

Alternative Polities

RODERICK J. McINTOSH

Abstract

The prehistoric landscape has exploded with examples, just recently recognized, of alternative polities—heterogeneous communities of interaction, of variable territorial and demographic extent, in which the constituent individuals participate in unifying networks of economic or political obligations or share commonalities of beliefs. Archaeologists are no longer constrained to look for the emergence of complex society in a framework of sequential, evolutionary stages the essential elements of which were defined ethnographically (neo-evolutionism). We can now begin to appreciate the enormous variability in the courses taken, and in the circumstances leading to more and more people living together and interacting in ever more complex ways.

INTRODUCTION

Boasting an explosion of new forms in completely unanticipated expressions of core structure and accoutrements, an explosion oddly similar to the ecological dynamics of new niche species exploitation, the global archaeology of emerging complex society has enjoyed a burst of research on territorial entities of variable, but often considerable extent, unifying often large populations socially, politically, economically, or ideologically. The new research is open to mechanisms of authority or power that defy older definitions of chiefdoms or states. The new research explicitly rejects the basic premises of neo-evolutionism—the presumption that all societies becoming more complex must have followed a predetermined set of stages (band to tribe to chiefdom to state, in its simplest iteration) better known from the ethnographic record. For decades, neo-evolutionism structured archaeologists' discussion of the origins and definitions of chiefdoms and states. For decades, neo-evolutionism justified the projection into the archaeological record of ethnographic analogies to suggest what aspects of social life, such as religion or social differentiation or power relations, may have existed but did not leave direct identifiable traces for archaeologists to find. The effect was to limit the types and the varieties of complex societies that archaeologist studied, and even limited prehistorians' ability to think

about the circumstances leading to more and more people living together and interacting in ever more complex ways.

Alternative polities, then, can be defined (loosely) as heterogeneous human communities of interaction, with territorial extent unspecified (tens of square kilometers to hundreds of thousands of square kilometers, and populations in the low thousands to millions) in which the constituent individuals share (or differentially participate in) networks of economies, beliefs, kinship, or political obligations quite different than the coercive, top-down power relations that were once thought to be unavoidable as societies became larger in size and individuals interacted more and more often with others not intimately related by kinship.

Freed of these constraints, the literature of the past 15–20 years groans with examples from the past of all continents of large territorial entities with populations, perhaps diverse in other aspects such as occupation or ethnicity, held together by means other than the top-down, hierarchical and despotic decision-making mechanisms that were once thought universally responsible for the emergence and efficient functioning of the early, “primitive” or archaic state (with nascent expression in preceding chiefdoms). The cross-cultural approach to research on these dizzyingly diverse alternative polities is alive and well. Yet, as diverse as alternative polities can be, it is not enough to say that local conditions created uniquely local histories and expressions. Archaeologists search for broad parallelisms of types and developmental trajectories. This search complements other emerging trends in global archaeology, such as the exploration of themes such as social fields and symbolic reservoirs, and has even encouraged archaeologists to dust off that hoary, imperfect, but persistent concept—civilization.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

While the search for the origins of vertically or horizontally stratified societies (what we now call complex societies) has been much in fashion in prehistoric archaeology for decades, that search was strangely limited to finding data to support or deny the assertion that such and such a society did or did not conform to an ideal type—chiefdom or state—at various stages of their developmental history. Archaeologists imported and elaborated upon an overlapping set of neo-evolutionary schemes from the 1950s and 1960s, esp. those of Steward, Fried, Service, with an important “materialist” variation by White, all of which purported to present a temporal sequence of types, each with, to varying degrees, their own internal logic of progression. Each had been abandoned by sociocultural anthropologists by the early 1970s. All were stadial (bound to a predetermined series of stages) in structure. That is, all state societies had passed through an obligatory

