Comparative Frames for the Diachronic Analysis of Complex Societies: Next Steps

Gary M. Feinman, Field Museum of Natural History
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Comparative Frames for the Diachronic Analysis of Complex Societies

Next Steps

Gary M. Feinman

The top scientific discovery according to the journal Science in 2007 (Kennedy 2007) was the finding that the DNA of all humans is not alike. More specifically, the extent of person-to-person genomic diversity is much greater than was expected (Pennisi 2007). To place this breakthrough in context, it was less than ten years ago that the same publication proudly announced the unraveling of “The Human Genome” (Jasny and Kennedy 2001), although in fairness the future comparison of different human genomic sequences was anticipated. What geneticists initially conceived to be a species-wide genomic pattern encompassing relatively minimal elements of individual variation has even at this early date been shown to be more diverse than most scientists imagined.

Although these research findings in evolutionary biology have been played out at warp speed, perhaps this path of discovery and interpretation has a degree of analogical utility for those of us who study human societies over long temporal scales or deep history. More than a century ago, early social scientists recognized broad patterns of human societal diversity (e.g., Morgan 1877). Yet the first recognitions of such diversity were often mistakenly commingled with elements of human biology. More than a half century later, similar overarching schemes of human organization were resurrected and reframed as Marxist and neoevolutionary theoretical perspectives. But by this time (e.g., White 1959), these ideas were appropriately estranged from the simple biological explanations of prior eras. Nevertheless, the latter conceptual approaches, like those of an earlier era, stressed broad modes of societal diversity (such as Service’s [1971] categories of bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states) that were organized and differentiated by
distinct degrees of politico-economic complexity. As with the early genocidal work, the emphasis in these studies was understandably on the broad-brush modal patterns. Thus key works of this era featured titles such as The Evolution of Culture (White 1959), Primitive Social Organization (Service 1971), The Evolution of Political Society (Fried 1967), and The Evolution of the Prehistoric State (Haas 1982). The focus of this comparative work was on similarity, and much discussion centered on evaluating the relative merits of different prime movers that might uniformly account for the transition to more hierarchical modes of organization (such as the state) in different regions of the globe.

Since the mid-twentieth century, a great deal has been learned about societal change and diversity by both anthropological archaeologists and scholars in adjacent disciplines. As with the investigation of the human genome, much of this new knowledge highlights significant aspects of patterned variation within the broad tiers of organizational complexity that were outlined decades ago. In fact, it seems evident that recent comparative efforts have recognized this greater diversity, adopting titles with plural nouns such as Archaic States (Feinman and Marcus 1998), Empires (Alcock et al. 2001), Chiefdoms: Power, Economy, and Ideology (Earle 1991), Understanding Early Civilizations (Trigger 2003), and Collective Action in the Formation of Pre-Modern States (Blanton and Fargher 2008). Nevertheless, it is a central tenet of this chapter that key frames that were part of that mid-twentieth-century framework remain in place and require judicious reevaluation and modification. Specifically, I argue for more systematic and cross-disciplinary approaches to examine the recognized variation within broad organizational modes (such as “states”). In other words, comparative approaches now focus on societal variation as well as similarities, and modified theoretical frames are necessary to accommodate and explain the variation in societies that could be lumped under the rubric “states” (or “chiefdoms,” for that matter).

Furthermore, archaeological dialogues and frameworks for the consideration of hierarchically organized societies should be open to theoretical constructs and conceptual frames that are currently being employed in cognitive disciplines where the study of societal change and variation is also a serious and ongoing focus. Our comparative archaeological perspectives on human groups and groupings should not necessarily be restricted to the past, but should ideally contribute to and profit from comparative studies of societal organization in the more recent past and even the present.

The Challenge: Understanding Societal Change and Diversity

Following decades of sustained fieldwork, in conjunction with innovative laboratory analyses, amplified computer technologies, and new archival investigations, diachronic studies of complex/hierarchical societies in anthropological archaeology are on a far firmer and geographically broader empirical footing today than ever before. In most global areas, the depth and quality of published/readily available information on past socioeconomic organizations have increased by several orders of magnitude over the state of knowledge fifty years ago. And, in certain key places, we now possess significantly amplified, even entirely novel, perspectives at the regional and domestic/house scales. These vantages provide empirical bases to assess settlement, economy, and power relations in ways that were not possible before.

