Chiefs: A Perspective from Prehistory on Modern Failing States

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There was a time before strong leaders, social inequality, and class systems. Coming of age in the 1960s, my motivation was to understand and hopefully help alter the world of unjust and unstable societies. This personal essay summarizes my career as an archaeologist studying the emergence of complex political systems.¹

My training was at Harvard (BA, 1969) and Michigan (PhD, 1973), where I was strongly influenced by a cadre of top anthropologists, many of whom were members of the American Academy, including Kent Flannery, Marshall Sahlins, Eric Wolf, and Gordon Willey. From these scholars, I learned the essential linkage between strong theory and a rich empirical record. My work has involved field archaeology in Hawai‘i, Peru, Argentina, Denmark, and Hungary, and I am often asked what my assorted research regions have in common. My response is that they present three independent historical trajectories (Polynesia, Andes, and Europe) where larger-scale political institutions developed. This historical independence allows me to concentrate on general evolutionary processes of societal change.

My focus has been on the emergence of strong leaders (chiefs), who created institutions of support and control (chiefdoms). Prior to my research, the established belief was that leaders emerged in societies that had key problems, such as internal conflicts of interest, which required leaders to act for the general good. I decided instead to focus on the political economy, which allowed chiefs to mobilize goods to finance their power strategies and centralize control. These are topics included in social evolution, which is sometimes wrongly equated with biological evolution. In social evolution, societies are understood as open and interrelated social fields that change systemically. Social evolution has much in common with ecosystem change—involving energy flows, predation, mutual dependency, and anthropogenic interventions.

A chief’s sovereignty is always problematic, and is based on three sources of elemental power: the economy, warrior might, and ideology.² Economic power derives from the ability to give or deny necessary and desired goods, which include food, housing, and prestige goods and wealth. Goods mobilized from the political economy support diverse actions of chiefs, such as rewarding supporters, constructing new agricultural facilities, maintaining a warrior cadre, and provisioning religious ceremonies. Warrior power is based on an ability to coerce by force or threat. Ideological power is based on the ability to present followers with religiously sanctioned narratives for compliance and support. To understand chiefdoms and archaic states is to understand the contested ways that the elemental powers were intertwined to centralize regional polities that eventually became formalized as governing institutions.

Emphasis on one source of power versus another creates much of the differences between complex societies in terms of the mechanism of control. In all cases, however, I emphasize the political economy, because its resources finance specialists in the fields of power, including managers, craftpeople, warriors, and priests. Chiefs provided some services to their populations, but the extent of central power, its autocratic character, and the resulting nature of social inequality depended on the particular articulation with the political economy and its use in different spheres of control.³

Three independent cases of social evolution of chiefdoms, which I have studied, illustrate this diversity in power strategies. First, for the Hawaiian case, I showed that the existing functional explanations of emergent chiefs were wrong. The Hawaiian irrigation systems, thought by Wittfogel to require central management, were in fact small scale, organized at the village level, and requiring only cooperation among neighbors. Regional economic specialization, thought by Service to require management, was almost non-existent. The complex chiefdoms and subsequent archaic states of pre-contact Hawai‘i emerged rather by controlling ownership of an engineered landscape in a feudal-like political economy with a highly stratified social system of divine chiefs and obligated farmers.⁴ Second, in highland Andes, I studied the formation of chiefdoms and their conquest by the Inca Empire. Here, the bottleneck was also ownership of improved land, but warfare played a different role. Community chiefs, who held power in times of war, organized defense of hillfort communities and associated lands. The society had little economic inequality, and the power of chiefs was limited. The conquest by the Inca state created the central power and inequality seen in the Hawaiian case. Third, in the Bronze Age of southern Scandinavia, I described how a class of warriors emerged to control exported special products, including animal products, amber, and probably furs and slaves. Their goal was to obtain metals used to fabricate status objects of dress and weapons. While these Nordic chiefdoms were quite unstable and small scale, their social inequality was quite high as evidenced in burial riches and impressive chiefly halls. My research illustrates how the spe-
pecific nature of the political economy resulted in the emergence of different types of chiefs with contrasting characteristics of power, stability, and instituted inequality. The basic process was, however, the same – controlling bottlenecks in the economy to mobilize surplus to finance power strategies.

Our knowledge of pre-state societies helps us to understand how all states, including modern ones, operate. As states evolve, chiefs do not disappear; rather they adapt creatively to state governance, retaining many of their previous dynamics. Derluguian and I looked at how chief-like actors have retained substantial powers – both in collaboration with and in opposition to modern states. The myth of the modern state rests on the exclusivity of territorial control, a monopoly of force, and effective judiciaries and bureaucracies. Using these measures, all states are in some sense failing. The American Revolution, for example, created a weak state through its rebellion against the British monarchy. Our ideology stresses principles encapsulated in the freedom to bear arms, free markets, and religious freedom, as means to counter the power of central government. Over the last two hundred years, the laws of the land have developed fitfully to retain these freedoms at the same time that they restrain the chief-like powers of political machines, oligarchs, and drug cartels.

An analysis of the insurgent Taliban suggests that, acting much as ancient chiefs, their success depends on an ability to recognize and seize pop-up revenue prospects to finance their grab for power. Each step in the opium trade in Afghanistan, for example, created revenue opportunities for the Taliban. At the farm: “Taliban commanders charge poppy farmers a 10 percent tax, and Taliban fighters can make extra money harvesting poppy from fields.” At the lab: “The Taliban get taxes from traders who collect opium paste from farmers and take it to labs, where it is turned into heroin. The Taliban are also paid to protect the labs.” On the road: “Truckers pay the Taliban a transit tariff on opium paste or heroin as it is smuggled out of the country.” At the top: “Drug trafficking organizations make large regular payments to the Quetta Shura, the Taliban governing body.” The Western coalition’s desire to suppress drug traffic has had the unintended consequence of creating opportunities for Taliban chiefs to offer up their services. Any time new opportunities crop up, these chiefs quickly step in to mobilize the resources to support their insurgency.

My conclusion is that the archaeologist’s long-term perspective on political systems provides a clear view of the full spectrum of chieftoms and states and can help fashion the taming of chiefs for the general good of society. Chieftaincies reach up to the state to corrupt and tailor legal structures to enforce their advantages, but the state also reaches down to use its imbedded chieftains to outsource state responsibility to meet the needs and desires of its populace. The relationships of Mafia dons, drug lords, oligarchs, and local political figures to the state continually morph through negotiated power derived from the economic and political landscape. The goal of the chieftain is to operate with minimum oversight. The goal of the state is to tame and sometimes co-opt the aggressive and creative initiative of the chiefs, whose ability to quickly maneuver around the restrained actions of state bureaucracies is legendary. The pathways toward effective modern states recognize the inherent power of sub-state actors to operate in their own interests and the necessity of a strong rule of law to tame them for the broader interests of society.

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ENDNOTES


