

# INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the earliest cities, states, and civilizations is an enormous topic and writing about it is made no easier by my discomfort with the term “evolution” itself. Although I criticize “neo-evolutionary” theory – that is, the attempt to create categories of human progress, which in anthropology stems from the nineteenth-century work of Edward Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan and which was revived in the mid-twentieth century by Leslie White and Julian Steward and others – I do not reject the term evolution or social evolution.

Economically stratified and socially differentiated societies developed all over the world from societies that were little stratified and relatively undifferentiated; large and densely populated cities developed from small habitation sites and villages; social classes developed from societies that were structured by kin-relations which functioned as frameworks for production, and so forth. These changes must be explained, and archaeologists have been doing the job with remarkable success for more than a century, with the pace of research quickening in the last decades. As I discuss throughout this book, it doesn’t much matter what we call things, as long as we explain clearly what we mean, and as long as our categories further research, rather than force data into analytical blocks that are self-fulfilling prophecies.

This book is about the earliest states, particularly the constellations of power in them, and also about their evolution, that is, where varieties of power came from. I also discuss certain other features of the evolution of the earliest states, for example their “collapses,” as well as what happens after collapse. Archaeologists traditionally group these and related phenomena and try to explain them by building what they call social evolutionary theory. I do not intend to break from this tradition.

As Thomas Carlyle said of the lady who told him that she accepted the universe, “By God, she’d better.”

The central myth of this book is not that there was no social evolution (but see further in Chapter 1), but the claim that the earliest states were basically the same sort of thing: large territorial systems ruled by totalitarian despots who controlled the flow of goods, services, and information and imposed true law and order on their subjects. If myth can be defined (in at least one respect) as “a thing spoken of as though existing,” we find that much of what has been said of the earliest states, both in the professorial literature as well as in popular writings, is not only factually wrong but also is implausible in the logic of social evolutionary theory.

Indeed, much of the literature on the evolution of ancient states focuses nearly exclusively on political systems and has tended to reduce the earliest states to a series of myths about godly and heroic (male) leaders who planned and built prodigious monuments and cities, conquering their neighbors and making them powerless subjects of the ruling elites. Little has been written about the roles of slaves and soldiers, priests and priestesses, peasants and prostitutes, merchants and craftsmen, who are characteristic actors in the earliest states. No one should conclude, however, from my discussions of the limitations on the power of rulers, and because I am interested in the “bottom-up” aspects of power, that I regard the nature of rule in the earliest states as anything other than repressive and exploitative.

There are many things I do not even hope to cover in this book. I do little more than glance at biological or astrophysical conceptions of evolution. These evolutions may or may not provide interesting and useful ideas for the study of social change, but the mechanisms and scales of biological change or of stellar ontogeny (themselves different kinds of evolution) are different from those pertinent to the study of change in human social organizations. I do not intend this book as a rebuttal to all the ideas of social evolutionary change with which I happen to disagree, and I have tried not to clutter the book with copious references to theories and data. Some readers may still find the number of citations daunting and the narrative thereby occluded.

Although I am a Mesopotamianist and provide my lengthiest examples from Mesopotamia, a large part of my project is to illustrate the varieties of social systems and modes of power that existed in many of the earliest states. If “social evolution,” in the end, seems to some onlookers as “world history,” I shall shed no tear.

This book deals with the theories that have been used to understand the evolution of the earliest states and also why such theories have been invented and in which academic environments (in Chapters 1 and 2). I describe the variety of trajectories towards ancient cities and states (in Chapter 3) and the “evolution of simplicity” in them (in Chapter 4). I consider certain roles of Mesopotamian women, as elites and

as prostitutes (in Chapter 5), as examples of how people constructed their social lives within cultural circumstances, and I discuss the “collapse” of the earliest states and civilizations (in Chapter 6) as studies in “social memory” and “identity.” I meditate on “constraints on growth” (in Chapter 7) – that is, why states did not appear in some areas of the world, especially in the American Southwest – and on the use and abuse of analogy and the comparative method by archaeologists (in Chapter 8). I conclude with a sketch of the evolution of Mesopotamian states and civilization (in Chapter 9), borrowing the language and some of the reasoning of “complex adaptive systems” theorists.