In addition to anthropological archaeology, scholars situated in a large number of cognate disciplines (or sectors thereof), including history, classics, area studies, political science, economic history, and sociology, are also studying shifts (and theorizing about variation and change) in human socioeconomic arrangements over long time horizons. Ironically, there is precious little dialogue and almost no consensus across these disciplines regarding how to conceptualize complex sociopolitical formations, or even a broadly accepted metalanguage to facilitate the exchange of information and comparison. Within anthropological archaeology, where the investigation of these issues has long been recognized as a focal topic for research, a sizeable faction of practitioners seems to eschew systematic comparison, and relatively little effort is devoted to engaging those researchers with related interests outside of anthropology. In fact, while archaeologists have been effective in conveying to the press and the public their claims for the oldest or the richest, they have been less successful at disseminating the field’s long-standing interests in and contributions to the rise of (and variation in) hierarchical political organizations.

The lack of effective bridges and communication to other disciplines has its costs. For example, recently Science (Kennedy and Norman 2005) outlined 125 big/important questions that were driving contemporary scientific research. These included “how can a skin cell become a nerve cell,” “can the laws of physics be unified,” and “are we alone in the universe.” Regrettably, relatively few questions from the social sciences were even placed on the list, and a much smaller subset of them concerned the dynamics of human
social formations. Nowhere to be found were issues such as (or related to) “how does inequality become institutionalized in human societies,” and “what factors and conditions historically have engendered human societies to rise, fall, and reorganize.” Such research issues are not only critical for understanding our history as a species, but they are relevant to evaluating shifting politico-economic dynamics today.

On Science’s list, the only question that was close in content to aforementioned focal questions about societal organization was “how does cooperative behavior evolve” (Pennisi 2005). Certainly this is a pertinent issue, relevant to our broad understanding of human societal change. Yet the path to future breakthroughs was framed almost exclusively within the domains of evolutionary biology and game theory. Absent was any mention of archaeological/empirical findings regarding how human social groupings and the equations of cooperative behavior have changed over time and varied over space (Pennisi 2005). By raising the issue of broad scientific agendas, I do not intend to critique the selections of Science so much as to express a concern regarding the ways that anthropological archaeology as a discipline communicates and bridges (or not) to other fields and the larger educated public. In this regard, it is curious, if not unsettling, that the most broadly read serious treatises on the rises and collapses of complex societies (Diamond 1999, 2005) were written by a nonarchaeologist.

The construction of theory and the comparative study of settlement, economy, and power over deep history is in many senses a version of a synthetic investigation of “world history” (Yoffee 2005:191; see also Northrup 2005; Sanderson 1990:223) that certainly reflects a focal concern on how human societies rise, expand, reconfigure, and vary over time. The pursuit of these aims falls within the broad mandate that Boas (1932:606) expressed for anthropology more than eighty years ago, when he stated that “we may ... best define our objective as the attempt to understand the steps by which man has come to be what he is, biologically, psychologically, and culturally.” What is critical about the scholarly enterprise that Boas envisioned is that it is globally inclusive, explicitly historical in character, and necessarily comparative.

As Smith (2006:6) has emphasized, in the face of several decades of relative theoretical stasis in archaeology, a reenergized and more explicit comparative approach to complex societies is in order. For in accord with Hunt (2007:ix), “there is no inquiry, and no knowledge, without comparison.” It is also important to stress that comparisons ought not to be restricted to one dimension. In analogical parallel with the current paradigmatic approach to the history of life, the contemporary biological evolutionary synthesis, comparative analyses of social evolution should be considered and enacted along various dimensions and scales as they inform (and are appropriately framed by) overarching theoretical questions. Although this may seem obvious, I stress this point in contrast to a recent approach (Yoffee 2005) that argues that specific sequences of societal change (looked at in their entirety) are the principal grist for comparative study. The outcome of this approach is to find and emphasize the “uniqueness” of many particular diachronic series. Yet sequences of change tell us little of broader relevance about the past without filtering in some understanding of the dynamics of the social and economic formations and other broader principles that help us interpret and understand these sequences.

