How Society Makes Itself: The Evolution of Political and Economic Institutions

HOWARD J SHERMAN, University of California, Los Angeles
## TABLE OF CONTENTS and Chapter 1, How Society Makes Itself

**Preface**

**Acknowledgments**

1. Prehistoric Communal Institutions in the Middle East
2. From Communal Equality to Slavery in the Middle East
3. From Slavery to Feudalism in Western Europe
4. From Feudalism to Capitalism in Western Europe
5. From Pre-Capitalism to Capitalism in the United States, 1776–1865
6. Slavery in the United States, 1776–1865
7. Rise of Corporate Capitalism in the United States, 1865–1900
8. Growth and Depression in the United States, 1900–1940
10. Inequality in the United States Under Global Capitalism, 1940–2004
11. Economic Instability and Environment in the United States under Global Capitalism, 1940–2004
13. Beginnings of Economic Democracy
14. Lessons from the Story of Evolution

**Appendix 14.1. History of Evolutionary Thought**

**References**

**Index**
Chapter 1:

Prehistoric Communal Institutions in the Middle East

Our sun and planets evolved over an enormous amount of time. The Earth was originally uninhabitable by life as we know it. Over billions of years, however, the earth evolved and eventually changed into an environment in which we can survive. These geological changes in the earth are revealed in its layers of rocks. For example, some rocks show plant fossils from a million years ago or reveal a volcanic eruption caught forever at a given moment.

When the environment permitted, life evolved at spots where all the necessary elements happened to be together. All other life has evolved from the simplest virus-like creatures that lived at least three billion years ago. Charles Darwin showed how nature selects from the existing individuals the ones best suited for survival under particular conditions. Eventually this type of individual has the highest reproduction rate and that fact leads to a change in the species. This process of change is called natural selection. Thus new species evolved, including human beings.

At the time our first humanoid ancestors evolved on grassy plains, they made simple tools and weapons from pieces of wood or stone or bone. Remnants of early humanoids have been dated to 6 or 7 million years ago, but the exact time of the earliest humanoid is still controversial. Those who had better brains could use tools and weapons more effectively, thus improving their chance of survival. This process led to
slow enlargement of the brain. Humanoids with a larger brain could improve the use of tools. An erect stance allowed these humanoids to hold tools while running, so their survival chances were improved.

The new species of homo sapiens (our present species) became dominant about a 100,000 years ago. Eventually, the older humanoid species disappeared, but there is much debate about whether homo sapiens wiped out the old types, or simply interbred with them, or if the earlier humanoids just died out. The earliest type of society developed by homo sapiens endured most of the last hundred thousand years, so other types of societies are a relatively new invention.

How do we know anything about societies that existed tens of thousands of years ago? Many societies of the past three to four thousand years had written languages, so scholars can translate their documents and learn a great deal about them. But earlier societies were prehistoric (meaning before written history) and had no written language. Two kinds of evidence are available on the earliest human societies.

First of all, archaeologists have dug up the earliest dwellings and graves, containing weapons, tools, and ornaments, as well as skeletons. From this evidence, archaeologists deduce an amazing amount of information. For example, by comparing the value of different houses or of different objects found in graves, archaeologists can estimate the degree of economic inequality in the society.

Second, in the past two centuries, anthropologists have studied existing societies that resemble the prehistoric societies, though the numbers of such societies have steadily declined. One problem in using this kind of evidence is that we cannot say for
sure whether existing societies that resemble the prehistoric ones behave exactly the way prehistoric ones did. Moreover, the evidence is contaminated because these societies have been in contact with more advanced societies. If no one else, the anthropologist has contacted the communal society and therefore changed it. Nevertheless, in the past two centuries, anthropologists have accumulated an immense amount of reliable information on the earliest type of society.

**Features of Prehistoric, Communal Society**

To understand prehistoric institutions and how they changed, it is useful to examine four aspects of that society. The four pillars of that society were technology, economic institutions, social institutions, and ideology.

First, what is meant by technology? We think of technology today as modern gadgets and machines, but it means far more than that. Technology is the way that human beings produce goods and services. Technology includes the knowledge of how to do things, the available skills of different types of workers, the amount of production by each type of present equipment, and the quality of land and natural resources available.

The technology of the early communal societies was used for hunting or fishing and gathering fruits and vegetables. Their technology was based on a knowledge of simple stone or bone or wood tool making. Since they lived off of hunting and gathering food, these small groups had to roam over a large amount of land to find their food.
supply. The total labor force of each group was small, estimated at 5 to 35 people.

