

Committee 3
Values and the Social Order:
Order by Rules and Rules by Order

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THE EMERGENCE OF STATES

by

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Abstract

Archeological evidence indicates there were states before we could read and write. This paper is to deduce from rather indirect methods and evidence how these states originated. Since all the existing states know how they direct descendents, this is a matter of some importance. Essentially, they seem to have developed from the combination of the aggregation of larger groups of people together, and the fact that as the number of people increased it was necessary to set up more complex structures, and eventually something in the way of king-ship occurred.

The point of this paper is to talk about the state before it fully enters into history. Obviously, since we're talking about it before it enters history, we will not have detailed knowledge. We must make inferences and draw evidence from other things, which at first glance might not seem to be relevant. In general, I intend to carry the story up to about 3000 B.C., but various references will be made to more recent times when I think the more recent developments parallel what happened before.

There are, of course, no written records for the earliest periods, but we can in a very, very minor and cautious way look at nonhuman social orders which have at least some resemblance to the state and to the small illiterate tribes that are still found very occasionally today, but were quite common as late as the nineteenth century.

Both of these sources of information have to be used with great caution, of course. I should, however, say in particular

that the societies of things like ants and bees¹ have very, very little resemblance to human societies. They operate by quite different systems. On the other hand, our closer relatives, particularly some mammals and in a very few cases, the birds, have social relations which may be somewhat similar to the very early human beings.

If we look at the nonhuman species, we find as a rule of thumb that a good many plants and animals have property or, more accurately, territory. They have a specific geographic area which they are willing to fight to defend. Observers have pointed out there doesn't seem to be all that much fighting by animals on the borders of such areas for which there are several reasons, one of which is that these animals recognize rights, a suggestion that doesn't attract me very much.

Another is that the current occupant who originally conquered the territory is known by everybody to be bigger and stronger than the possible intruders. There is also the fact that in a fight detailed knowledge of every irregularity of the ground, every tree branch, if it is a winged animal is a great advantage and the resident has that knowledge. In any event, property or territory of this sort is not uncommon among nonhuman species. Plants frequently poison the area around them to obtain somewhat similar control.

¹, See my "The Economics of Nonhuman Societies", Pallas Press, Tucson, 1994, for a general discussion of these things.

This, however, is not the state. If we turn to organizations of groups of animals, we can confine ourselves to those which are warm-blooded. In a number of cases they have what are called strict dominance orders. There is a lead chicken and then the number two chicken and the number three chicken etcetera. In the mammals close to us, this is apt to be somewhat simplified into having an alpha male² with the others, although they are not exactly equal, all markedly inferior to the alpha male. The alpha male gets his position by fighting. Although there are some aspects of this kind of thing in human society, I don't think the resemblance is very close.

When we turn to our primate relatives, however, some live in actual tribes, the Hamadras Baboon, Colobus monkeys, etc. There will be a number of males and females operating together. In some cases they have a tribal territory which they will defend. Within this group there normally is not a simple single leader who dominates the whole thing, although it is not particularly uncommon to find that one particular baboon who is bigger and tougher than the others. Something which closely resembles human political maneuvering may take place. For an introduction see Chimpanzee Politics by Frans de Waal³

² Except in the case of hyenas where it is an alpha female

³, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1982. There is a successor volume, Peacemaking Among Primates, Harvard, 1989. In spite of the name, there is much more strife in this volume, including a fairly horrifying murder.

What we more normally find here is that there are a considerable number of what we might call leading males,⁴ and that these have primary access to mates and food. In fact, they drive the younger males out, but there's no specific leader.

Indeed, in the baboon troops, we frequently find a situation in which one adult male who is old enough so he is not really a particularly good fighter is in a way the leader. He normally decides which way the tribe will go each day. Apparently, this is confidence placed by the other baboons in his memory of good places in the past. In any event, it is quite different from the wolf pack where the alpha male is the toughest fighter in the group.