Here again, an analogy with the theoretical frame for the history of life is informative, as the overarching conceptual frame for the investigation of human social evolution will have to be just as complex and multifaceted, if not more so (Shermer 2007; Watts 2007). Specific branching sequences of biological evolutionary change are important for the synthetic theory of life’s history (as they are for social evolution). Yet it is not those historical sequences (e.g., the evolution of horses or beetles) when examined on their own that have advanced biological knowledge. Rather, the application of more general, overarching principles—concerning reproductive strategies, predator and prey relations, sociality, population/resource dynamics (and certainly genetics) as well as many other broadly comparative relations to the study of those sequences—serves to explain the history of life, both in the general and specific sense.

The remainder of this discussion advances major initiatives to expand and enhance the comparative frame that archaeologists employ to examine complex societies. This broadening agenda ought to include both intensified efforts to dialogue and communicate with other disciplines, and explorations toward a metalanguage or theoretical frameworks that are less parochial in structure (see Pearson and Sherman 2005) and promote more systematic analyses of the variation in complex societies (particularly societies with comparable degrees of hierarchical complexity). If there are intellectual reasons to segregate the study of non-Western cases/histories, archaeologically known complex societies, or the subset of early (formerly considered “pristine”) states, then these reasons should be demonstrated or oriented to specific problem foci. They should not reflect arbitrary or antiquated disciplinary barriers or residues that largely reflect scholarly practices or priorities set decades, if not centuries, ago and maintained for the most part by inertia/practice (Wallerstein 2003).
More specifically, I propose that an expansion of the basic twodimensional frame (that emphasizes hierarchical complexity and idiosyncratic/cultural variation), employed for more than fifty years by anthropological archaeologists, is necessary to accommodate variation more systematically. Several theoretical propositions, drawn from different scholarly traditions, are introduced that are intended to define and account for important axes of variation noted in societies with similar degrees of hierarchical complexity. These independent, yet parallel, perspectives offer direction for theoretical expansion, while illustrating the potential gains from enhanced cross-disciplinary communication. At the same time, they challenge traditional ideas regarding restrictions or limitations in which historical cases may fittingly be compared.

Expanding the Comparative Frame

As outlined earlier, the examination of societal sequences (or more to the point, shifts in the artifactual record) of a given region over time are just as inadequate for understanding societal evolution as narrow treatments of the fossil record alone would be to explain the history of life. Nevertheless, when placed in a broader comparative theoretical context, the analytical advantages of diachronic perspectives over strictly synchronic analyses are evident (Adams 2004:349). For that reason, it is unfortunate that frameworks and findings derived from the comparative examination of archaic complex societies are so rarely engaged by scholarly considerations of later generations of states (e.g., Smith 2006) and vice versa. Clearly, a wide-ranging dialogue, if not an overarching set of ideas comparing states and statecraft and the cycling (rises, falls, and shifts in implementation) of political power, would be highly informative and could enhance the kinds of patterned variation recognizable in the corpus of complex societies past and present (see Jones and Phillips 2005 for a parallel argument).

As Trigger (2003:3) stated succinctly: “The most important issue confronting the social sciences is the extent to which human behaviour is shaped by factors that operate cross-culturally as opposed to factors that are unique to particular cultures.” Yet, given this call and the related argument to expand the scope of such comparisons, it is necessary to assess and reconsider how anthropological archaeologists generally have framed the issue of similarities and differences in archaic states/complex societies. Although focused attention has on occasion been given productively to subsets of complex societies, such as small (city-) states (e.g., Hansen 2000; Nichols and Charlton 1997) and empires (Alcock et al. 2001), less theory building and systematic comparison has been devoted to the construction of more general frames that integrate distinct organizational properties into cross-cultural theories (comparisons and contrasts) of dynamics and change (however, see Trigger 1993). I propose that a repositioning or expansion of the predominant neoevolutionary theoretical perspective would bring archaeological approaches more in line with comparative efforts in cognate disciplines while opening up the potential for more overarching frameworks for the study of past and present complex societies.