Second, economic institutions are defined to mean the ways that people interact in the economy. An economic institution is not a thing; it is a set of relations between people doing economic activities. For example, the institution of slavery is the relation between slaves and masters. The main prehistoric economic institution was the family. It was an extended family of brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, parents and grandparents. There was a division of labor between men and women—and a division of labor between young and old. Men, usually as a group, did most of the fishing and hunting. Women, usually as a group, gathered fruits, nuts, and vegetables. The division of labor between genders, however, was far from absolute because the men probably often gathered fruits and vegetables, while women probably hunted small animals. These two collective groups delivered their food to the whole band, The whole band consumed the food as their right. This little collective group was isolated from other groups and seldom met the other groups.

Such family-based, collective or communal societies existed for 90 to 95 percent of human existence. No one word describes all aspects of their existence, but the term “communal” emphasizes the collective nature of their economic institutions. Since everyone worked together and everyone consumed the product, the prehistoric communes had no use for the market. Thus, the communes were non-market societies. The reader is reminded that such early, family-based communes had little or nothing in common with the utopian groups called communes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Third, the social institutions are defined to be all noneconomic ways that people interact together, such as the political process, the family, or religious organizations. The earliest institutions were very simple. There was no separate government. Most decisions were made collectively. There were no separate, organized religious institutions. The whole community took part in various magical ceremonies, though one person usually led them. There was no separate education system. Education consisted of learning from your parents and the rest of the band by following their example. There were no separate media. News was spread by everyone around the campfire.

Fourth, ideology is defined to mean a more or less coherent system of ideas about how society works and how we should behave in it. We may believe that an ideology is good, like democracy, or bad, like the idea of burning witches. Everybody, however, has some ideology. Ideology is simply a particular viewpoint that integrates many of one’s ideas. The communal social ideas (or ideology) reflected their life and environment. If the earliest groups behaved like similar small bands of people discovered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then they valued cooperation among all individuals in the band. They also had a set of superstitious beliefs, which were centered around animals and natural forces, such as lightning.

The four features of communal society are summarized in Table 1.1:

These four features of early communal society raise a lot of intriguing questions. For example, when one asks how they fit together in the social whole that was prehistoric communal society, the tale becomes more exciting.
How the Four Basic Features of Society Interacted

These four categories—technology, economic institutions, social institutions, and ideology—will be useful in understanding society as a whole. At first glance, there seem to be hundreds of unrelated aspects in a society. They must be seen in a framework, such as these four categories, to understand how society functions.

These four aspects of society are not independent of each other. Rather, it will be seen that each of the four is determined by the other three. For example, technology has provided quite reliable birth control devices. This new technology has changed our ideas about sex. Thus technology can affect ideology.

A simple schematic picture of these interactions is presented in Figure 1.1.

<<FIGURE 1.1 NEAR HERE>>

Figure 1.1 illustrates six interactions:

1. economic institutions with technology.
2. social institutions with economic institutions,
3. social institutions with technology,
4. social institutions with ideology,
5. technology with ideology, and
6. economic institutions with ideology

We will explore how each of these interactions plays a vital role in understanding the early communal society.
Economic Institutions and Technology

The technology of the prehistoric communal society has been defined by four main points. First, it used land for hunting and gathering. Second, there was a small labor force. Third, production was based mostly on simple stone, bone, and wooden tool making. Fourth, physical capital, which just means the equipment and materials being used, consisted only of these simple tools. Communal economic institutions were described as nothing but an extended family acting collectively. How did the communal institutions interact with the simple tools they used?

With this simple technology of bone, stone, and wooden tools, the prehistoric communal society was able to hunt animals, gather plant resources, make leather and fiber implements, clothing, and shelters. The tasks were accomplished but there was a low level of productivity. Because technology was at such a low level that if everyone worked together all day, there was only enough food, clothing, and shelter produced for everyday survival. For this reason, no one could specialize in any one trade, since that would have reduced the production of needed supplies below immediate, daily needs.

The description of economic activity and productivity in this chapter relies on the archaeological evidence from the Middle East. We know from studying recent bands (small simple societies) that every group devoted some time to leisure activities and recreation. More leisure-time is found in early societies that lived in easier environments, such as a fertile Pacific island with a pleasant climate all year.
Because there were no specialists, no one focused his or her thoughts on how to improve tool-making technology. In fact, the prehistoric communal people did not dream that their tools could be radically improved. Moreover, the economic institution of the family encouraged people by peer pressure to work at a reasonable pace, but it did not encourage people to do anything differently than the family had always done. When the family is just above the starvation level, it cannot take chances with new ways of doing things that might result in death by starvation for most of the family. For all of these reasons, technological progress was very, very slow. In tens of thousands of years, there was very little improvement.

Each band of people was forced to form a communal group to protect themselves from large carnivores, as well as to hunt large animals, such as the mammoth. An individual who left the communal group usually died quickly. One institutional consequence of the low technological level was that, if there was a clash with another band, it made no sense to keep a prisoner as a slave because a slave could only produce enough to survive. Therefore, a prisoner from another band was either integrated into this band, or killed and left behind, or killed and eaten. Although it was rare, cannibalism made economic sense to some bands, but slavery did not. Only in a few exceptional cases, such as intensive fishing under good conditions, could slaves produce more than their own necessary needs.