I don't see any great resemblance between these tribes and modern human society, although there is clearly some at a superficial level. Still, as far as we know this is the kind of society that our very distant ancestors had. The archeological work appears to indicate that they operated in groups, and do not show any strong signs of pure dominance on the part of any member of the group. Of course, it should be said that we haven't dug up very many of these, and the information left is hard to interpret from the standpoint of society.

It is also possible that these early pre-humans lived partly as single solitaries, and partly in groups, and only the group settlements are conspicuous enough so that the archaeologists

⁴, In some cases, Elephants for example, leading females.

find them. I think it is likely that we had small groups, rather similar to the baboon tribe. But from the very beginning of what we call human, we had something in the way of tools. This may, however, be only a decision by archaeologists to use tools to distinguish between humans and pre-humans.

It is interesting that in the earlier diggings the tools consist primarily of chipped stones. These are so primitive that the question of whether they were broken into an appropriate shape by the human hand, or simply picked up is frequently open. In any event a device called the hand axe was soon produced, and this was the basic human "tool" for many thousands of years.⁵ They were probably used more in hunting and attacking other animals than attacking human beings, but they certainly would have been effective in attacking human beings. As far as I know no human skull with a hand axe injury has been found.

It is notable how extremely slow progress was in these days, and the equipment was very primitive up to the development of what we now call the neanderthals.⁶ The neanderthals were

⁵, "Hand axe" is a little misleading as a term since the object is very obviously a weapon. It was in a way a primitive stone dagger designed not to be thrust, but to be swung as a tiger uses its claws. This is my own interpretation as the archaeologists have some difficulty with these things. There are lots of hand axes, but we don't really understand what they are.

⁶, Most digging in this field has been done in Europe and, to a lesser extent in Israel, with a result that our history really is better in that area than any where else. Neanderthals do not seem to have been found outside of Europe where for many years they dominated.

markedly better in many ways than predecessors, but they seem to have been a very unprogressive race. It was not until they were replaced by our ancestors in Europe about 40,000 years ago that the stone age began moving forward with new and improved tools of various sorts, greater hunting efficiency, etc.

Eventually, they invented agriculture, but let us pause briefly to consider the situation before agriculture came drawing on our knowledge of the recent hunter-gatherer tribes of which we have some records, mainly from the 19th century.

We must avoid an error which many archaeologists and anthropologists have fallen into. They argue that the hunting-gathering way of life was actually a wealthy, leisurely, life and that the movement into agriculture was, from the standpoint the average person, a step down.

We should not follow many anthropologists and consider the !kung as examples. They undeniably, when the anthropologists began studying, them had a rather nice life, if you didn't mind living in a fairly ferocious climate. The government of South Africa, however, a few years before, had decided that these tribesman should be taught agriculture. They did not propose to force them to learn agriculture, but they set up training areas and land for any !kung tribesman who wished to improve.

Two-thirds of them chose that alternative which I think shows pretty well what conditions they were living in. The remaining third found themselves in an environment which was an extremely rich one. It had previously supported three times as

many of them as there were now. They found it very easy to make a good living. Anthropologists studying them have made a mistake by assuming that this was their status before the population was reduced and hence the hunter-gatherer life was quite an easy one.

It should be said that certainly now, and probably during the 19th century, the hunter gatherers always have a free opportunity of simply ceasing to be hunter gatherers, and becoming part of some neighboring more advanced society. It would appear that they would need at least a high standard as hunter gatherers as their neighboring farmers in order to continue as hunter gatherers. This does not prove that the hunter gatherers had a high living standard in the days before this agricultural alternative existed.

As a rough rule of thumb, the human race before 1800 was capable of producing enough offspring to push down the living standard to the subsistence level almost regardless of the wealth of the environment in which they operated. The fact that natural resources vary from year to year may mean that they would have a number of years without much starvation, and then a very bad year which puts the population back to the level at which it can live reasonably well for a while. Plague would do the same. The fact remains that the birth rate available to human beings is enough to press against almost any environment that existed before 1800.

It is ironic that Malthus wrote his famous book just at the time that the combination of the advance of science and development of birth control meant that it would no longer be

true. Today, advanced countries worry not about the people not having enough to eat because there are too many of them, but about the possibility that they will eventually disappear because the birth rate is below replacement level.