As implied earlier, the following discussion of variation in complex societies decouples that consideration from any necessary or uniform pathway of change (see Drennan 1991:114). In other words, in examining any specific regional or even global sequence, neither progress nor any broad-brush directional shift over time is assumed (e.g., Blanton et al. 1993:23; Claessen 2000:45-69). Empirically, there seems little support either for the notion that small city-states always precede larger polities (cf. Yoffee 2005), or the converse that territorial states generally always arise first only to collapse into smaller political units (cf. Marcus 1992, 1998). In fact, collapse and reconfiguration are consistent features of the historical record, and the histories of different regions indicate alternative paths. Where there are convergent patterns of change or even cross-cultural trends that seem directional in nature, such historical patterns require explanation and ought not be considered predetermined or “natural.” Nevertheless, to describe and understand societal diversity and change, comparative frameworks are necessary, and this is the central focus here.

In Anglophone anthropological archaeology, most comparative and neoevolutionary approaches have been grounded for the better part of five decades (if not longer) in the reconciliation crafted by Sahlin and Service (1960) of the seemingly contradictory evolutionary approaches advanced previously by their mentors White (1949, 1950) and Steward (1949). This mediation (see particularly Sahlin 1960) previously has been discussed, dissected, and amended by many theorists (Claessen 2000:191-95; Flannery 1983; Sanderson 1990:131-38; Segraves 1974; Trigger 1989:292). The reconciliation outlined two core aspects of the neoevolutionary research agenda, general and specific societal evolution. Basically, general evolution was envisioned as a focus on the broad, shared societal patterns directly associated with increasing organizational complexity (such as the core features of Service's 1971 model of band, tribe, chiefdom, state), whereas specific evolution was defined as the focus on the remnant and presumably rather unique aspects of societal variation linked to particular regional traditions and case-specific adaptations to varying socioenvironmental conditions.
of “grade” and “line” (see Sanders and Price 1968:217–18). Nevertheless, this basic framework has had much less impact in other disciplines that study states. To begin a dialogue regarding the structural parallels and transformational histories of states, early and more modern, certain basic theoretical principles or elemental axioms ideally should be broadly shared and not left unexplored by one discipline or subset of scholars. More importantly, and in accord with the wide body of knowledge on states from across the academy, it is becoming clear that key structural similarities or cross-cultural patterns of variation cannot be tied exclusively to stepped tiers of hierarchical complexity (or so-called general evolutionary “Bauplan” [sensu Spencer 1997:234]). Additional axes of patterned variation are explored in the next section.

Organizing Diversity within Hierarchical Modes

Although the broad axes of cross-cultural variation have rarely been drawn explicitly (see Trigger 1993 for a notable exception), patterned variability in the large corpus of ancient states has been recognized, particularly in regard to the properties associated with polity scale and/or major technological/communication breakthroughs. A number of studies have found that small states, part of regional networks (and often sharing a cultural tradition), tend to share features (such as high degrees of connectivity with neighboring states, smaller bureaucratic infrastructure, and a reliance on inter-polity exchange) that differ from common properties of larger states (e.g., Feinman 1998; Friedman 1977; Trigger 1993). In the same vein, there are properties of empires (size, ethnic/cultural heterogeneity, emergence through conquest/coercion) that distinguish them from smaller polities (Alcock et al. 2001; Doyle 1986; Sinopoli 2001:444–47). Likewise, legal/formal sovereignty and more finite borders (defined territories) are two of a number of features that tend to differentiate many modern states from those of the deeper past regardless of their relative size (Claessen 1988; spruyt 2002). Industrial-era states generally claim effective legal sovereignty over a territorial domain and its population in the name of the nation in a manner less common deeper in the past (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Nevertheless, other distinctive properties hypothesized to be associated with Western political “modernity” (Rokkan 1969; Tilly 1975) may also be present in the deeper past (Blanton and Fargher 2008:290–99). Finally, as Marcus (2008:259–61) has argued, it is conceivable that the processes associated with the rise of pristine states (the first to be established in a region) were distinct from the processes that led to the formation of secondary/later states, but that
does not imply that the organizational properties of these pristine states were more similar as a group as compared to later states.

If scale and certain communication/transport technologies can be linked to (or pattern with) other characteristics of states, then other cross-cultural axes of variation in complex societies are also worth investigating. Here, I focus on different modes of politico-economic integration in complex societies.

