downhill, and ultimately to the commerce-dominated cities on the coast that were marked by corruption and other vices (Plato 1980, p. 59; 676c). There are many possible configurations, but what they all share is that they enable and inform factional divides among educated urbanites who align themselves with virtue against their corrupt rivals. Tradition is generally mapped on the countryside and modernity on the city, but tradition is variously a defense against corruption and alienation or it is a bastion of conservatism and ignorance against the refreshing wave of liberty.

Caro Baroja shows quite clearly that the historical evidence was made to fit whatever case was being made. His main point was that the binary contrast of city and country misconstrued history, society, and diversity through overgeneralization and oversimplification of each part. Cities and the countryside have always been shaped through their relations (rather than standing as distinct types), and each area is made up of diverse groups who often are in tension and conflict (rather than ever being uniform and united). That is, history was being made (up) through contrasting images of social types that were plotted on space and time. Different versions of the evolution of the state express a similar dynamic, and appear as questionable as the fabricated linear evolution of 'the horse.'

The ideas of how cities and the countryside relate have long allowed for debate and factionalism in western societies, as is clear from Caro Baroja's study. No amount of scientific inquiry will solve the issue or remove the debates. Social divisions are an ordinary affair, and in this case they rest on how people relate (emotionally as much as intellectually) to specific everyday items. Through identification with a particular understanding of history, cities, or the state, individual people come into identity as members of an association with a particular genealogy (a set of ancestors and orientations) and a certain history (struggles, tension, battles, drama, and victories). Shared understandings of history and the state, that are expressly counter to another group's different understanding of history and the state, enable networks ('imagined communities') of like-minded people.<sup>2</sup>

## PERPETUAL DIVERSITY AND COMPLEXITY

[T]he state, like *the town* and *the family*, is a spurious object of sociological concern (Abrams 1988, p. 63).

The evolutionary perspective of scholars like Lewis Henry Morgan and E. B. Tylor assumed all of humanity. The focus and the findings are strikingly different from what later became the dominant trend, of an ethnographic focus on individual peoples (most often as ethnic groups, such as 'the Nuer') and an indifference to the notion of a human trajectory. The focus on the distinct-ness of individual ethnic groups invites particular forms of simplification (see below). Histories of anthropology chart the shift from evolutionism to ethnography; a concern with social structure (in British anthropology) and with culture (in US American anthropology).

Most of the intellectual histories don't make much of ethnology, the analytical style that sits between these two—the focus is comparative, regional, and historical. The few that do tend to label the US variant 'historical particularism' and to characterize it by the reluctance to generalize about anything (Kuper 2005, pp. 115-34). An alternative perspective on this history suggests that ethnology offers a grounded critique of both the evolutionist focus and the subsequent ethnographic one. Ethnology involves a systemic search for patterns and variations in individual items (marriage, guardian spirits, kinship, politics) in ways that do not assume any uniform trend (all of humanity, or each ethnic group is unique). As an example, Edward Westermarck (1891) focused on marriage and concluded that nothing supported the then-common expectation that in ancient times there had been group-marriage and that the monogamous family was a later (evolutionary) occurrence. While some of his case can be challenged, his main point stands that there are basic matters of nurturing and exchange associated with human biology and sociality (childbirth, child-rearing) that require a set of social responses which have remained rather constant (Hrdy 2011).

Many ethnologists were interested in evolutionary questions without assuming that evolution had any predictable outcomes. Some, such as Franz Boas, were committed social reformers who used research to challenge what they saw as unjustified discrimination, including racism and sexism (Boon 2010; Lowie and Hollingworth 1916). Regarding understandings of the state, Robert H. Lowie is particularly interesting. His studies, through his own fieldwork as much as through the available archival record, indicated no support for the prevalent distinction between 'primitive' and 'civilized' peoples. Lowie wielded these particular terms in book-titles, such as *Primitive Society* (Lowie 1947 [1920]) and *Are We Civilized?* (Lowie 1948). He took the issues seriously and he found no signs of progress: "Neither morphologically nor dynamically can social life be said to have progressed from a stage of savagery to a stage of enlightenment" (1947, p. 440).

Lowie was especially critical of Morgan's *Ancient Society*. One part of his critique was that the notion of a shift in social logics from kinship to territory had no basis. Lowie (1927, 1947) showed that there was in many cases no coercive apparatus, but that in no case was there the absolute difference that evolutionary theories assumed. Many societies were small and generally organized along kinship lines, but the trend is also deceptive. A closer scrutiny revealed that people were simultaneously organized along territorial lines (a village, and the like), and that associations were also common. The associations were independent of vil-

lage and kin-group, and focused on a range of things—craft specialization, medicine, ritual, warfare, and so on. The point about the presence of territoriality was scientific, and it was simultaneously political: Lowie wanted to give empirical justification to the defense of Indian (Native American, First Nations) land rights, against the then-current trend of pervasive dispossession (Feit 1991).