Returning to these early societies, and looking at the ones we know something about, there are several things which must be kept in mind. The first of which is there is a good deal of variety among them. The second is they have had some 30,000 years of experience to draw on, and it unlikely that they are living exactly the same as their ancestors in 20,000 BC. Still, there are some lessons we can learn from them.

In general they had to continuously move around from place to place in order to avoid exhausting the hunting and gathering resources. There were exceptions to this, mainly people engaged in fishing who could live in one place for a long period of time, but generally the hunter-gatherers had to move about. This meant their physical equipment was necessarily of a portable nature. If one of them had invented pottery, it would have been a waste of time because of the tendency of pottery to break under rough handling. They had to have things that were light and easy to carry and could not have comfortable housing, efficient cooking equipment, etc. This came later.

Their governments seem to be in most cases ones something like we described in the baboon tribe. A number of people got along reasonably well with each other and without pure dominance. Of course, there might occasionally be cases of a very strong

dominant male who controlled the area. Mainly, however, leaders were just leaders rather than chiefs.

The small portable items in modern tribes and probably for our ancestors, were pretty much owned by individuals. The same was true with the smaller readily available types of food. The person who went out and picked some fruit had complete rights to it as to small game. Large game in general was shared by the entire group, although, the person who actually killed it would be given some advantage.

This does not indicate any particular charitable attitude on their part. If one person tried to keep it, it would spoil, and the person would probably die from eating the rotten food. The rational way was dividing the food.⁷ Once again the fishing communities may not have had this attitude. They could have large communities with considerable stratification. Learning how to dry fish so that they are not dangerous to eat for some time seems to have been an early development.

Observation of those few hunter-gatherer tribes we have available and the archeological digging indicates that these people had both artistic ability, the cave paintings are an example, and they appear to have strong religions or perhaps superstitions. Certainly the beautiful cave paintings located in places where the average person would never see them can hardly

⁷, There is also the impossibility of one person defending a fairly large food hoard. See "Why Ravens Share", American Scientist, July August 1995, pp.342-9 for an example in another species.

be explained on other than religious grounds. On the other hand, a good deal of the art objects seem to have been simply making useful things more decorative.

There is no way of making sure that the people who put a decoration on their dagger did not think that it was a charm. Some of these decorative objects, whether they are a pure decoration or religious must have been produced by a specialist because the level of skill is higher than one would expect from any random person.

With time, during this period, there began to develop a certain amount of social stratification. This shows up in the graves. The homo sapiens sapiens buried their dead with some ceremony, and certainly a certain amount of artifacts were left with them. In the later period some graves are much richer than others which seem to indicate that during life some had more than others. Whether this indicated that they were powerful political personalities or simply that they were much more successful as hunters than other people, we have no way of knowing.

With time, eventually agriculture developed. By the way, It was not in only one place from which it spread, but in several places, the Valley of Mexico, and the Middle East to give two. The initial development and then its spread was gradual, but it had a revolutionary effect. Far more people could live on a given area of land and hence they could live in permanent or semi-permanent villages.

As we have said before, this did not lower the living standard of the people. It meant that far more people could live, and it seems likely that they lived somewhat better. They could have permanent housing which was far better than the temporary housing of the hunter-gatherers. The physical equipment used in both hunting and crop and livestock raising no longer need be highly portable. It is interesting that people moved into small cities, and lived in such developed places as Katal huyuk and Jericho before they had pottery. It is possible that copper smelting may have appeared before they had ceramics, but that is only possible.

We have little or no knowledge of how these villages operated. Katal huyuk, at least in the small part of it which has been dug, seems to have an immense number of what appeared to be religious chapels. These may indicate that these were extremely religious people, or we may just happened to have dug into the religious quarter.