Through an array of different approaches, some more theoretically driven (whereas others work more empirically from a more targeted contrast of specific cases), a range of scholars, working independently in different disciplines and different global regions, have noted that states with highly centralized, individualized power also tend to be characterized by high degrees of inequality and a dependence on externally derived resources. Alternatively, political formations with more diffuse access to power or power-sharing arrangements frequently co-occur with lesser degrees of inequality and greater reliance on basic economic production. In the remainder of this discussion, I principally review the broadly parallel patterns of variation that have been noted by researchers in different fields with an eye toward the definition of another axis or dimension of cross-cultural societal variation that requires examination in comparative analyses of long-term societal change and diversity. However, before discussing these specific studies, I first briefly review what I mean by societal integration and why cross-cultural variation in integrative modes is deeply rooted in the human career.

Means of Integration

Along with scale, complexity, and boundary conditions, integration has been proposed as a core feature or characteristic that is basic to all societies and comparable over time and space (Blanton et al. 1993:14–19). Specifically, integration refers to the interdependence between societal units and the means or mechanisms used to achieve the degree of connectivity. The integration of societal segments, such as households or larger units, can be achieved or implemented through various means—the most prominent include economic and political modes of integration. In complex, hierarchical societies, political integration is related to the sources or funds of power (e.g., Brunnfels 1992:554–55; Wolf 1982:97) that can be mobilized by political actors to accrue followers and pursue their political agendas.

Lehman (1969) contrasts power wielded systematically, largely through institutions or groups, with inter-member power, which is found in individual-centered social networks developed through personal social ties. As Blanton (1998:141–49) has argued, both of these means of wielding power encompass material resources as well as cognitive-symbolic bases of power—albeit in different ways that have distinct ramifications on other aspects of society. Of course, none of these strategies or bases of power are mutually exclusive, and they often are employed jointly, but in different ways and to varying degrees.

Because a degree of inequality (at least by gender, age, ability, and temperament) exists in just about every human social system (e.g., Cashdan 1980; Flanagan 1989), hierarchical or uneven relations of some sort are a key aspect to human social integration. Such hierarchical relations have their roots in many parts of the animal kingdom, including primates (Chase et al. 2002). Yet, in addition to these deeply rooted practices, cooperation and the social learning skills necessary to form and thrive in groups also have been argued (Herrmann et al. 2007; Tomasello 1999) to be a defining feature that distinguishes humans from other animals. These social practices helped keep orderly hierarchical behaviors largely in check for a long era in human history and in many smaller scale societies (e.g., Boehm 1993). Therefore, it is not surprising that very different mixes of these seemingly contradictory practices, hierarchy and cooperation, might characterize how human groupings interrelate (Stone 2008:77–80), and that given the deep roots of these characteristics in what it means to be human, the consequent integrative strategies might pattern in a suite of different but repetitive ways.

Analytical Parallels in the Societal Modes of Integration

More than a decade ago, my colleagues and I (Blanton 1998; Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman 1995; Feinman et al. 2000) juxtaposed corporate and exclusionary (network) modes of politico-economic organization in the corpus of complex societies. Our original comparative frame built on established cross-cultural contrasts between individualizing and group-oriented chieftoms (Renfrew 1974; see also Renfrew 2001), and staple and wealth finance (D’Altroy and Earle 1985). Although our original formulation had a longer list of contrastive characteristics associated with each of these ends of a comparative continuum (e.g., Feinman et al. 2000:453), here I emphasize those key characteristics at the core of these alternative organizational patterns. In this section I unpack or trim down those features associated with the corporate or exclusionary strategies of integration. Corporate organization is broadly associated with shared power, less ostentatious manifestations of stratification, and an economy focused on basic/local production, whereas more exclusionary power arrangements are keyed to highly centralized/individualized rule, networks of personal power, more expressed
degrees of inequality, and an economy heavily unpinned by long-distance networks and flows.

The corporate-exclusionary axis has proven conceptually useful to understand seemingly "enigmatic" archaeological cases (Feinman 2000, 2001; Feinman et al. 2000) in which scale, centralization, hierarchy, and inequality do not co-vary in strict (stepped) conformance with each other. In other words, these cases tended to lie outside the predictive parameters of the aforementioned two-dimensional frame in which variation is a consequence either of general evolutionary "Bauplans" or specific, idiosyncratic factors. From this vantage, with the consideration of an additional axis of variation, the notion of corporate yet hierarchically organized polities helps conceptualize historical instances where political power was unequally distributed but, perhaps, not concentrated in the hands of a single ruler or family and/or where the expression of stratification was muted or (inequality relatively unpronounced) despite the presence of supra-household, hierarchical, decision-making institutions.