The common notion of primitive society is an oversimplification that denies the commonality with more ‘modern’ social forms. People in even the simplest and smallest social units identified and were organized along alternative lines of kinship, territory, and associations. In even the most egalitarian societies, Lowie found patterns of coercive authority such as the ‘buffalo police’ that monitored the hunt and would punish and even kill those found violating the conventions of the hunting season. Leaders who often had only nominal power and were chosen for their generosity and pacifism might wield the death sentence. That is, they expressed attributes that are associated with sovereignty.

Between the cases manifesting sovereignty, policing and the monopoly on violence, territoriality, associations, and kin-groups, Lowie found no essential difference that justified the idea that ‘civilized’ people were superior, more advanced, or profoundly different from ‘primitive’ populations. He noted that one might define statehood in such a way that it applied primarily to “the United States or to Imperial Germany [but that] such procedure, however etymologically or ethically justifiable [would defeat] the purposes of scientific classification” (1927, p. 1). Elements associated with state-ness could be found in the unlikeliest societies, even if in everyday life many of them did not have active state-institutions.

In both evolutionist and ethnographic studies, scholars have commonly generalized for the social or political organization of individual peoples (tribes, nations, and the like). On this front, ethnology suggests otherwise. One example is Fred Gearing’s (1958) study of the Cherokee. Different activities (farming, ritual, warfare, etc.) each structured social life along separate lines, grouped people in unique ways, and varied between ranking and egalitarianism. The notion that a society has a structure—common in studies of the state as much as in studies of tribal groups—does not hold; it erases the complexity, diversity, and fluctuations that are common in most or all social entities.

The work of the ethnologists challenges the findings and assumptions of evolutionism and of the ethnographic paradigm. For the most part, these challenges have not been noted in histories of the discipline. In his preface to *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940, p. xiv) argued that there was no basis for the distinction between political types (states versus nonstate societies), or for the assumption that some societies were organized by kinship and others by territory. Those were the intellectual foundations of this trendsetting collection of case studies, and as far as I can tell this internal challenge was not noted or taken seriously.

Kuhn’s (1970) study of how science works would suggest that the example was most likely brushed off as an anomaly that had no bearing on the enterprise. Intellectual history is an important part of the practice of science, and in accounts of Radcliffe-Brown he is conveyed as a champion of ‘functionalism’<sup>3</sup> and there is no notice of his profound challenge to that academic enterprise (Stocking 1984; Kuper 1973). This kind of simplification, to associate a scholar with a distinct and singular train of thought, is common but quite misleading. It is analogous to the idea that ‘the state’ is a political type, or that a ‘tribal people’ or ‘peasants’ have predictable and stable social characteristics.

David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) call attention to a surprising and rich human legacy of social complexity, in an innovative comparative study of social life and political organization. Their study has a global reach, and echoes some of the ethnological edge. It draws on considerable familiarity with archeological and ethnological materials—some of their examples go back ten-twenty thousand years. Nothing in their examination affirms the expectation of a directional move in the human past from egalitarian simplicity to stratified complexity, or that the invention of agriculture led to cities and the state in any direct way. The archive of case studies on human social dynamics suggests otherwise, but for the longest time scholars had not been looking. Complexity and diversity were never absent, and various social entities manifest changes in organization (by season, activity, or over several years) that would seem to pertain to different

peoples or different stages of social evolution. This is indeed among their lessons; our ideas about social evolution and its stages are a matter of stories that we have clung to for one reason or another, they do not capture what really has taken place.

One of many intrigues in the study is the insistence that the state has no origin (2021, pp. 359-440). The two authors discuss cases of cities that lasted for decades and even centuries but which appear to have been without administrative machinery of any kind. There are also cases of sovereignty where there is no sign of a state (2021, p. 396). And they show that the ethnological and archaeological record has a wealth of examples of long-distance interaction zones (trade and many other elements): the notion of pre-modern societies as small-scale, simple, and local has no basis in fact.

Where we once assumed ‘civilization’ and ‘state’ to be conjoined entities that came down to us as a historical package ... what history now demonstrates is that these terms actually refer to complex amalgams of elements which have entirely different origins and which are currently in the process of drifting apart. Seen in this way, to rethink the basic premises of social evolution is to rethink the very idea of politics itself (2021, p. 431).