Jericho has an extremely big wall, although a very badly designed one.⁸ Katal huyuk was a city like none that has ever been built since, in that the houses actually were built directly next to each other and movement around within the city took place over the roofs. It is sometimes suggested that this may have been

⁸, The tower is on the inside instead of the outside of the wall.

a defensive method much like that of the wall of Jericho, but no one actually knows.⁹

Digging has turned up a number of things which appear to be primitive religious buildings, but nothing which can be said to be definitively a government building. Of course, it is very hard to say what a building which was designed for government in those days would be like. It is true that among the residence quarters not all are exactly the same size. There may have been kings and chiefs living in the larger ones.

Once again we can turn to some extent to societies which were contemporary either with us or, more commonly, with the 19th century which had this kind of society. In much of Africa there were agricultural communities, each of which had control over a adequate piece of real estate to keep it alive, and then there would be some jungle which was used for hunting, and also as a sort of border with another such community.

As a general rule communities were in more or less continuous warfare with each other. This did not normally take the form of formal campaigns but simply that an individual who strayed out of his area and into that of another was likely to be killed. There were also techniques by which one village could arrange a parlay with another if there was some reason for it, and marrying outside of the village was fairly common, apparently to avoid inbreeding.

⁹, The outer edges in the settlement where a wall might exist are either destroyed by erosion, or at least not dug.

If we look at these 19th century primitive groups, we find in Africa a number of cases in which things that the early anthropologists called "empires" had developed. These were usually a small area perhaps 20-30 miles across in which one village had conquered all of the others, and had established a centralized government. As a result a man who had simply been very important in one village became a genuine chief. Normally this had happened recently enough in the past so it was possible to ask people how it occurred. Thus we know it was conquest.

These new rulers tried to keep down any competing theives so that they could seize anything they wished. They also protected the people against raids from other areas which would reduce their taxes. They probably through their military power made it possible for the farming communities to spread over areas which previously had been dangerous because of the existence of a neighboring village. Lastly, they built much improved foot paths around the area. All of these things were improvements from the standpoint of a dictator who wanted to maximize his tax collection, but were also very decidedly improvements from the standpoint of the average citizen.

It seems to me that the development of modern society was simply an outgrowth of this kind of thing in which individual areas were expanded. In this connection it should be kept in mind that all of the early groups which I have been describing had a close interaction of some kind of primitive religion with the State. Further, all of them not only had a ruler, but they had

some group of people who he consulted before making decisions. This is true of all absolute rulers and Machiavelli discusses it at some length.

I now move to the first case in which we begin to have written records. This is in Mesopotamia, although Egypt was almost as early. I should say that there have been a number of archaeologists who have felt that the early Egyptian state developed subject to some influence from Mesopotamia. There are other anthropologists who think it was entirely a local development. Certainly, the two were in many ways very different, but in the very earliest Egyptian dynasties there are some signs of Mesopotamian influence. Whether these indicate actual influence or coincidental similar developments is a subject of dispute.

These early developments in both Mesopotamia and in Egypt depended on irrigation agricultural. Irrigation agricultural is subject to very large economies of scale and requires considerable organization. It seems likely that the development of villages with well enough endowed structure so that they could engage in irrigation and could maintain a much larger population concentration occurred well before the development of writing. Certainly the archaeologists do find "cities" in Mesopotamia which depended upon irrigation agricultural, but without writing.

American Indian communities frequently seem to have had elaborate irrigation networks without any actual writing. The Maya could read and write, and the Aztecs seem to be right on the

verge between simply illustrating stories and tales and actually writing them out. Most of the other indian societies, including such a highly developed one as the Incas could not write¹⁰.

An even more extreme example comes in the immediate vicinity of Tucson. About a thousand years ago there was a small irrigation culture here with perhaps villages of one thousand or two thousand people living through agriculture. The reason why this culture disappeared is not known. Another then appeared which depended on much more primitive irrigation networks, and with a much lower density of population. There are many suggested explanations for this. One of which is climate change.

All of this indicates that you can have irrigation on a small scale without a state. It is possible that if we some how or other were able to go back to Mesopotamia or Egypt, 4000 BC, we would find such a society, but the fact there are no large monuments makes it seem unlikely.

Returning to Mesopotamia, the cities dependent on irrigation are bigger than the rainfall agricultural cities and they have a distinct structure of large cities with the smaller cities around them and still smaller villages around them. How these things were governed remains something of a mystery, because as we say there is no very obvious way of saying from a building whether it is a government building or not.