By means of case-studies that survey the world-landscape of emerging states, I depict an evolutionary process in which social roles were transformed into relations of power and domination. Stratified and differentiated social groups were recombined under new kinds of central leadership, and new ideologies were created that insisted that such leadership was not only possible, but the only possibility. I center social evolutionary theory in the concerns of how people came to understand their lives in the earliest cities and states, how the new ideology of states was instituted in everyday life, and how leaders of previously autonomous social groups in states negotiated with rulers and/or contested their domination.

Some may say that such a project can have no successful conclusion, for its scale is too large. They may be right. I am buoyed, I think, only by a comment attributed to John Kenneth Galbraith: “The surest means for attaining immortality is to commit an act of spectacular failure.”

This is not a book of reprinted essays, although I have drawn from journal articles and book chapters that I have written. Some of these, for example on specific Mesopotamian institutions, appeared in small-circulation journals, *Festschriften*, and other out-of-the-way publications that will not be familiar to archaeologists and historians. I have updated and altered already published material considerably, added new data and discussions, and connected the chapters so as to form a narrative. Although I express a variety of critiques of existing theory and advance new perspectives on theory, I adhere throughout to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s dictum, “A book should consist of examples.” No one can write a book with the scope of this one, however, without the help of many friends, whom I thank individually in the acknowledgments at the end of this book. I want to express my gratitude for their expertise and collegiality collectively also at its beginning.

## 1

THE EVOLUTION OF  
A FACTOID

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Definierbar ist nur Das, was keine Geschichte hat. (You can only define things that have no history.)

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

There is an irony in beginning a book on the “evolution of the earliest states and civilizations” with an apology for using the term “evolution.” Nevertheless, it is far from unusual for archaeologists (e.g. Hegmon 2003) to eschew the term in favor of discussing “social change,” “social development,” or the like. Critics have argued that social evolution presents a theory of how history is a continuation of biological evolution, in which societies advance from lower to higher forms. Such “neo-evolutionary” theory has been used to justify racism, the exploitation of colonized peoples, and Occidental contempt towards other cultures (Godelier 1986:3). Social evolution has, not entirely unfairly, been characterized as an illusion of history, as a Hegelian prophecy of a rational process that culminated in the modern bourgeois state, capitalist economies, and technological advance. Such criticisms are by no means new, and exuberant schools of disenchantment that are today common in anthropology and other faculties disdain the idea of social evolution in all its forms. Little wonder that many archaeologists are uncomfortable with the term.

Although I criticize neo-evolutionary theory as it has been used in archaeology and anthropology, that is, the attempt to create categories of human progress and to fit prehistoric and modern “traditional” societies into them (which stems from

the nineteenth-century founders Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Tylor<sup>1</sup> and was represented in the mid-twentieth century by Leslie White and Julian Steward and others), I find “evolution” an appropriate term for investigating the kinds of social change depicted in this book. Class-stratified societies with many different social orientations and occupations and with internally specialized political systems developed from societies in which kin-relations functioned to allocate labor and access to resources; large and densely populated urban systems emerged over time from small habitation sites and villages; ideologies that espoused egalitarian principles<sup>2</sup> gave way to belief systems in which the accumulation of wealth and high status was regarded as normal and natural, as were economic subordination and slavery. These changes occurred across the globe, mostly independently and about the same time (especially if time is calculated in each region from the onset of the first agricultural communities). Archaeologists have the resources to explain these and many other kinds of change, and the term evolution is the only one I know that can enfold the various theories needed for the job.

#### AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL EVOLUTIONARY MYTHOLOGY

I contest a variety of myths of the evolution and nature of the earliest states, or “archaic states,” as some have curiously called them.<sup>3</sup> These include: (1) the earliest states were basically all the same kind of thing (whereas bands, tribes, and chiefdoms all varied within their types considerably); (2) ancient states were totalitarian regimes, ruled by despots who monopolized the flow of goods, services, and information and imposed “true” law and order on their powerless citizens; (3) the earliest states enclosed large regions and were territorially integrated; (4) typologies should and can be devised in order to measure societies in a ladder of progressiveness; (5) prehistoric representatives of these social types can be correlated, by analogy, with modern societies reported by ethnographers; and (6) structural changes in political and economic

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the history of social evolution, which, depending on the commentator, stretches hundreds or thousands of years before Tylor and Morgan, see Patterson (2003), M. Harris (1968), Skinner (1978), Lovejoy and Boas (1965), and Meek (1976).