Aristotle’s (1996) study of the state, *Politics*, suggests one perspective. It was based on the collection of 158 case studies (‘constitutions’) of political units around the Mediterranean region. That is, it was quite empirical in its orientation and execution. It was comparative, regional, and historical, as it traced how things played out over time rather than suggest that each case had a singular and stable structure. On this level, Aristotle’s focus is compatible with the grand scope of Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) study, and with their focus on dynamics and variability. It is also compatible with the ethnologists’ comparative emphasis on diversity, complexity, patterns, contrasts, and changes over time.

Aristotle does not assume that states are categorically the tool for one segment of the population to oppress others, but he notes the cases when this happens and traces how it evolved. He finds a general divergence among tyrannies, democracies, and aristocracies. They are all examples of states and yet they are incompatible. Meanwhile, no political structure is stable, so a democracy can over time become a tyranny, and so on.

States are any political community where different settlements have formed a network, generally involving a city (*polis*) and villages. Different environments are conducive to different forms of economy, politics, and the like. The reason for states is human sociality; people are a political animal. Creatures that stand below and above humanity—a beast or a god—don’t need political negotiation and economic exchanges, so they can easily survive without a state. States are, however, a human need. If states are rooted in justice then they are a good thing, but states where justice is absent do not bring its people any benefits and are instead harmful. This can happen and has happened, and it is important to understand the process and how to guard against it.

Aristotle’s study is marked by measured (as opposed to naïve) optimism. He is convinced of the human need for sociality, security, justice, and a negotiated exchange of benefits, because he knows the harm that comes from war, neglect, and various injustice. Meanwhile, he suggests that no organization is guaranteed to work for everyone’s benefit. However, it is urgent and practical to study and understand what works and how, and what can prevent things from turning bad.

All humans need sociality, justice, benefits, and exchange. This may seem to contradict the common assertion that Aristotle’s work justified slavery. The text notes that many saw the practice as natural and just: “Others affirm that the rule of a master over slaves is contrary to nature, and that the distinction between slave and freeman exists by convention only, and not by nature; and being an interference with nature is therefore unjust” (1996, p. 15, A1235b).

Unlike many generalizations about the state and politics, Aristotle’s *Politics* is rooted in a keen sense of common human-ness (sociality and the requirements for human wellbeing). The study generalizes but refuses to oversimplify—it insists on tracing things over time, and it insists that each case needs to be un-

derstood in its particulars while the aim is for knowledge that is both general and practical. Aristotle insists that diversity is essential for the viability of states. If people, and their needs and resources, are too much alike then the results are stifling and people's reasons for entering into a political union will evaporate (1996, p. 32, A1261b; Weissleder 1978, pp. 201-2).

The topic of human nature in relation to social or political arrangements tends to evoke the ideas of Hobbes and Rousseau. The former suggests that states and political repression were the inevitable response to human baseness. The latter insists that humans started off in pleasant innocence, and that only the subsequent advent of agriculture and cities brought about inequalities and oppression. I don't see a reason to argue with these understandings. Instead, I suggest that the ideas of Aristotle and the ethnologists (Westermarck, Lowie, etc.), as well as the recent case by Graeber and Wengrow, offer plenty of non-reductionist and non-fatalist angles on human nature in its surprising and non-linear diversity and complexity. Politics can be a curious, normal, beneficial, and creative process, rather than being the ostensible curse that inevitably has brought repression, manipulation, conflict, and inequality.

## HOSTILE STATES, BENIGN STATES, AND THE MAGIC OF ETHNOGRAPHY

The state was tyrannical, but episodically so. Physical flight, the bedrock of popular freedom, was the principal check on state power. [Subjects] who were sorely tried by conscription, forced labor, and taxes would typically move away to the hills or to a neighboring kingdom rather than revolt (Scott 2009, p. 33).

Karl Wittfogel's (1957) *Oriental Despotism* was in many ways an extension of the case that Karl Marx had made for an Asiatic Mode of Production, that state control and oppression in Asia rested on the control of irrigation; the essential component of the economy. Wittfogel suggested that any positive social change was dependent on removing the material bases for despotic rule. This required making industry and commerce independent of the government and its bureaucracy. The question can be fielded empirically whether states, inequality, and oppression are an Asian matter of the control over the means of production such as irrigation. Stephen Lansing's (1991) study of irrigation in Bali, Indonesia, offers one answer. There, water temples coordinated the distribution of water to irrigation networks in a way that emphasized the equitable distribution of water, combined with pest control. The officiants at the water temples are ritual specialists who rely on complex calendrics and engineering, both of which have a long history.