It is important to note that corporate-exclusionary strategies are not meant to be culture-bound. That is, one would expect to see shifts along this continuum in a given region or for a specific society over time. Integrative strategies may change as opportunities arise and conditions permit. For example, such transitions already have been illustrated for both the pre-Hispanic Maya (Blanton et al. 1996) and the Ancestral Pueblos (Feinman et al. 2000). Contrary to Yoffee's (2006:400) assertion, these alternative forms of integration were never intended to be used as a reformulation or resurrection of societal types; rather, the intent is to recognize repetitive patterns of societal variation that can help us understand human organizational diversity and patterns of societal change.

As I have examined different integration modes across diverse geographic regions, eras, and disciplines, it has become evident that scholars in an array of academic fields have noted rather similar patterned axes of variation or contrast in the global corpus of complex societies. This includes a number of empirically based studies (e.g., Lehman 1969; Renfrew 1974) that helped inspire the original contrast of corporate and exclusionary strategies (Blanton et al. 1996). Nevertheless, the prime focus of this remaining discussion is on more recently published parallel/independent conceptual perspectives. At the same time, it is also worth noting that a number of archaeologists have independently and constructively employed the corporate-exclusionary axis to discuss and explicate diversity and change in complex societies (e.g., Earle 1997; King 2006; Mills 2000; Trubitt 2000; Willey 1999).

An important corresponding perspective, advanced by Grinin (2004), draws a contrast between "monarchic" and "democratic" states. He argues that the latter, typified by ancient Athens and the Roman Republic, have most of the basic properties of early states elsewhere, but that political power was not monopolized by a single ruler (rather it was more shared, delegated, and checked). Grinin's argument is significant in that it recognizes that the Athenian state and the Roman Republic were hierarchically organized like other early states, but that the modes of political integration were less centralized, not focused on a single all-powerful ruler.

Similar to many corporately organized states, for the "democratic" states (as analyzed by Grinin) agrarian production was critically important for the economy, and its taxation largely financed the government. Socio-economic stratification, although certainly present, was less ostentatiously expressed than in other archaic states (Grinin 2004:110-11). As with corporate polities, broad social mechanisms and pressures such as ostracism were voted on by the Athenian Assembly (see Ober 2008:75-76). Such sanctions were employed to encourage conformance to cultural codes in the absence of royal fiat or coercion. Grinin tends to associate his "democratic" states principally with the West, but some of the basic integrative properties are shared with non-Western cases described as "corporate," so less hegemonic practices of rule and government should not be considered unique to Europe or Western societies.

Independently, and shifting to a consideration of more recent times, the positive association between high degrees of (broad) political participation and relative economic equality has also been described in a cross-national study of contemporary polities (Russett 1964) and a large cross-cultural ethnographic sample (Ember et al. 1997). That these patterns were found in such synchronic samples is significant because factors such as relative income inequality reflect long intergenerational histories of wealth creation and transfer in specific historical contexts.

Conversely, the recurrent properties of exclusionary power arrangements are not unique to ancient kingdoms, medieval monarchies, or non-Western contexts. For example, the increasing concentration of executive power and a growing disparity of wealth, both of which have occurred over the last decades in the contemporary United States, are unlikely to be serendipitous, unrelated trends (American Political Science Association Task Force Report 2004; Domhoff 2006; Feinman 2010). Correspondingly, mathematical modeling directed at contemporary societies has illustrated in general how strong unitary executives reliant on personal networks to enhance their own power (through economic transactions) are advantaged in contexts...
already characterized by marked income inequities (Acemoglu 2005; Acemoglu et al. 2004). In other words, when marked disparities of wealth exist, leaders may find it easier to act unilaterally. Such relationships provide one potential mechanism through which shifts in power and wealth disparities can move in parallel ways in different specific historical contexts over time.