<sup>2</sup> I do not imply “egalitarianism” is a basic human social form, and much egalitarianism in the ethnographic record might itself be an evolved form of organization from earlier, different social organizations.

<sup>3</sup> The term “archaic states” was used by Talcott Parsons (Sanderson 1990:110) and others (also see Trigger 2003). The working title of the recent book now called *Archaic States* (Feinman and Marcus 1998) was *The Archaic State*.

systems were the engines for, and are hence necessary and sufficient conditions that explain, the evolution of the earliest states.

In this book I question the image of the earliest states as totalities (as in such phrases as “Teotihuacan did this or that”) within which political competition and social conflict were rare, and I critique “types” of societies as essentially content-free, abstract models that say little about how people lived or understood their lives. I want to contribute to the rehabilitation of social evolutionary theory as a means for investigating how the emergence of new and differentiated social roles and new relations of power in early agricultural societies occurred and how differentiated groups were recombined by means of the development of new ideologies of order and hierarchy. These ideologies are at the core of what we call ancient states. I begin by reviewing how the theory of neo-evolutionism, the “factoid” that I refer to in the title of this chapter, took hold of archaeologists’ imaginations in the period roughly 1960–90 and in what academic circumstances.

#### TYPES, RULES, AND FACTOIDS

It has taken archaeologists many decades to reject the neo-evolutionist proposition that modern ethnographic examples represent prehistoric stages in the development of ancient states.<sup>4</sup> Defining “types” of societies (e.g. bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states), establishing putative commonalities within a type, and postulating simple lines (or even a single line) of evolutionary development had led archaeologists to strip away most of what is interesting (such as belief systems) and important (such as the multifaceted struggle for power) in ancient societies and consigned those modern societies that are not states to the scrap-heap of history. I review why most archaeologists have now explicitly discarded, or just ignore, these “old rules of the game” of social evolutionary theory, even to the extent of excising the word “evolution” from their analysis of social change. This is not simply an exercise in the history of social thought, because the task of building the “new rules of the game” for understanding the evolution of ancient states depends on the self-conscious examination of the failures of neo-evolutionary theory.

The “rules of the game” – old and new – consist in two domains or sets of rules. First (but not necessarily chronologically prior) are the substantive rules of how archaeologists recover and analyze data, and how they build models that interpret, explain, and represent the past. Second are the academic rules governing why

<sup>4</sup> Not all archaeologists have rejected neo-evolutionist stages (see Billman 2003).

archaeologists take up certain problems and look for and often find particular kinds of data, and how they convince their colleagues of the plausibility and relevance of their interpretations. No one will be surprised to learn that the two sets of rules are inextricably interlinked. Of course, the substantive rules are themselves hardly theory-neutral, because the process of observing, analyzing, reporting, and drawing inferences from data cannot be kept separate from the reasons for which data are sought and the manner in which they are studied. No archaeologist doubts this, although there are many disputes, for example, about how recovered data are “resistant” to some interpretations and better fit others (Wylie 2002), and how one actually goes about deciding between rival claims to knowledge. I return to these substantive rules later.

I first consider the rules of academic behavior, namely the reasons archaeologists have been attracted to certain theories of the evolution of ancient states. These academic rules – the domain of the sociology of science – are those that guide academic success, since jobs, promotions, and status depend on learning the governing substantive rules, and how practitioners can convincingly amend, emend, or replace them with new rules. American academic archaeologists, who normally find employment in departments of anthropology, or were trained in these departments, have not unnaturally attempted to model prehistoric societies after one or another modern ethnographic or “traditional” society studied by their social anthropological colleagues. Social evolution was inevitably thought to proceed from one “type” of society to another. Archaeologists, who thus “found” ethnographic types in prehistory, could thereby claim to be genuine anthropologists. At least, this was the process invented in the 1950s and 1960s, when some social anthropologists (such as Leslie White and Julian Steward, Morton Fried and Elman Service) were defining and arguing about ethnological types of societies. It continued for another two decades in archaeological circles, although social anthropologists were progressively turning their interests from anything that might be called social evolutionary theory.<sup>5</sup> Why did archaeologists embrace neo-evolutionary theory, the theory of ethnographic types that were projected into the past and marched towards stardom, so wholeheartedly?

