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Ideology and the Rise of Early States

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Professor Carneiro is a distinguished American scholar who made a seminal contribution to the debate about the rise of the early state. As early as in 1970, he published a landmark paper in the authoritative journal *Science* on the circumscription theory about the emergence of the (early) state. This theory focuses on the central role played by environmental constriction in giving rise to population pressure, bringing about warfare, which, in turn, is believed to have induced the rise of early states, at least in some areas. In this article, he seeks to amplify and strengthen his theory by drawing attention to auxiliary factors such as resource concentration and social circumscription. The weakness of his approach in this article, however, is that he aims principally at verifying his original theory by referring to evidence that supports his views, but according to the legendary Popper (1963) theories can only be corroborated by means of falsification of contrasting evidence and approaches. Indeed, Carneiro could have engaged more with his counterparts and critics, including Henri Claessen and Jan Vansina, who have both drawn attention to the role of ideology in the constitution of early state societies, which in their view could not have sustained the allegedly repressive regimes, sometimes over a period of several centuries, without a reciprocal and, therefore, more positive relationship with their rulers. The Arab Spring is the most recent testimony of that hypothesis, which has gained wider acceptance over the past few decades, for example, in the debate on nationalism (see below). Indeed, the terms of the debate about the rise of the early states have changed since Carneiro published his paper in 1970, and it is somewhat disappointing that his views have not moved along.

Over the past few decades, a revolutionary shift in paradigms has taken place in social sciences, which Ortner (1984) characterized as a grand transformation from a focus on structure to a focus

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on practice and agency. It could also be argued that a constructivist approach to social reality can no longer be disregarded completely in favour of a so-called scientific approach. As a result of this long-term change, at present a wide consensus exists about the assumption that society is a system, which can be powerfully constraining, yet this system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction (*Ibid.* 159). This view has also been the point of departure in the recent debate about nationalism that was revitalized with an innovative approach of national identity that emphasizes the cultural and political construction of nationalism. This notion of nationalism was developed in response to the more modernist and objectivist approach to nationalism by, amongst others, Ernest Gellner (1983), who argued that nationalism evolves naturally in the transition from agricultural to industrial society, in which the changing nature of production demanded more homogeneity than had existed in the past. Benedict Anderson (1983), in contrast, focused on the subjective imagination of the nation as a community, which in his view was made possible by, on the one hand, the decline of religion and its conception of cyclical time, and, on the other hand, by a growing awareness of human diversity with the rise of exploration, the development of capitalism, the new technology of print and, concurrently, the emergence of a linear conception of time. Although Anderson's explanation of nationalism has been criticized on empirical grounds, his focus on the subjectivist dimension of nationalism as a cultural and political construction is frequently cited, partly also since only this view explains the passions that nationalism may generate (see also Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 1991).

In a certain sense, the distinction between an objectivist and a more constructivist approach to nationalism parallels the distinction between what Carneiro labels a coercive and a voluntaristic approach in theories of state formation. My point in this context is that Carneiro repeatedly refers to the 'overwhelming body of empirical evidence' to substantiate his assertion that warfare fuels political evolution, which is embedded in his coercive approach of the rise of states, but he does so without addressing the question how violence alone can sustain a state. Methodologically this strategy is not only transparent to the extent that he neglects to elaborate in any detail on the 'evidence', but, more importantly, he does not take into account that in recent years a social anthropological perspective has been integrated into the archaeology of warfare in

order to explain the cultural dimension of coercion as well. After all, war is always a social practice that is based on a cultural logic and therefore it cannot merely be explained with reference to biology, genetics or evolution (Otto *et al.* 2006). Warfare is not simply a natural fact in prehistoric societies, but it was simultaneously 'nurtured' by men and women, who were looking after the men at times of battle... For these reasons, too, it is increasingly difficult to maintain that war was the only factor in the formation of states, since logically it must have been complemented by other, ideological factors that explain and justify violence and hierarchy, as Claessen and Vansina, and many others for that matter, have argued so well.

Taking ideology into account in theories of the emergence of states also implies that heed needs to be given to recent debates in which the old-fashioned, narrow and negative concept of ideology, with its exclusive focus on the legitimization and reproduction of socio-political organization, has been broadened with attention to the positive and constructive role that ideology may play in long-term transformations (Larrain 1979; Thompson 1984; Eagleton 1991). Against the background of these debates, ideology must no longer be considered as a passive reflection of socio-political relations. As a theoretical concept, ideology has been extended to do justice to its constructive contribution to social and political changes that may take place over the years. Thus, natural factors, population growth, economic decline, or even changing political relations are all insufficient to explain the development of state organizations as long as no account is given of the role of ideological values and imaginary dimensions of social life in providing some kind of trans-dimensional stability to communities that are encompassed by states, but which can make or break states as well (Claessen and Oosten 1996).

In sum, Carneiro made an excellent contribution to the debate on the emergence of states several decades ago, but the present article is a missed opportunity in the sense that it could have engaged more with recent innovations in social sciences, which make it increasingly necessary to shop across the spectrum of theoretical paradigms. Indeed, Carneiro could have been more convincing by not only looking for supportive evidence for his scientific approach in favour of the role of coercion and warfare in the emergence of states, but also by taking into account aspects of a constructivist

approach in the social sciences and by paying attention to the positive role of ideological values in the development, growth and preservation of states over time.

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