

On the Emergence of the State

Ziqing Jack Wang

Where does the state come from? What prompted people to build the earliest city-states? These are profound political questions debated for centuries by philosophers and political theorists. Thomas Hobbes claimed that life was nasty, brutish, and short. Individuals, hence, came together and submitted themselves to a greater authority to prevent the spread of violence. The fear of violence or the desire to live harmoniously as a collective group led to the creation of a state. However, using historical examples, this essay will point out an alternative explanation for the birth of a state. The first states were glued together not as shelters from violence, as Hobbes believed, but by economics. Economic needs in agricultural societies drove people to coalesce into more complex forms of organization that could serve such needs.

The Fertile Crescent is home to some of the world's oldest settlements. The Mesopotamian civilizations that developed along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers date back over 5,000 years, earning them the title "the cradle of civilization." As Robert Allen, Leander Heldring, and Mattia Bertazzini argued, economic considerations based on the changes of the two rivers strongly correlate to the rise of the Mesopotamian city-states. In their paper, the authors investigate "whether the timing of changes to a river's course had anything to do with when the number and size of settlements grew." This investigation method is reliable. When the paths of these rivers shifted, some ancient farmers were left without water for their crops, so they had to think of different ways to transport water to their irrigation fields. Some of these ways might have required the centralization of cooperative effort.

Mr. Allen and his co-authors looked more specifically at the effect of the first recorded shift at around 2850 B.C.E. This time coincided with the emergence of several early city-states. When the rivers changed their course, the Mesopotamians could choose to revert to nomadism or a "state of nature," as Hobbes proposed. Or they could cooperate and build systems to ferry water from distant rivers. The study revealed that a "5km-by-5km square in the basin left behind by a river was 14% more likely to have a settlement, marked by a public building such as a temple or marketplace, 150 years after the shift than in the 50 years before it. Each square was 12% more likely to have a built canal..." The Mesopotamians created five new cities and expanded previous ones along the river's tributaries. Thus, establishing a more complex social and political order in the form of a city-state may be attributed primarily to the economic concerns of the Mesopotamians. When the rivers' water was no longer available, they possessed an economic need to provide enough agricultural output for their rising populations. Such a need called for forming central governments that could build canals and invent new irrigation methods to meet the economic demands.

Similarly, in Egypt, the kings formed some of the early Egyptian states and cities for economic reasons. During the Early Dynastic Period, from around 3150 to 2686 B.C.E., Egypt became a unified kingdom. One of the most pivotal cities at this time was Memphis. The Early Dynastic Period kings established Memphis to realize some of the region's potential economic gains. The city was situated near the fertile delta region of the Nile River, where agriculture was booming. Since most economies during that historical period were almost purely agricultural ones that relied heavily on agricultural yields, the kings could control the vast surrounding farming areas



by building Memphis. The fertility of the land also provided for a greater population, which translated into a stabler and larger labor force. Hence, Memphis could serve as a city-state where the kings organized a more centralized labor force for their needs. Finally, the Egyptian rulers could have established Memphis for trade purposes. It linked Egypt with the Levant, where trading various goods, such as different raw materials and agricultural products, was quite lucrative. Such a crucial economic nexus allowed the Egyptian kings to benefit from trade and further build their fledgling kingdom.

From the above selection of examples, people decided to construct states not because they feared conflict. Instead, economic reasons pushed individuals to erect governments that could centralize and manage resources more effectively. One may find many more examples elsewhere. For instance, in prehistoric China, many cultures developed sophisticated social and political organizations. But when archaeologists excavated many prehistoric sites, based on the abundance of agricultural products found, they hypothesized that many such minuscule states and cultures formed so that agriculture and trade could be more efficiently controlled. Plus, the lands of prehistoric China were sparsely populated, so intercultural warfare should not be severe to the point where it would become the sole factor prodding the early Chinese to establish complex states. Balancing and evaluating the different factors, many historians agree that the economy was once again the main driving force behind the creation of governments and states.

Overall, this essay believes that the origin of the state is more an economic question than a philosophical or political one. Hobbes' argument that it was a fear of continuous conflict and violence driving people to form states underestimates the importance of the economy in the narrative. This underestimation is understandable, as Hobbes would have lacked the necessary tools and evidence to investigate his essential idea of the state of nature in history. Historians divide centuries of thinking on the origins of states into two groups. The first, including the prominent Karl Marx, argues that states arise from a social bargaining process. The elite grasp power to advance their interests and periodically provide services, such as basic infrastructure, education, or social security, to ensure the populace remains satisfied with their basic demands. However, this essay falls more into the second group of thinking, which includes philosophers like Locke and Rousseau. They claim that governments came into existence when people voluntarily chose to coordinate themselves, signing social contracts and swapping their individual freedom to be totally unrestrained for a state that protects their safety and other rights. Economic concerns usually guide and initiate this process of coordination. For today's states, fulfilling economic needs is still a vital criterion for judging the effectiveness of governments. Hence, historians should spend more time investigating whether economic factors would similarly be at play in the formation of early states.



Works Cited

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