No state authorities were involved, and occasional attempts by outsiders to take control of the process were a serious failure. The state existed, in a king and his court and his attempt to impose taxation and a control over ritual, but it had no bearing on the process and certainly has no control over it. The Balinese case shows a configuration of farming, engineering, ritual, economy, and politics that challenges any materialist reductionism about the logic of society and power.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1980) studied the nineteenth-century Balinese state from archival sources and argued that it had not been about oppression or power but instead about pomp and ceremony. To some extent his case belongs with other western studies of the ancient and mystic Orient where politics is a matter of cosmic centers (cf. Heine-Geldern 1956; Lopez 1998). That is not an unfounded notion. But Lansing's study shows very clearly that societies may not add up in the way we tend to assume, as unified and well-integrated and where the king is at the center and in charge. Balinese states were caught up in various rivalries and had occasional wars among themselves. But they (as the king and court and military) were in many ways also quite trivial to daily life and to the running of complex irrigation schemes.

To Geertz, the ancient state in Bali was devoted to elaborate spectacle. This reality was later undone with the 'iron cage of modernity' (a notion borrowed from Max Weber)—first with Dutch colonial rule and then the Indonesian nation state. Caro Baroja's (1963) analysis is useful for this cursory look at western studies of Asian states: Where Wittfogel (1957) finds a tradition of despotism, Geertz (1980) and Heine-Geldern (1956) find cosmology and rituals that unite societies and which emanate from the king and court.

Modernity undoes tradition in these alternative models, but tradition in one perspective implies despotic oppression and the hostile state, and in the other perspective tradition refers to a culturally meaningful order and the benign state. Lansing offers a third angle on tradition, one of an active, equitable, and sustainable management of the environment, and in his scheme the state is of no apparent moral or political significance. In Lansing's study, there is no conflict between tradition and modernity; the 'ancient' mode of managing the environment is continually up-to-date.

Herold J. Wiens (1954) charted the history of southern China through a millennia-long tension between the Han Chinese and the various ethnic others such as highland tribal peoples. This history was one of hostile interaction by the expansionist Han, and a chronicle of the suffering of the Yao and Miao and many others. All the various non-Han peoples had been subjugated and currently faced extinction under this Han pressure (1954, p. xi). More recently, James C. Scott (2009) has offered an analogous historical scenario involving two-millennia-long tension between Southeast Asia's states and the ethnically-other hill peoples whom previous anthropology had classified as tribal groups.

What sets history in motion, in Scott's study, is the 'padi-state',<sup>4</sup> the lowland Southeast Asian state that was enabled by rice-farming. Prior to the spread of agriculture, people had lived in mobile, egalitarian, and small-scale communities of foragers. State authorities proceeded to subjugate people and tax them, and this regime of oppression expanded with time. But refuseniks escaped into the hills and fashioned small domains of egalitarianism and freedom, expressing and recreating 'state-refusal' through particular social, horticultural, and religious dynamics. The highlanders' innumerable ethnicities were not expressions of traditional tribal identities, but of self-fashioning that changed on a dime to resist the homogenizing dynamics of the state. Freedom-seeking egalitarians held out in remote nooks and crannies until the state had the modern means—by about 1950—of infrastructure, surveillance, and other technologies to reach completely to its outer borders. Since then, history in the Asian hinterland has been one of subjugation and homogenization.

The study was very well received and appeared to capture a previously-unknown or under-appreciated slice of world history in an out-of-the-way place. The study resonates with the Wiens' analysis, as well as with Franz Oppenheimer's (1914) argument for the state as a mechanism of one group's control, suppression, and exploitation of other groups. For Oppenheimer, class was the active social element in politics; states were a means for one class to oppress another or others. Lowie (1927, pp. 20-42) reframed this in terms of castes and ethnic groups and found much support for the notion in the comparative record. Scott's case for Southeast Asian states sits well with the notion of Asian despotism.

This discursive affinity among the studies by Oppenheimer, Wittfogel, and Wiens is interesting and significant. My skepticism and disagreement, however, come down to historiography, a concern with the reality described in the sources (Jonsson 2012, 2014). In my understanding, both the historical record and the ethnographic record have mis-represented social life and interethnic relations over the last five thousand years or longer. My critique rests on familiarity, built over a 30-year period, with the sources and how they relate to social life at different times and in different places, within this sizeable region of mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent southern China.