¹⁰, They had a system of bundles of knotted strings which could conceivably be a writing mechanism, although probably not. It seems more likely that they were aides to memory.

We usually recognize temples. In both Mesopotamia and Egypt there were undeniably temples and the view at least in Mesopotamia, that the temples actually ruled their cities is quite widespread. It seems more likely that they had a sort of priest-king who both ran the temple and the city.¹¹

Its hard to tell the difference between a religious organization which knew how to read and write and has records, and a kingdom in which the king was also the high priest and used the temple as a tax gathering and propaganda organization. In any event, by 2500 BC there clearly were palaces as well as temples. Whether their occupants were kings, high priests, or priest-kings is unknown.

It is certainly true that in later times, up until Naramsim, none of these rulers of Mesopotamia, and there were many, claim personal divine status. They were always shown as servants of the God, in spite of their complete and total control over the communities. It is different in Egypt where from the beginning the Pharaoh was himself a God on equal standing with his colleagues, the other Gods for whom he occasionally made sacrifices in order to obtain assistance in his divine rule.

The Egyptian case is somewhat simpler. There was a Pharaoh who was absolute ruler and the civil structure in the sense of cities, etc., was generally speaking subordinated to that absolute ruler. There wasn't really the kind of city based

¹¹, The Chinese Emperor was, among other things, the chief priest of one religion. The beautiful temple of heaven is a relic of this fact.

civilization that you found in Mesopotamia. The governors of the Pharaoh had reasonably large congregations of population around their headquarters, but no true industrial and commercial city of the sort that we find in Mesopotamia. The largest single industrial activities in Egypt were the construction of temples, pyramids, etc. These were very largely constructed by the Pharaoh, and many of them were literally temples to the Pharaoh. The pyramids, of course, were his graves.

This means that the two societies were radically different, and I would speculate a little bit that perhaps this may have been because of the different nature of the water supply. The Nile is navigable and runs between cliffs in a narrow valley with the result that throughout history it has been the principal transportation method in Egypt. Further, the Nile is a very friendly river from the standpoint of an irrigation society, flooding regularly at the appropriate time for raising crops. The actual irrigation work to a large extent is simply trying to arrange that not all of the flood runs back into the river when the high water level falls. This involves much less complication and difficulty than in Mesopotamia.

The other thing to be said is that when the European explorers went into Northern Africa in the 19th century, they found a number of local tribes which had governments that had a strong resemblance that of pharonic Egypt. They had God Kings. Interestingly, in many cases, the physical vigor of the ruler was

important. One of the more important duties of this God King was to insure rain, and he could be killed if they had a dry season.

Egypt may have had something similar in the form of the sed festival, which was apparently a ceremony in which the Pharaoh demonstrated his physical fitness that was important for the prosperity of the society by running over a fixed course. All of this indicates either that there was some very ancient structure which the Egyptians simply adapted to Egypt, or that these other societies copied Egypt. Which is unknown.

Here again we have an absolute ruler, more absolute than most because of his divine connections, and he always had advisers, and he engaged in a great deal in the way of economic activity.

It is sensible to consider Wittfogel's "Oriental Despotism". This is a hypothesis literally lifted from Marx during the time when Wittfogel was a communist, that says that there is one case in which technology does control society. This is the situation in which large scale irrigation is important. An irrigation system requires very large amounts of labor which must be carefully organized, and it has a characteristic that if somebody doesn't pay his taxes you don't have to send out the army to force him to do so. An engineer many miles from him closes a sluice and he dies.

I recommend Wittfogel's book to almost any one who is interested in the early development of societies based on irrigation, but we have the question of why large scale societies

normally originally developed in such areas. I believe the explanation is simply that they had no great advantage anywhere else. The necessity of having large scale organized labor gangs in order to produce a sizeable irrigation network meant that you had to have a lot of people and centralized control. Further, the "state" was very obviously doing something which was necessary to the survival of most of its subjects.