Each small community was separate from the others, so there was little or no trade with other communities. There was no market exchange because there was rarely anything to exchange. Since there was no exchange, there was also no money. The
reason for the isolation was that each person required about a half a square mile or more for adequate food supply, though they often moved in a nomadic life style from place to place following the food supply. Since it was a family, and since everyone worked collectively to bring in the food, the food was distributed to everyone. People had almost no private possessions, except for an animal skin as clothing and perhaps some simple implements. This information comes from the archaeological data on the Middle East from approximately 100,000 to 10,000 years ago.

Thus, the economic institutions included the extended family; the collective production of the food supply; no division of labor, except partly between men and women and partly by age; no specialists; no market; no money; no significant amount of wealth; and the collective consumption of the food supply. These economic institutions did not encourage technological experimentation, but tended to promote the use of the same technology century after century. Since there was little or no change in the available technology, there was no need to change these economic institutions. The entire set of economic institutions and the available technology fit together perfectly at a very low level, while change was incredibly slow.

**Social Institutions and Economic Institutions**

Given these technological forces and the economic institutions, the other institutions that were necessary to maintain the community were also very simple. No group of managers or complex corporate structure was needed to run the repeated
economic tasks of hunting and food gathering by a small group of people.

No separate government structure was needed in the political sphere to run such a small, highly integrated group. The simple tasks of governance and major decisions could be and were made by the group as a whole. There was a direct democracy because all adults participated in the group. There was no need to vote for representatives.

Since society was not complex and everyone knew what was happening, there was little opportunity for getting away with crimes of violence or theft. With very little crime, there was no need for police. The group as a whole punished or expelled anyone guilty of crime. Expulsion was an extremely serious punishment because it was very difficult to survive alone.

The total amount of personal wealth was a few tools, weapons, and ornaments that could easily be reproduced and carried. There was thus little reason theft by individuals. Nor was there reason for war by communities, except skirmishes over hunting grounds. A bigger war was not profitable. Moreover, war not possible in much of an organized way over the vast spaces roamed by the different families. So there were no armies, navies, or air forces.

According to studies of similar bands still in existence today, life was mysterious to people with limited scientific knowledge. Therefore, there was a widespread belief in magic. But there was no organized religion and no full-time priests. One reason was that there was no surplus above basic necessities to feed groups not engaged in production. Everyone had to work for the community to survive.
There was no sexist discrimination. As noted earlier, men tended to do most of the hunting, while women usually focused on gathering food because pregnancy and childcare often did not allow them going on long hunting trips. But it is quite possible that women often produced more resources for the groups than men did. The food gathering was often more important for the food supply than was the hunting, which was often unsuccessful. Women carried very heavy loads at least as often as men did.

There was no racist discrimination within the group because everyone was a family member. There was certainly ignorance of other families and wariness about all strangers. This was a result of the isolation, an isolation imposed by the need for each group to roam a very large area for its food supply. Different bands occasionally met, mainly to find suitable mates outside the immediate family.

Of course, these social institutions also helped mold the economic institutions. The education and media systems, in which all of one’s learning and news came from other family members, meant that all of the views reinforced the existing system of an extended family working cooperatively. The magic ceremonies involved the entire family, so they also reinforced the family unit as the center of activity. The whole group made the most important economic decisions, such as where to go next to look for food.

**Social Institutions and Technology**

We have already discussed how the technology of prehistoric communal societies
consisted of a small labor force, large areas of land for hunting and food gathering, a few simple tools as capital, and an unchanging fund of technological knowledge. These facts had important implications for social institutions. Hunters and gatherers had fairly stable populations. Their low level of technology and perilous existence meant that even a high birth rate was balanced by a high death rate.

Not only were there no radio, TV, or cable, but they were not needed for spreading news and education within the family. Because there was no long distance communication, hunters were more constrained to work as a group within sight or calling distance of each other. No chiefs had the right to have their children inherit their power. So the low level of technology enforced a rough equality of power and wealth.

In turn, the social institutions of the extended family, education by the family, news exposure within the family, and magical ceremonies within the family all tended to reinforce and support the economic institutions of cooperation among family members.

**Social Institutions and Ideology**

The extended family was not only an economic institution, but was also the most important social institution. As described in detail above, living within the extended family meant that it constituted one’s early training and conditioning, education, exposure to news, and religious experiences. No wonder that the family dominated one’s ideology and behavior. In similar isolated communal groups living today, the prime importance of the extended family is perhaps the most important idea or ideology
in every individual’s mind—the family is everything.