developmental series of stages, of types broadly universal and (with White as perhaps the outlier) with political control and progressive domination of decision making over increasingly broad aspects of everyone's lives as the causative dynamic. (For example, in the "band" stage (ethnographically, the Inuit) all are of equal decision-making potential, whereas in the "chiefdom" stage (ethnographically, the Iroquois) most deferred to the persuasion of ranked chiefs in certain decision-making domains, whereas in a classic despotic state (ethnohistorically, Shang China) the "persuasive powers of the king were backed up by conspicuous use of lethal force.) When adapting these neo-evolutionary schemes, archaeologists might debate the inevitability of the climb up the ladder of stages once complexity had reached a certain degree, or the (toggle-switch) degree to which a particular society had or had not attained the imprimatur of a particular stadial category, increasingly finely grained in definition, but still universal (such as "archaic state"—"[state-level society] that arose early in the history of their particular world region and were characterized by class-endogamous social strata, with royal families, major and minor nobles, and commoners ... first-, second-, or third-generation states in their regions" [after Feinman and Marcus, pp. 3–4]).

The seduction was undeniable. Find an ancient society with one or two "signature" traits that could be proxied in the material remains (e.g., total despotic control over the masses proxied by multiple human sacrifices accompanying "royal" burials) and one could legitimately extrapolate other societal traits (e.g., equally asymmetrical economic control) from a master list of traits of that type, or social stage, derived from a remarkably small number of ethnographic cases. In the same way that a "dumbing down" of the true diversity of the ethnographic record was the fatal flaw of neo-evolutionism within sociocultural anthropology, the limitations of cross-cultural analogy constrained by (questionable) ethnographic analogies meant that archaeologists became increasingly frustrated with the artificial constraints imposed upon their explorations of the world archaeological record. It was no brilliant stroke of insight to social-cultural anthropologists that the very fact that the ethnographic record for much of the world was restrained in variability by the fact of being a product of decades, if not centuries, of contact with expansive, aggressive European nation-states. The representatives of those nation-states, such as missionaries, merchants, miners, and colonial administrators, had a vested interest in making the cultural progression of other peoples seem flawed or doomed to stasis. In addition, of course, the socially embedded biases of the professional ethnographers and nonprofessional observers (those same colonial bureaucrats, missionaries, and "adventurers") further reduced the texture of the description of the lives of the "other" that were coming out of the field. This was particularly

so in the case of descriptions of any pre-imperial empires, states, or political entities that had been long since destroyed or co-opted as clear threats to the imposition of Colonial authority. Archaeologists were well aware of their social-cultural colleagues' ennui (not to mention their European prehistorian colleagues' disinterest in extreme typologizing, on the whole), it was just too convenient, just too "grand scheme" tempting to pretend that out of a "finite infinity" of social forms at the level of band and tribe, there had emerged an increasingly smaller set of options for organizing society once society emerged into that of chiefdom, and even more so at the level of the (premodern) state.

This last-mentioned presumption built into the edifice of classical neo-evolutionism, namely that of a decreasingly diversity of forms is found as one mounted the socioevolutionary ladder to statehood, was perhaps the first to be set aside (with distaste) by archaeologists. This has to do with the not-always-happy history of the use of the term *civilization*, at least amongst anglophone scholars. Used unambiguously as a near-synonym for the state by the early Cultural Evolutionists such as Tylor, evolutionary anthropologists of the early twentieth century and even some of the classic mid-century neo-evolutionists found it hard to shed tinges of judgmental progress and superiority of the terms use in popular culture (not to mention its suggestion of "high culture"). State level was so rarely achieved (witness archaeologists' obsession with their emergence) and, ironically, they were so dramatic in their collapse (another of archaeologists' obsessions), that they must be the products of a superior place and time, or peoples, or "tradition". Surely history was not so fickle to have bestowed those benefits on anyone, randomly and without a discernable logic. Ironically, the new usage of the term *civilization* that has accompanied the recognition of alternative polities is quite close to that known from a long tradition in French scholarship, in which the term *civilization* has connoted a more amorphous, areally extensive network of peoples who share a set of values and who see themselves as distinct from others.

CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the first research into ancient complex societies that did not fit the classic neo-evolutionist types happened in parts of the world proscribed for state-level research by the paradigm (esp. Africa and Southeast Asia, or "peripheral" provinces of China or the elsewhere in the peripheral Far East), or of a time thought far too early (in the case of the Andes or lowland Mesoamerica), or amongst a peoples "just not ready" (hunter-gatherers, for example). In other instances, however, once ignored sites in the midst of a classically conceived high state dominated landscape

showed disturbing anomalies of organization, or of lack of expected elements, once investigated for the first time or using methodologies untried before. In some cases, older but unexamined expectations based on environmental, or demographic, or even (shamefully) racial presumptions inhibited even the most exploratory research. As an example of the last, current research on the Amazonian side of the Andes, and very early Formative horizon sites in most resource-poor precincts of the Mayan lowlands show a level of complexity clearly critical for any understanding of how and why the later classic expressions of those “civilizations” made manifest. How many prehistoric mysteries of remain out there, hidden and awaiting the spade?

The take-away message is that the “anomalies” can be anywhere! Let us take just a sampling of work from the 1970s through 1990s that had a liberating effect—conceptually speaking—on disparate areas. Central Highland Peru, and later cultures of the northern Peruvian coast, had the conceptual anomaly of Chavin (highland Andes, c. 900–200 BCE) builders of massive monumental religious platform complexes (huacas), without definitive evidence of a ruling class, or of a despotic ideology to manage the masses of workers that must have been somehow organized. We now posit that an areally widespread religious ideology could have propelled large numbers of people to assemble seasonally to do otherworldly service in labor at these sites. Similarly, when pre-Ankor temple complexes were uncovered beneath Ankor Wat and other rather late Southeast Asian sites complexes, the reigning thesis of stimulation of simple local peoples to adopt a politically elaborate and religiously richly textured life by an intrusive “hinduizing” ideology from south-central Asia was called into question. In West Africa, a parallel presumption of Arab traders stimulating cities and long-distance commerce had to be jettisoned when research (first at Jenne-jeno in Mali) on the terra incognita interior floodplain of the Niger River revealed hundreds, if not thousands, of artificial mounds that once were cities (tells), as large as those of Mesopotamia, occupied a thousand or more years too early, and showing no evidence even in their lowest levels of contact with Punic, Greek or Roman North Africa, nor with Egypt. There had always been a minority (more prehistorically inclined, perhaps) of Egyptologists who argued that late pre-Dynastic Upper Egyptian sites of Hierakonpolis and Naqada were not just overgrown villages, but were a part of an dynamic network along the river and including lower Nubia (Qustul) of competing “proto-states” (to fall back on a highly inadequate label). Even in the heartland of civilization, within the sphere of influence of Old Babylonian period Larsa is the curious site of Mashkan-shapir, where society appears to have been organized by residential quarters, perhaps reflecting occupational group identity, rather than by a temple-reinforced elite. As we

approached the millennium, there were simply too many of these counter examples appearing and the neo-evolutionist paradigm collapsed.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Norman Yoffee in his influential *Myths of the Archaic State* (p. 41) describes the dawning of alternative polities:

“... in the 1960s and for the next decades, archaeologists were obsessed with identifying states and developing methods for the purpose. In the 1990s, archaeologists, having rejected the neo-evolutionary project, asked not what states were but what they did. In the new millennium, archaeologists now rather study what states did *not* do. That is, what were the limits of power in early states? How did people construct their lives in the earliest states?”

Yoffee provides a brilliant exposition of the grand strategy for future research on the phenomenon of Alternate Polities. So recent is our liberation from the neo-evolutionist imperium that archaeologists are only beginning to converse with each other, across continents, about just how to recognize the various actors (corporate or individual) that make up the polity, how to understand the terms of their negotiations amongst themselves, and how to build a picture of integrative mechanisms that are not necessarily coercive unifying some but not necessarily all aspects of material culture production, economy, politics and the symbols that crystallize collective social action, over the newly expanded areas that characterize most alternative polities.