In the introduction to his photo-biography of Marilyn Monroe, Norman Mailer (1973) coined the term “factoid.” A factoid is a speculation or guess that has been repeated so often it is eventually taken for hard fact. Factoids have a particularly insidious quality – and one that is spectacularly unbiological – in that they tend

<sup>5</sup> Marshall Sahlins, whose views of 40 years ago I discuss below, has said, “I’m still an evolutionist, but I’ve evolved.”

to get stronger the longer they live. Unlike “facts,” factoids are difficult to evaluate because, although they often begin as well-intended hypotheses and tentative clarifications, they become received wisdom by dint of repetition by authorities. The history of neo-evolutionary theory in archaeology is the evolution of a factoid. Neo-evolutionism advocated a “new taxonomic innovation” that could “arbitrarily rip cultures out of context of time and history and place them, just as arbitrarily, in categories of lower and higher development” (Sahlins 1960:32). “Any representative of a given stage is inherently as good as any other, whether the representative be contemporaneous and ethnographic or *only archaeological*” (Sahlins 1960:33, my emphasis). Once the factoidal nature of neo-evolutionism has been exposed, we can see that its deployment by archaeologists resulted in circular reasoning about the nature of ancient societies and the process of social change.

#### NEO-EVOLUTIONISM EVOLVING<sup>6</sup>

Neo-evolutionary theory was revived, beginning in the 1940s, harkening back to its earliest proponents, the founders of the discipline of anthropology. Leslie White, the hero of the movement, in fact disclaimed the title of “neo-evolutionist” because “the theory of evolution set forth . . . does not differ one whit in principle from that expressed in Tylor’s *Anthropology* in 1881” (White 1959a:ix). White, in his first essay on the subject in 1943, in his last in 1960, and in several in-between, was fond of citing a remark of B. Laufer, exhumed from a 1918 review, which White considered exemplary of the low regard into which social evolutionary studies had fallen in the early twentieth century: “The theory of cultural evolution<sup>7</sup> [is] to my mind the most inane, sterile, and pernicious theory ever conceived in the history of science” (Laufer 1918:90). In 1943 White predicted that the “time will come . . . when the theory of evolution will again prevail in the science of culture” (1943:356) and nearly two decades later he was gratified to report that “antievolutionism has run its course . . . The concept of evolution has proved itself to be too fundamental and fruitful to be ignored” (1960:vii).

<sup>6</sup> This section is based on an earlier essay (Yoffee 1979). There aren’t many new discussions of neo-evolutionism. Jonathan Haas (2001) presents a slight review of the subject; Thomas Patterson (2003) considers the ideas of White, Steward, and others within the development of social theory in anthropology and archaeology. I include this updated discussion here as a prologue to new concerns of archaeologists with the evolution of power and ideology, which hardly played a role in the writings of the neo-evolutionists.

<sup>7</sup> I use the terms cultural evolution, social evolution, and sociocultural evolution – and also the terms cultural anthropology, social anthropology, and sociocultural anthropology – interchangeably.



If Tylor and Morgan and other nineteenth-century anthropologists were reacting against the supernatural in history (Kaplan and Manners 1972:39–40) and the creation theory of Judeo-Christian theology (White 1959a:1; Lesser 1952:135), White was reacting mainly against the errors of Boasian particularism. Boas and his group (those most frequently cited by White include Goldenweiser, Sapir, Lowie, Herskovits, Mead, and Benedict) were particularists and relativists, refusing to set up stages of development and asserting that any evaluation of cultures was chimerical and ethnocentric. Boasians and others ascribed social change to diffusion and borrowing, anti-evolutionary or non-evolutionary ideas, according to White (1959b:108).