This potent ideology of the all-important family lasted for thousands of years. It was taken for granted and almost never questioned. Everyone agreed that the extended family was the proper and only possible economic institution. Therefore, this ideology was very powerful and went unchallenged. The ideology of the importance of the family helped shape the way this society behaved in every aspect of life.

The group was collectivist in its thinking, meaning that it was taken for granted that everyone must work together just to survive. Expulsion from the group usually meant death. The collectivism was not an outlook thought up by philosophers or politicians. Rather, the collectivism of the family was a result of dire economic necessity as the only way the group could survive.

For people in that era, economic necessity meant having enough food and shelter. Economic necessity shaped the main communal institutions, such as working together. Economic necessity also shaped their ideology, the idea that it is good to have cooperation in the extended family. Then that ideology of cooperation became a powerful force holding the group together for tens of thousands of years.

It was noted that the work that women did was roughly equal to that of men in importance to the survival of the family. It is no surprise that this experience was reflected in the myths that portrayed men and women as roughly equal. There were no sexist myths about the inferiority of women. Economic necessity and institutions shaped this egalitarian ideology of men and women, but those ideas of equality then shaped the democratic institutions for eons of time.
Technology and Ideology

The small labor force meant that everyone knew everyone else extremely well and made the ideology of cooperation seem natural. The simple stone tools produced little envy for the wealth of others. Other people had very little except their tools and ornaments.

Moreover, the use of the same simple tools for eons of time meant that people came to think that this way was the only way that things could be done. After a long time, people trust these tools and ways of doing things and they come to distrust any change.

These ideas—forming a strong ideology—reinforced habits and formed rigid traditions. But one should not assume that the belief that there should be no change in technology was merely a superstitious impediment to progress. Rather, for tens of thousands of years, it represented reality and the best available wisdom. Prehistoric communal people did not look for brand new technology, but they did spend much time learning how best to use the technology they had. It was this belief in the unchanging technology that pushed them to do their best with what they had. You and I could not shape stone tools as well as they did without years of practice.

In the prehistoric communal period of technology, which covered most of human existence, most myths had to do with nature. Nature was at the center of their lives.
Nature was dangerous and full of surprises to prehistoric peoples. So their myths had to do with gods who were embodied in animals, fire, water, thunder, and lightening. Some of these myths encouraged magic rituals to accomplish goals. If a wise person correctly portrayed a mastodon in a magic ceremony, consisting of song or dance or pictures, then the band might control it and kill it without losing members of the family. So myths about nature helped to give confidence to the whole band. These myths also to reinforce the power of those who seemed to know the most about “spirits,” animals, the weather, and other mysteries.

Art often meant pictures of the animals, or dances depicting the animals, because that was part of the magic to control them. Science consisted of accumulated detailed knowledge of nature plus magic. In short, all of their ideology helped unify the family and helped it operate successfully for thousands of years. At the same time, the economic and political environment of the extended family, along with the level of the technology, helped shape their ideological views.

**Economic Institutions and Ideology**

The communal economic institution—consisting of the extended family, along with cooperation and collective action by all—lasted for at least 90 percent of the time that Homo Sapiens has existed and over 99 percent of the time since the first hominids came out of the trees. As noted earlier, it was not planned by philosophers, but was pure economic necessity, since people could not survive alone. Not only the ideology of
the extended family, but so was the ideology of cooperation and collective action by all, were taken for granted. Any dissenter was handled harshly. Although the ideology at first represented necessity, it came to be a habit of thinking, and then a rigid tradition.

The ideas of cooperation and collective action within the extended family did tend to hold back progress, but they were not silly ideas. Remember that this belief in cooperation and collective action was what allowed the society to survive for countless ages and was the glue that held it together. Since these ideas were vital to survival under these circumstances, any other social ideas (a different ideology) would have led to societies that would not have survived and would not have reproduced. Thus their ideological beliefs helped to enforce the unchanging technology, as well as the economic, social, and political institutions that lasted for most of human existence.

Conclusion

This chapter showed how the four categories of technology, economic institutions, social institutions, and ideology are a useful tool to examine human societies. Their interaction in prehistoric communal societies explained why those societies survived. Yet their interaction also explained why these societies did not change for an incredibly long time.

Suggested Readings
All of the facts in this chapter are discussed in detail in the suggested readings. This section does not provide the latest books and articles for specialists. Rather, the suggested materials provide the reader with some books that will be easy to read, useful, and in some cases fun to read. None are obscure or difficult books that would interest only specialists. A few more difficult books are identified as advanced or scholarly, so the reader is warned. The same approach—expanding the facts in interesting and pleasant books or articles—will be used in all the Suggested Readings sections in this book. Note that all citations in the text are partial, but full citations are in the References at the end of the book.


The entire history of writing on social evolution, including Suggested Readings focusing on anthropology, is presented briefly in Appendix 14A, Chapter 14 of this book.