Mesopotamia, unlike Egypt, has a pair of rivers which are not particularly easy to navigate, and high water in what is agriculturally the worst possible time of the year. Under these circumstances, irrigation was a great deal more difficult, and did involve much larger areas. It is possible along the Nile to engage in irrigation only in local areas, but they can at least get sizeable crops even without irrigation after the floods. In general, in Mesopotamia that is not true¹².

Civilization did develop in lower Mesopotamia, although agriculture in small villages, etc., existed in the hills around the east of Mesopotamia, and in the head waters of the rivers before we find anything very much down in the lower plains which required irrigation. This may indicate simply that what was there is now buried.

Government in Mesopotamia, as has been said, was some kind of mixture of priestly and royal power. There is some hint in some of the sources that there may be formal legislative bodies

¹², I am referring to the lower Mesopotamia not the upper where rainfall agriculture is possible.

which control the activities of the king. The most significant of these are some obscure references in the epics of Gilgamesh which are hard to interpret and which may indicate nothing more than that he did consult with some people before making policy decisions, but, additionally, they may indicate some kind of constitutional restriction on his power.

Unfortunately, the text we have of Gilgamesh is not only fragmentary, but it is a translation into another language which was made over a thousand years after its original composition. Under the circumstances, I am afraid little weight can be put on this.

In both of these areas we had an imperial development. In the case of Egypt, the imperial development took the form of unifying the entire Nile valley very early, and the earliest written records which are still hard to interpret seem to be about the same time as the unification of the valley by Narmer. If we turn to Mesopotamia we find a large number of cities and states, each with its own ruler, and its own God, and each surrounded by a number of smaller cities which in turn are surrounded by a number of smaller villages. Way off, usually not more than 100 miles, another city is also the center of a similar structure.

The maintenance of permanent military forces and sizeable bureaucracies which collect the taxes, legal systems, etc. are clearly presented in the documents. For various reasons and mainly the fact that baked clay lasts longer than papyrus, these

records go back farther than those in Egypt. The later history of these countries and of the other civilizations which developed partly by copying them, and partly independently are reasonably well known. There were the wars, empires, and devastating famines which fill our history books.

The point of this paper has been to synthesize the early history, and I think we can say what did happen. Firstly, agriculture was available. There were a large number of small villages with various permanent establishments of houses, pottery, and frequently defensive walls. These small societies normally did not have good relations with their neighbors. The total population was vastly higher than it had been when they depended upon hunting and gathering.

Occasionally, some individual within one of these villages would have enough dominance and ability in military matters so that he would convert himself into a genuine chief instead of simply an influential individual in a not well organized society. In this status he would conquer a number of the neighboring communities and establish what we have called an empire, even though it will be very small.

In those cases in which irrigation was possible, this new larger society could produce larger irrigation networks with the result that rather quickly there would be a very large increase in population. In places like Egypt or Mesopotamian, and more certainly in the latter, a well functioning irrigation system even if it is small can increase the total production of food by

a factor as large as ten. The population will also increase. This central government rapidly becomes a more powerful government, and its importance is obvious to the entire society.

Granted the fact that you depend to some extent on the river flooding at the right time, the religious aspect is apt to be strong. The mix of government and religion, whether in the form of making the ruler a God as in the case of Egypt, or a High Priest as in the case of Mesopotamia, is to be expected.

This permits the development of a large amount of division of labor. Further, individuals who put time into inventing something which can be used by 100,000 people are more likely to be highly rewarded than if the same invention can only be used by about 2,000 people. Hence there is more invention, and progress was faster. At the same time record keeping is necessary, engineers developed and worked out ways of handling of the water, and were capable of building things like the pyramids and the temples.

If I am right, the end result is that our societies first entered into the state system as despotisms of one sort or the other. This does not mean that despotism is a better system, but simply that it is harder to develop a cooperative organization than it is for somebody who is tough and strong to exert coercion on other people. Needless to say if this is the way the state started, it does not mean that we should retain a centralized despotic and coercive state as an ideal. It is a statement of history, and I rather hope it is a distant history.

KEY WORDS:

State

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Tribes