The historical record, rooted in western scholarship that started in the colonial era, takes ethnic states and ethnic/racial inequalities for granted. To the extent that the historical record builds on chronicles and other indigenous material, there is a different problem. It can be situated in terms of Gearing's (1958) notion of structural poses and Lowie's (1927, 1947) understanding of primal identities resting on any one of three alternative principles. That is, the idea of a singular indigenous identity is an oversimplification that denies any internal social diversity, debate, or complexity.

The basic ideas about the padi-state and its project to subjugate people by making them sedentary, and the opposite dynamics of people nurturing freedom and egalitarianism in the hills, out of the state's reach, are derived from theory. Scott's (2009) case draws from available scholarship from anthropologists and historians, but that does not guarantee its validity (Jonsson 2010). Historians and political scientists of Southeast Asia generally ignored the hinterlands as a realm of no interest, while ethnographers sought out

ethnically unique peoples in the same hinterland and generally sought to accentuate markers of ethnic difference. Scholarly engagements with national majorities and minorities in the region, since the colonial era, are suspect.

The case for a long history of state-avoidance among the ethnically Other highland peoples of mainland Southeast Asia (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia) over 2,000 years is primarily built on ethnographic materials from Thailand, from research conducted after 1960. Because of wars and other political emergencies, research in neighboring countries was largely impossible in this period. The research in Thailand assumed that there were six tribes (Akha, Karen, Meo [Hmong], Lahu, Lisu, and Yao [Mien]), and that each of them was socially and culturally unique. That is, the research was designed to find ethnic realities that, further, were imagined as endangered by the dynamics of national integration (because one was traditional and the other modern, and as modernity is inherently destructive of its opposite).

Not only did the ethnographers take ethnic incompatibilities as axiomatic and seek out ethnically ‘representative’ villages that showed little exposure to national realities. They also assumed that the situations they encountered (and selected for) were representative of traditional ethnic realities. Nothing about the situation was typical. As part of nation-building efforts, starting in about 1915, provincial governors in Thailand’s north started to discriminate against ethnically non-Thai hill peoples, declaring various aspects of their livelihood illegal and then imposing arrests and fines. This went on for at least 60 years, and already by 1935 had produced interethnic mistrust that is very atypical for the region. When ethnographers studied the hill tribes, from 1960 to 1985, they found peoples who had little engagement with Thai society and who were treated generally with distrust and disdain by agents of national integration. This was a unique situation of political breakdown. The ethnographers assumed that the patterns they found were expressions of traditional tribal ethnicity (kin-based and egalitarian peoples) and adaptations to the highland environment through the cultivation of rice, maize, and poppy.

There is no average highland situation, nor an average in interethnic relations. The pattern of lowland state hostility to the ethnically other hills, and the notion that ‘the state’ was geared toward subjugation—where migratory hill farming is instead an expression of freedom—are theory-driven. Historically and prehistorically, this region of Southeast Asia and adjacent southern China was ethnically diverse. Basic social units were made through multi-ethnic networks that combined different environments. There has not been any predictable or stable inequality in such networks. Forest products procured by ethnically varied hill peoples were high-priced items of valuable international trade, and relations across ethnic lines and different environments were actively maintained. Traders and rulers maintained various networks across ethnic lines and there is no indication that ‘subjugation’ was involved (Cushman and Jonsson 2020).

Most of the interethnic networks have left no archival trace. In contrast, there are various ritual and social statements that highlight exclusive identities. For example, coronation rituals in Jengtung, Burma, involved seating Lawa highlanders on the throne, serving them a meal, then driving the Lawa off the throne and out of the city before they were finished, and finally installing a new lowland Tai (Shan) king. This ritual enactment of interethnic hostilities happened with some regularity, but nothing about Tai-Lawa relations suggests that they were marked by unfamiliarity or hostility. This can be compared to New Year rituals that are common among various ethnic groups in the region, where a village is ritually cleansed of non-local elements (spirits and ethnically-other people). For three days every year, the village has no ‘foreign’ elements, but for the remaining 362 days such issues are of no concern.

In Laos and Vietnam, multiethnic networks were common and important, including in the wars of the twentieth century. But these were never all-inclusive networks. Instead, typically rival factions in the city had their separate allies in the hinterland. It was not generally the case that ‘the state’ was unified and singular, nor that there was a uniform pattern of relations across ethnic lines or environments. Public statements of ethnic divides and incompatibilities are easily found in the archive. However, they are very selective representations.

Only in exceptional cases of political breakdown have patterns of discrimination and abuse fallen clearly along ethnic lines. This happened in Thailand during 1915-1985. In Burma, the national military

declared ethnic non-Burmans a threat to national unity by 1962, and this triggered an ethnicized civil war that still has not been uprooted. These two cases of highly specific interethnic hostilities can be read as typical of how 'the state' relates to the ethnically diverse hills. That was the reading of the ethnographers, which James Scott relied on. The alternative, following Aristotle and the ethnologists, is to examine the hostilities comparatively and historically to see how they add up and what they represent.