Fragmentary as the archaeological record may be, in some cases the complementary archival or ethnohistorical sources can help this herculean task of sorting out the role of multiple actors. We look at Mesopotamian prehistory very differently now, far from the monolithic landscape of *tell*-cities locked in perpetual internecine warfare, dominated by a despotic king and his support staff of temple and palace minions, obsessed with wresting territory and human chattel from neighboring kings. Now we understand from *epigraphy* (study of the ancient texts) complemented by excavation that cities sporting monumental palace and temple complexes also had a highly complex underlying *oikos* (extended household) economic substrata, with components interacting together in a complex history, of kin-based households (sometimes with a specific craft definition), temple and palace estates, and larger secular estates (and the complication of season visitations by large numbers of “tribal” pastoral affiliates). The decipherment of the Mayan glyphic code has massively introduced greater depth to our understanding of the workings of agency (craftsman, commoner, as well as elite) to the dizzying alliance history of the lowland and highland Maya. Going forward, we anticipate great

breakthroughs in the use of material culture proxies for the different societal components and their negotiating positions as we investigate polities without a written record.

An interesting example of this can be made in the cross-culture comparison of emergent urban polities, as far removed as West Africa (Middle Niger), and China (Shandong), and middle and late Uruk period Mesopotamia, where vast fields of satellite settlements orbit around a slightly larger focus site (or about a central component possibly with greater internal differentiation), each satellite suggesting it is the location for specialist craft production, and the residence of a different corporate group (kin, ideological, craft?). In these and many other instances only now being documented, clearly there is some highly cohesive integrating mechanism other than despotic control “from the top down”. It is this willingness of archaeologists to think globally about mechanisms of negotiation, integration and, for that matter, dissipation that suggests there are several broad categories of alternate polities. One must certainly acknowledge that there are examples (or segments during a multiphase history of some areas) where the highly Hierarchical, “top-down” and coercive model of our earlier way of thinking about the primitive state holds sway. There are others, such as the Mesopotamian *oikos* organization, where it is equally valid to talk about a Nested organization, in which multiple domains of authority (some highly hierarchical) are at work simultaneously. In other cases altogether, the lack of vertical control mechanisms allow archaeologists to talk about different flavors of Heterarchy—the horizontal distribution of authority amongst segmented, co-existing, competing and cooperating entities. As yet we do not really know who claimed as their home the segmented components of the Shandong clustered cities, such as Liangchengzhen or Dantu, but they, like the Middle Niger clustered cities of Jenne-jeno and Tombouze, lack all the (expected) manifestation of hierarchical control. The vast areal distribution of traded and exchanged goods (and presumably services) in these regions, and of sites that show homogeneity of material culture, is staggering.

Let us end with another broad category of alternative polity, one that is very “expedient” and has been very ephemeral to the archaeological eye. This is what has been called the *nomadic state*—pervasive in world prehistory and defined ethnohistorically by shifting, expedient alliances amongst the component parts, yet episodically holding sway over vast areas. Sometimes in the archaeological literature called *nomadic confederations*, states, or sometimes empires, these polities showed complex variations on strategies of spatial networking, distributed authority, and innovations in transport and exchange. Mobility means that evidence of residence is frustratingly sparse on the ground, yet new survey methodologies pioneered in Mongolia, Senegal, throughout the Sahara, and grassland western Asia demonstrates that such

evidence (especially of craft production) can indeed be found. In many cases, nomads build impressive landscapes of monuments (the stone circles and stele of Mongolia; the earthen and stone tumuli of the Senegalese grasslands). In some cases, “seasonal cities” with permanent buildings and defined cemeteries mark capitals of pastoral nomadic polities (e.g., Kerma in Nubia) in others, such as the historically attested Xiongnu “empire” so feared by its Chinese neighbors, a landscape of stone monuments is the sum of our evidence. Even hunter-gatherers can surprise—we wonder how far back in time we one day will be able to trace the ethnohistorically known, areally extensive “trade confederations” of the Chumash of California.