These perspectives from studies of contemporary states illustrate that the variation in states may have patterned structural characteristics with broad time-space applicability. For example, the co-occurrence of concentrated political power (and associated individualizing behavior), marked socio-economic stratification, and an emphasis on exchange-based (as opposed to basic productive) economic activity may have broader applicability than was envisioned originally (Blanton et al. 1996). At the same time, if these studies in concert serve to outline repetitive patterns of variation in states that explicitly do not correspond to broad stepped tiers of organizational complexity, then a new, more comprehensive frame for analyzing and explaining the variability in states is needed. Conceptually, we could profitably implement a research program to define and account for patterned and modal variation in the corpus of states (over time and space), recognizing that the variation in states is not strictly due to either unique historic pathways or culture-specific, idiosyncratic factors.

A Path toward Broader Understandings

Critiques of the corporate-exclusionary dimension have questioned why these societal properties tend to co-occur, while also wondering why integrative strategies might shift in a given societal context along this continuum. One productive avenue of research on these specific patterns of societal variation may extend to a consideration of the collective action problem (Olson 1965) and related works that have built upon this approach (in particular, Blanton and Faragher 2008; Levi 1988; Lichbach 1996). These ideas endeavor to bridge the micro-macro problem (e.g., Collins 1988) by exploring the extent to which individuals who share common aims may find it in their personal interest to carry the costs of organizational effort (Levi 1988:8). As Lichbach (1996:32) states, a collective action problem or the cooperators’ dilemma “arises whenever mutually beneficial cooperation is threatened by individual strategic behavior.” Although this line of discussion may seem abstract, the fundamental issue is really the key dilemma posed by Hobbs (2003). “What holds society together given the tendency of individuals to pursue their self-interest?” (Blanton and Faragher 2008:6; also Lichbach 1995). In other words, what kinds of integrative strategies and practices keep social systems intact and why might different societal compacts seem to be favored in certain contexts as opposed to others? To assess these questions, the interests of rulers and the ruled must be considered.

To explain variability in governing regimes, Levi’s (1988) research in particular examined the link between the ways governments are financed and the relative dispersal of political power/voice. Levi’s (1988:2) focus is on ruling strategies, political integration, revenue, and resources with an emphasis on the ways in which the latter two finance power. These factors largely encompass those unpacked characteristics of the corporate-exclusionary axis that are our central concern as well as the parallel contrasts/comparison drawn by other scholars (e.g., Ember et al. 1997; Grinn 2004; Russett 1964). Basically, Levi’s thesis is that the more rulers depend on the extraction of localized resources, the more checks and voice the ruled will have. Alternatively, the more external and monopolized a ruler’s financial base (e.g., patron-client relations), the more concentrated power is apt to be (Faragher and Blanton 2007). This perspective offers a testable alternative to traditional models that often associate heavily agrarian states with the manifestation of absolute power (Bates and Lien 1985:53–54).

In a large global sample of historical cases, Blanton and Faragher (2008) provide strong support for these expectations, while also illustrating that the basic model is supported across the world and in the analysis of cases from the deeper past as well as more recent history. The latter study provides a theoretical underpinning for the patterned variability noted in the suite of core features that marks the poles of the corporate-exclusionary axis. Significantly, parallel politico-economic arrangements can emerge through distinct historical pathways (likely under certain pre-conditions) just as we know that chiefdoms and/or states with similar hierarchal formations/properties can develop in diverse geographic/cultural settings when a set of necessary/sufficient conditions are met (Tilly [2000] makes a similar point for democracies). When examining long-term sequences of societal change, a framework that enables us to document and explicate both shifts in organizational complexity as well as changes in the modes of political and economic integration will yield a more holistic and explanatory perspective on “world history” and the diverse pathways that it encompasses.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

As outlined earlier, anthropological archaeology can potentially learn a great deal from (and also contribute to) an expansive cross-disciplinary
dialogue that explores the diversity of complex societies, ancient and modern; Fletcher (Chapter 11) and Smith (Chapter 12) also explore this theme. In our field, we might better come to understand the patterns of variation, particularly in regard to the means and modes of societal (economic and political) integration, which have been too little explored in a systematic, cross-cultural fashion. Specifically, we also might begin to more explicitly probe and define the differences that exist between preindustrial and industrial polities. Too often that gulf has been assumed rather than documented. Modern states clearly have key differences from those in the past, but not all of the claimed differences necessarily bear up to empirical scrutiny. Such dialogues would likely promote careful examinations of the theoretical and interpretive divides that artificially ghettoize the “Rest” from the West (see Blanton and Fargher 2008; Fargher and Blanton 2007).