Various examples of interactions suggest that people sought to place themselves in networks involving lowland rulers. This was not about subjugation but instead about access to protection and trade, for which there was often competition. Lowland rulers generally sought to cement such deals by giving titles to highland leaders, and there were commonly ritual exchanges and various linguistic, cultural, and social mixing. About the only researcher to describe such interactions (which lasted for centuries if not millennia) was the Thai scholar Kraisi Nimmanhaeminda (1965, 1967). All other ethnographic accounts of northern Thailand suggest that hill tribes were new arrivals, alien, disconnected from lowland society, and that they were threatened by the dynamics of national integration. These other studies described individual ethnic groups that were egalitarian, kinship-based, migratory, and adapted to the forest environment.

Perhaps the clearest case of how western ethnographers of Thailand's hill tribes made reality fit their expectations involves the Mien hill people in Nan and Chiangrai, centered in the village of Phulangka. This population had actively sought and maintained relations with lowland rulers for centuries, in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Yunnan and Guangdong of southern China. In Thailand they were under a leader who had an official title and exclusive trade connections. He had sought out the king of Nan for a relationship, which would allow his followers security, farming, and trade. The villagers had citizenship and land rights, and by maintaining this relationship to 'the state' through annual tax payment at the District Office the people were never vulnerable to extortion, eviction, or any such abuse. The leader was in rivalry with another Mien leader in Laos, and between the two of them they had a contest over which could first assemble a household of over a hundred people (Jonsson 2005, 2014).

Three generations later, one ethnographer studied this group of Mien. He made no mention of the long history of interethnic entanglements and instead declared that Mien society was characterized by competition over labor and not land, as seen by one household's success in converting wealth into new members. The wealth was in fact a matter of a unique link to an opium trade monopoly (that had not been available to other highland settlements) and the large household expressed a quest for glory that was highly specific to a cluster of rival Mien leaders in Laos and Thailand during 1880-1940. None of this had to do with Mien ethnicity or society. All of it concerned specific individuals in place-specific interethnic relations of politics and trade. The biases of 1960s international ethnography rewarded 'ethnic' cases of culture, social structure, and adaptations to the environment. This anthropology erased a striking history of political abuse across ethnic lines that happened in Thailand during 1915-1985. The quest for ethnically specific realities also made unthinkable a much longer and different history of common and extensive multi-ethnic networks (Le et al. 2016).

The 1960s ethnography in northern Thailand was done by westerners who knew little about Thai language, society, or history. Thailand, not having been colonized, did not have an archive that was readily accessible to western PhD students.<sup>5</sup> What did they know or expect? According to one ethnographer's recollections (Walker 1995, p. 327), they all carried a copy of Edmund Leach's (1954) *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Leach had made the case that societies were not stable or distinct. Instead, there was considerable diversity and fluctuation across ethnic lines between Shan and Kachin. Shan were lowland and Buddhist state populations while the Kachin were kin-based animist hill farmers who varied between egalitarian and ranked social orders, and sometimes 'becoming Shan' and stratified. Leach (1954, p. 107) assumed a basic distinction between social orders, some were egalitarian and based on kinship and others were stratified and anchored to territoriality. He credited Lewis Henry Morgan with this clarification.

Leach's research took place 50 years after the establishment of British colonial rule in the area, and Leach noted that the British had actively engaged in ethnic separatism to divide the Shan and Kachin on the grounds that one was a lowland people and the other a highland people. Much of what Leach observed

had been shaped by colonial rule, social engineering, and then by war. But the reader encounters instead the (inter-) ethnic social dynamics of an *as-if* scenario where some key elements of the actual situation are nowhere in sight. This is the ethnographer's magic.

James Scott's (2009) well-received and compelling case about two millennia of political tension between the state (bent on subjugation and stratification) and the highland ethnic others (bent on freedom and egalitarianism) expresses a highly particular situation of political breakdown as if it was in the character of 'the state' and of 'the highlanders.' The credibility of the case, and of the ethnography that it builds on, suggests an inability to imagine positive political relations across difference—by the ethnographers in the 1970s and a political scientist in the 2000s. The general credibility of such studies is certainly interesting. One can try to counter this trend by pointing the other way, parading the 'theater state' to challenge the image of the despotic state and its hostile rule. Or one may instead follow scholars such as Lansing and examine things from the ground up, asking—between particular cases and general issues—what relationships matter and how, and also to what extent 'the state' has significant bearing on social life.