Evolutionism in its most irreducible form was for White “a temporal sequence of forms” (1959a:vii), for “no stage of civilization comes into existence spontaneously, but grows or is developed out of the stage before it” (Tylor 1881:20, quoted by White 1959b:108). “Evolution is the name of a kind of relationship among things and events of the external world . . . [and] in the dynamic aspect, things and events related in this way constitute a process, an evolutionist process” (White 1959b:114). For archaeologists the relevance of studying process was not lost and the born-again archaeologists of the 1960s (mainly students at the University of Chicago of Lewis Binford, who had studied with White at the University of Michigan, and then students of the students of Binford) called themselves “processual archaeologists.”<sup>8</sup> Since archaeologists study the history of artifacts and the people who made them, they perform study change; it is thus no surprise that archaeologists of the time flocked under the banner of evolutionism.

For White the stream of evolution was the culture of humanity as a whole. There was no question of confusing individual culture histories, because the subject of the evolutionist sequence was all of human culture. Furthermore, the evolutionist process is irreversible and non-repetitive, and any appeal to a particular culture’s ups-and-downs was ruled out of court since White was only interested in the evolution of human culture worldwide. The scale White used in evaluating the progress of human culture, for this was his aim, was based on the amount of energy utilized by a culture. According to the second law of thermodynamics, the universe is breaking down structurally and moving to a more uniform distribution of energy. Culture develops, then, as the efficiency of capturing energy increases and as the amount of goods and services produced per unit of labor increases (White 1959a:47; 1943:336). This, according to White, is *the* law of cultural evolution (1943:338). Since energy

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Caldwell called them “new archaeologists” (Patterson 2003), a term that Alison Wylie (1993) has shown to have been employed about every two decades since the early years of the twentieth century.

capture depends on technological advance, “social evolution is a consequence of technological evolution” (1943:347).

Armed with the evolutionist concept of development in human culture on a world-wide scale and the progressive utilization of energy through technological advance, White was able to describe a basic evolutionist trajectory in the development of human civilization. In agreement with Maine (1861) and Morgan (1889), he depicted the “great divide” (Service 1975:1) in human cultural evolution as the change from societies based on kinship, personal relations, and status (*societas*) to those based on territory, property relations, and contract (*civitas*). In the first type, relations of property are functions of relations among humans; in the second, relations among humans are functions of relations among items of property (White 1959a:329). This transformation occurs when ties of kinship wane and territorial factors wax. Further subdivision of evolutionist stages was left to White’s students and colleagues.

A last element in this necessarily truncated appraisal of White’s contribution to the conception and use of social evolutionist theory is a recurring motif of real concern to White, never directly stated, but nevertheless implicit throughout. In 1947 White stated that “Boas and his disciples . . . for reasons we cannot go into here . . . were definitely opposed to the theory of classical evolution as a matter of principle” (1947:191). In 1960 White was more forthcoming, contending that since “the capitalist-democratic system had matured and established itself securely . . . evolution was no longer a popular concept . . . On the contrary, the dominant note was ‘maintain the status quo’” (1960:vi). White’s point demonstrably was that antievolutionism was opposed to social progress in the Third World and to “the communist revolution which is spreading throughout much of the world” (1960:vi) and which constituted the next stage in social evolution. This was the reason the theory was opposed by Boas and his disciples. Marvin Harris (1968:640, following Barnes 1960:xxvi) traced White’s conversion to “evolutionism” to his 1929 tour of the Soviet Union but dismissed his understanding of the subject, describing White by Engels’s pejorative term, “a mechanical materialist.” Maurice Godelier (1977:42) and Jonathan Friedman (1974) replied in kind, describing Harris’s “cultural materialism” as “vulgar materialism.” This point is relevant only insofar as it sheds light on White’s earnestness concerning the subject of evolutionism and on a possible agenda in his “objective evaluation of cultures.” These issues are not mentioned as an indictment, but rather as a justification for considering White’s ideas as largely formulated in the context of other anthropological schools and political currents of the day.

The second source for the revival of social evolutionary theory in anthropology was the work of Julian Steward (see especially Steward 1955:11–29; cf. Patterson 2003; Harris 1968:642–3). Steward regarded social evolution as “multilineal,” since