At a time when our models call for greater consideration of agency and voice, it is important to realize that such a focus naturally leads to an analysis of the different integrative modes and mechanisms that interconnect societies. However, efforts to study and model agency in deep history should not only empower those few voices that had power in the past (cf. Baines and Yoffee 1998).

As Claessen and Skalnik (1978) illustrated decades ago, broad cross-disciplinary comparisons require the unbundleing or unpacking of the features and properties of states and the societies in which they are part. A theoretical approach would need to explore (as one example) how degrees of stratification patterned with the relative concentration of political power as discussed earlier. Such a perspective not only would help define axes of variability, but it would enable the recognition of causal connections and dynamics that might account for that patterned variation. This is a critical point; it implies that to understand variation in states it is essential to go beyond the largely synchronic comparisons that composed The Early State and other subsequent comparative works (e.g., Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Hansen ed. 2000).

Recently and along these lines, Drennan and Peterson (2006:3960; see also Tilley 1984:14) have made a forceful case that patterned variation in human social formations can only be understood if various cases or examples are examined and compared over long sequences. Although I applaud the kinds of multi-case diachronic comparisons being carried out (Drennan and Peterson 2006; Peterson and Drennan, Chapter 6), there is no reason that such analyses need be undertaken in a purely bottom-up, inductive fashion. There is a danger that ad-hoc interpretations may betray the unexpressed biases of the investigators at the expense of more theoretical framing. If this happens, it can lead to mischaracterizations of specific empirical cases and the false disconfirmation of extant models (see Kiser and Hechter 1991).

As previously noted, it is important to analyze how different attributes of states change in correspondence with co-occurring changes in other features. When such patterns are explored over a wide range of sequences, then we will gain a better perspective not just on the generalized properties of states and the idiosyncratic features unique to specific histories, but we should be able to find the patterned and structured variation between different states (e.g., corporate vs. exclusionary or democratic vs. ruler-centric). I suspect patterned variation that has little connection to the dimension of hierarchical complexity will often be defined, and that such structured diversity will help identify key axes of differentiation between states. At the same time, no model or framework, no matter how robust, can ever singly or fully account for a significant aspect of societal diversity, and so a consideration of historical, cultural, and local factors remains important in a comparative context.

Although I see diachronic comparisons as a primary theoretical component in an overarching framework to study states and their diversity and their cycles of decline and regeneration, such an ambitious multidisciplinary framework focused on states across space and time clearly would necessitate the bootstrapping (sense Blanton 1990) of an array of different, mutually reinforcing theoretical exercises, approaches, and frames, some of which are synchronic. As Fracchia and Lewontin (1999:78) state: “Transformational theories of cultural evolution have the virtue that they at least provide a framework of generality with which to give human long-term history the semblance of intelligibility. But the search for intelligibility should not be confused with the search for actual process.” There are many ways to try to make sense of global history, and we may ultimately need a number of these approaches in concert to understand settlement, economy, and politics in deep history.

This kind of broad encompassing theoretical infrastructure or frame (incorporating more than the two standard dimensions of variation stressed in much archaeological interpretation) may seem ambitious to some or cumbersome to others (see Smith and Peregrine, Chapter 2). Yet a theoretical frame designed for understanding and explaining the differences and similarities in states is in reality a frame for exploring the global history of human societies, certainly a highly complex set of interrelated questions. So it is not surprising that ultimately we in the social and behavioral sciences will require a theoretical frame analogous in form to the bootstrapped theories, some diachronic and others synchronic, that together aim to explain a comparable grand topic or set of questions: the history
of life through biological evolution (see Mayr 1982). Although the theory designed to explain that historical phenomenon (biological evolution) is not appropriately designed or structured to address and account for the suite of research questions of concern to us (e.g., Bryant 2004; Frairia and Lewontin 1999; Gould 1987), I do suspect that a comparable or analogous multifaceted structure that encompasses phenomena at multiple scales ultimately will be required to explain human societies, their histories, rich diversity, and how and why they change through time (Goldstone 1998). To move toward this broader theory, a concerted initiative toward wider communications and more systematic comparative investigations must be undertaken.

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