## POLITICALLY MODERN HUMANS

We can see more clearly now what is going on when, for example, a study that is rigorous in every other respect begins from the unexamined assumption that there was some 'original' form of human society ... that 'civilization' and 'complexity' always come at the price of human freedoms; that participatory democracy is natural in small groups but cannot possibly scale up to anything like a city or a nation state. We know, now, that we are in the presence of myths (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, pp. 525-26).

The state is not a thing. Further, it may not cohere in organizational terms: "It is [the actual disunity of political power] above all that the idea of the state conceals. The state is the unified symbol of an actual disunity (Abrams 1988, p. 79). One example of this appears in a political contestation in northern Thailand in 1999 that has the surface appearance of a conflict between the hill tribes and the state (Jonsson 2005, pp. 127-47). Ethnically Mien villagers were frustrated by the director of a wildlife sanctuary in their vicinity, and one morning about 500 people marched on the Sanctuary's headquarters, told the staff to gather their valuables and to get lost. Then they burned down two buildings, went back home, and sent announcements to the authorities about what they had just done.

The authorities initially sent in heavily armed soldiers to arrest the perpetrators. The locals replied that there were no instigators, that all 995 local men, women, and children were behind this. Further, the action was justified. The locals were rightful residents, they had been unjustly bothered and discriminated against for 18 years by the sanctuary's director, and their demands for improvement were in line with the national emphasis on environmental protection and economic progress. The authorities and the villagers met a number of times in the month that followed. There was no immediate resolution, but no villager was arrested or fined. The Sanctuary's director was replaced.

But an examination of the process does not reveal any coherence to the state. The Forestry Department is invested in the expansion of sanctuaries and wants to prevent road maintenance. The Highway Department is invested in the expansion and upkeep of roads. The Education Department wants to expand schools in the area. A National Masterplan on Environmental Protection called for the eviction of all the nearby settlements. Provincial authorities had some say, but they did not have authority over the military or over the rival Departments of the national government. The military and the national and provincial police, meanwhile, are long-time rivals for influence.

The ethnically-Other local people included the headmaster of the central school in the subdistrict, and the subdistrict headman (a great-grandson of the titled leader who had led the Mien settlement in the region). The villages had been officially registered many decades ago, and the road was according to law. That is, there is no clear distinction between the Thai state (in all its complexity, diversity, and rivalries) and the

ethnically-Other hills. A lot of scholarship has ignored all evidence of such extended entanglements and instead been confined to examples showing that these are lines of tension, conflict, and absolute difference. James Scott's (2009) recent suggestion that the 'real' highlanders had identified and organized in opposition to the state (and then expired with the arrival of modernity in 1950) perpetuates this imagery. His model ignores the fact that; a) these need not be oppositional or incompatible identities, and b) negotiating for security, benefits, and trade relations is a basic matter of human wellbeing. The idea that standing outside political or economic negotiation was a matter of precious freedom has no empirical support.

Political negotiation is a basic human need. The idea that an ethnic group, or a social entity like Asian highlanders, or the state, add up to coherent characteristics—that any such entity is a social type of particular moral impact (the despotic state, the theater state, the innocent and egalitarian foragers or hill farmers, etc.)—invites essentialism. That turns something three-dimensional, diverse and diachronic into a two-dimensional image that is singular and freeze-frame. 'The horse' and 'the state' produce descriptions that erase and misconstrue, respectively, the natural world and the social world. Science can do better than that.

In the above case, the villagers have an ongoing relationship with the state and national society, several of the locals represent the state, and there is no intrinsic conflict of interest between the two sides. The case suggests that the state's sovereignty could not be wielded (justifiably) against the protesting villagers. At least in this one case, sovereignty was not (per Agamben 1998) a matter that distinguished the authorities (the state) from the citizens (the people), but instead something that connected them.<sup>6</sup> The bulk of northern Thailand's hill peoples, however, was constantly at risk of eviction because they had been denied legal recognition decades earlier. For people in these other settlements, the sovereignty of 'the state' was a constant threat.