Lest this cross-cultural exercise become just a repeat of the classificatory (typological) excesses of the neo-evolutionists, two newly emergent themes in global prehistory should be linked with the examination of alternative polities. They provide frameworks for keeping our focus on how the components (individuals, kin groups, corporate craft associations, etc.) framed their interactions. The first is Social Fields, defined as an examination of a region not in terms of the different cultures present, but in terms of groups in web-like interconnections in which styles, good and services, and technological and ideological knowledge are shared among, differentially incorporated and modified or innovated by the linked groups. The second interpretive framework is symbolic reservoir—that we can think of as the examination of the permeable membranes between different groups or communities or clusters of like-minded peoples that allow some symbols, design and style patterns, ritual and occult practices, and behavioral clusters writ large to pass from one group to another, and others to be blocked. Key to the application of either the concept of the symbolic reservoir and the social field to archaeology is the idea that actors in the past were quite competent (thank you very much), to assimilate and creatively combine ideas, practices and beliefs from their own deep-time tradition and from the repertoire of their neighbors and, thus, not only to negotiate situationally to their own advantage, but in the process to create expansive territorial entities of diverse, but often considerable extent, unifying often large populations socially, politically, economically, or ideologically. In addition, lastly, when thought of in these terms of how people think of themselves and how they negotiate the terms of their existence, then the move by some to redefine that once-compromised archaeological term, *civilization*, makes some sense. The term no longer implicitly signally a society that had reached some pinnacle of human achievement, characterized by high culture and defining traits such as writing and monumental architecture. Civilization in current usage rather implies an entity, an alternative polity if you will, as shared attributes (perhaps better, as differentially participated in attributes) that characterize the members of that

sociopolitical entity and manifest in similarities in material culture, ideology or religion and ritual.

FURTHER READING

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RODERICK J. McINTOSH SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Roderick J. McIntosh, PhD, University of Cambridge. Professor of Anthropology at Yale University (New Haven, CT), Curator of Anthropology at the Peabody Museum, New Haven, and Honorary Distinguished Professor of Archaeology at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) (Department of Anthropology and Archaeology).

Major interests are in African and Old-World comparative prehistory, intellectual history of prehistoric archaeology, ethnicity and specialization and the origin of authority in complex society, urbanism, geomorphology and palaeoclimate, international art market, prehistoric symbols, and ideology. McIntosh was involved in the birthing of the first bilateral accord banning the import of antiquities into a “market” nation (USA) from a “source” nation (Mali). For the past 34 years, he has looked comparatively at the urban landscapes of the great Niger and Senegal floodplains, including codirectorship of investigations at Jenne-jeno, sub-Saharan Africa’s oldest city. His recent or in-press books and site reports are on the antiquities trafficking (*Plundering Africa’s Past*, edited with Peter Schmidt), syntheses of Middle Niger and West African prehistory (*Peoples of the Middle Niger: Island of Gold* and *Prehistoric Investigations at Jenne, Mali* and most recently (2005) *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape*), archaeological investigations along the middle reaches of the Senegal River (*The Search for Takrur*:

Archaeological Excavations and Reconnaissance Along the Middle Senegal), and human response to global climate change (*The Way the Wind Blows: Climate, History and Human Action* and *Climates of the Mande* and *Geomorphology and Human Palaeoecology of the Méma, Mali* and (in preparation) a special issue of *The African Archaeological Review*, entitled *African Palaeoclimates and Human Response*). He is currently coauthoring the update of Nehemia Levtzion's classic, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, which will appear as *Emerging Politics of the Western Sudan: Ancient Ghana and Mali*.

Future fieldwork will concern the paleoclimate, floodplain dynamics, and rise and fall of cities in the now "dead" delta of the Niger, the Méma of Mali. Plans to collect samples for archaeomagnetism dating from Peru, South Africa, and (continuing) from Senegal and Mali are also made. These samples are for his new archaeomagnetism dating laboratory, with the capacity for high resolution dates from archaeological contexts and to provide magnetic intensity data to field models of the changing intensity of the Earth's magnetic field.

McIntosh has been a Guggenheim Fellow, twice a Fulbright Senior Fellow (Senegal and Mali), and has held a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (Stanford).

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