The ability to establish roles and relationships is a basic feature of human cognition and sociality. Sovereignty, the ability to run one's own affairs and to decide on law and on life and death, is continually being produced through such dynamics. Johan Huizinga (1950) offered an angle on this phenomenon with his suggestion that culture was a subset of play. He defined play as coming with its own boundaries of time and space according to a given set of rules. Any play establishes a particular field of interaction and holds the players to its rules while it lasts, and in many cases leads to the formation of a community that insists on a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders (1950, pp. 4-13). Huizinga delimits the play-world as a contingent social contract. It is an agreed-upon field of interaction that frames the identities, relations, and focus of the participants in terms of some shared purpose for as long as the play lasts.<sup>7</sup>

The work of Michael Tomasello (2008, 2014, 2016) has offered a range of new insights regarding human evolution and human uniqueness. Tomasello's research combines experiments, comparisons, and reflexivity about cognition, communication, collaboration and morality. It offers considerable evidence for dynamics that Huizinga could only suggest. Human cognition and sociality are rooted in collaboration and intersubjectivity. The key elements are pre-lingual (pointing and pantomime) and concern the ability to establish fields of interaction; the prerequisite for collaboration and joint intentionality. Infants are predisposed to get the hang of this.<sup>8</sup> Experiments show that kids are naturally cooperative and keen to share information with others. Human collaboration depends on these cognitive and social factors, and the ability to share information, coordinate perspectives, and to trade perspectives stems from these elements.

The importance of sharing information for mutual benefit is unique. So is the importance of sharing food in human societies, as the means to make and maintain relations and to mark identity and belonging. The sharing of both items, information and food, is very distinctive. Comparisons with apes indicate that this element of sharing could only have come about in conditions of security and trust. Further, the perpetuation of these features is conducive to (re-) creating conditions of security and trust.<sup>9</sup>

Humans engage with one another based on implicit agreements and contracts that assume reciprocity. Of course, such deals may fail, but they are still foundational. People hold one another accountable in these terms. Thus, the elements of social contracts are based on unique features of human cognition and sociality that go back prior to the Neandertals. The ability to share and coordinate perspectives also implies the ability to trade perspectives and to see things from another's point of view. Trading roles and identities is

particularly evident in play or sports, but it is a foundational human capacity. Empathy draws on this element. Tomasello calls attention to social institutions in terms of status functions: People agree that element X stands as currency; they agree that there will be a chief who monitors social rules; they agree that a marriage makes a couple who then have these rights and obligations to children, in-laws, and so on:

Treating others as equally deserving as oneself in dividing resources fairly, or chastising oneself in the same way one would chastise others for violating a social norm, reflects a genuine morality emanating from the individual's perception of himself as equivalent to others in relevant respects, that is, from an impartial point of view (Tomasello 2016, p. 153).

The anthropological emphasis on each culture being its own world has distracted from these shared human features. The matter is not reducible to culture or to biology. Instead, it is bio-cultural and has to be actively worked on in each individual case. As Tomasello describes it; “the recognition of self-other equivalence was crucial in constituting ... the sense of mutual respect and deservingness among (potential) partners” (2016, p. 80). These elements of human cognition and sociality—the ability to make social contracts that rest on the ability to coordinate and trade roles and perspectives—emerged most likely around 200-300 thousand years ago. With that, through enacting and negotiating elements that we associate with state-ness and sovereignty, humans had become politically modern.<sup>10</sup> The rest, as Graeber and Wengrow (2021) have laid out in considerable diversity and detail, is history; lively, non-linear, and full of surprises.

## NOTES

- 1 English-language histories of anthropology have generally not concerned themselves with scholarship outside of the UK and the USA. Kuklick (2008) is the major exception, her book has an unusually broad scope.
- 2 The notion of ‘imagined communities’ is lifted from Benedict Anderson’s (1991) study of nationalism.
- 3 Sometimes also called structural-functionalism.
- 4 ‘padi’ refers to irrigated rice fields typical of lowland areas.
- 5 This contrasts sharply with the situation for French scholars in Indochina and Dutch scholars in Indonesia.
- 6 The initial response by the authorities rested on their claim to sovereignty but the villagers succeeded in denying this claim and insisting on their rights. Jessica Cattelino (2008) maintains that for the contemporary Seminoles of Florida, sovereignty is not a matter of autonomy but instead of interdependence, where they convert the benefits of corporations and a casino into social and cultural well-being within their communities.
- 7 There are direct parallels regarding ‘common ground’ in studies of human sociality (Enfield 2013; Enfield and Levinson 2006).
- 8 Anyone who has been around infants knows the expressions of pleasure when two minds connect and go somewhere interesting together, all without spoken language.
- 9 Pascal Boyer (2018) offers an evolutionary perspective on politics and society that is focused on dynamics of cognition and sociality. He shows that authoritarian regimes can hold onto power without much resistance if they establish and maintain conditions of pervasive mistrust among the public—no one can really tell who might be an informer.
- 10 Any classification of humanity has political implications (Marks 2007).

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