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The Fundamentals of the State

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Abstract

Although ubiquitous today, the “state” did not always exist. Archaeological and historical assessments of state beginnings—and research on the characteristics of the state form in both past and present—help address how the state as a social, economic, and territorial construct became dominant. Utilizing the categories of politics, violence, literacy, and borders, this article examines how individuals and households are mutually implicated in negotiations of power and expressions of everyday life that have been present from before the inception of the state through to the modern day. The state is constituted and expressed through nested exploitative engagements predicated on actual and perceived benefits; the outcomes of the existence of the state range from collaborative platforms for integration to the realities of inequality, environmental degradation through future discounting, and institutionalized power dynamics. As a container for human interactions, the state may be situationally unwanted but also seems inescapable once initialized.

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INTRODUCTION

The state as a collectivity of people, organized by a hierarchy of administrators, is the de facto territorial container for contemporary life. This configuration is not, however, the default condition of the human species but instead was put into place—sometimes incrementally, sometimes precipitously—over the past 5,000 years. Concomitant with the terraforming of the planet through agriculture, people increasingly leveraged village-level social skills of display, aggrandizement, ritual, punishment, and persuasion across larger territorial areas and with greater numbers of individuals. The nested, mutually exploitative practices that individuals and groups placed on each other at the beginning of state formation have continued to structure the relationships between states and their inhabitants throughout the historical era and into the modern world. Strategies of mutual interdependence and exploitation characterize not only states' relationships with their inhabitants but also states' relationships with other states as they engage in cross-border alliances, seen in the formation of ancient empires as well as in modern politico-economic groups such as BRICS (a group of states that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and the European Union.

Like other philosophical constructs that are materially evident, states have a form and flow that result in a process of continual “*becoming* over the long-term,” in the words of Gosden & Malafouris (2015, p. 701, emphasis in original; see also Runciman 1982, p. 367). Yet this sense of “becoming” is not limited to the most obvious physical expressions of the state, such as monumentality, boundary making, and the architecture of control. States and their inhabitants continually invent new forms of interaction, resulting in not only the mutual dependencies of top-down and bottom-up interactions of agricultural investments and other forms of infrastructure (e.g., Janusek & Kolata 2004) but also what one could call “middle-out” channels of engagement and supervision (cf. Coleman 2014; Regulski 2018, p. 260; M.L. Smith 2018; Thompson 2007, p. 8). The consequent contexts and materialities of the state are created and experienced on a quotidian basis in which the same concept articulated by Gosden & Malafouris—“flow”—can be understood in the sense of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) to describe the experience of psychological fulfillment through the mastery of a complex series of instructions undertaken under restraint conditions and applied to the individual affective experience of the state at all socioeconomic levels.

Treatment of the “fundamentals” of the state begins from the premise that the state, as a configuration in which leaders are expected to be sequentially replaced while keeping the remainder of the political apparatus intact, was constituted to confer advantages to its inhabitants, such as protection from physical harm (warfare, natural disaster) through the process of exploitation (taxation, conscription, expropriation). States exist only when there is a capacity to elicit support from a significant proportion of their inhabitants, who not only acquiesce to the payments exacted from them because of perceived advantages of stability and transactional regularity but also actively engage in a process of symbol making to connect themselves and their households to political realms. Participating inhabitants of states engage in myriad forms of allegiance (singing anthems, appearing for the census, paying taxes, serving in the military, obeying laws) while receiving tokens of convenience or badges of legitimacy (coinage, passports, professional licenses) and outsourcing at least some of their worries to political leaders (via laws, security, and a judicial system structured to provide redress against private as well as public wrongs; children's education; retirement benefits; health care; and the establishment and defense of a worldview and a general sense of order).

In the ancient period, the outsourcing of individual redress began by entrusting rulers with complex religious ceremonies to which households contributed incremental support as a bulwark against catastrophe and as an insurance policy against divine caprice. Put simply, it was relatively easy for ordinary people to contribute their labor to build a pyramid or temple as a specific,

time-delimited activity and thereafter compel the ruler to take over the recurrent time-intensive responsibilities for addressing moral questions and sustaining the universe. Rulers subsequently used that same capacity for the organization of labor and matériel to create secular monumental structures that bolstered their claims to authority whether in settlements (palaces) or in the countryside (fortifications and boundary walls). State authorities, devolving their top-down and middle-out authority through specific nodal points (cities, towns, military bases), directed specific acts of construction and warfare through the displacement of personnel, thus solidifying and advertising their effectiveness through both portable and fixed installations that projected the “legibility” (sensu Scott 1998) of the state to far-flung residents.

The relationships of states and inhabitants, and the agentive actions undertaken by people at all levels of the social hierarchy, result in similar managerial outcomes such that the actual mode of governance (e.g., democracy, monarchy, communism) is of only passing historical interest. Nor does the state have to function well for its occupants to doggedly entangle themselves in a web of mutual dependence (e.g., Ariely 2020, Gupta 2012, Yoltar 2020). Individuals’ willingness to work with a recalcitrant or unhelpful bureaucracy is seen in the oldest states as well as in the modern day: Mesopotamian and Roman archives are replete with missives in which bureaucrats plead for more time, more resources, and more beer in order to reward subordinates and complete their projects (e.g., McLaughlin 2018, Oppenheim 1967).

STATE BEGINNINGS

As territorial constructs whose physical boundaries are almost always beyond the limits of human eyesight, states encompass three long-standing human processes: cultural connectivity, network interactions, and knowledge of landscapes. Long before the state, people were in contact with one another across vast spaces both directly and indirectly, with widespread cultural cohesion seen in the material and style of objects traded across short and long distances (Stiner 2014, Miller & Wang 2022). Political control through hierarchy, through the creation of scarcity, and through the real or desired control of others’ autonomy have likewise all been part of human society for tens of thousands of years or even longer (Graeber & Wengrow 2021, Wadley & Hayden 2015). Why did the state appear for the first time “only” ~5,000 years ago? As in the case of other time-consuming and costly human social inventions, the specific rationale for the inception of the state seems to involve costs (in human time and material resources) that reached a tipping point of appearing to be bearable compared to alternatives of crisis and chaos. Archaeologists and historians have identified the prime movers of state formation as involving multiple simultaneous opportunities, constraints, and crises precipitating a rapid collective-yet-direct response (Frangipane 2020, p. 17; Hassan 1993, pp. 552–55; Stein 1975, p. 79; Wang 2007, p. 17). The logistical innovators who knit together the first states did so by utilizing intersecting strategies of coercion and reward; while the first states might have been short-lived, the concept of integrated territories provided a template of memory and aspiration to which leaders and followers returned again and again.

Viewed from the perspective of the ordinary person, small-scale interactions at the village level became hypertrophic across continental-sized spaces through a series of agentive actions by both leaders and followers. The state did not “emerge,” as anthropologists sometimes write, but was deliberately brought into being and sustained on a quotidian basis as individuals augmented their experiences of village life through new layers of opportunity and constraint. The transitional conditions for the establishment of the state are challenging to discern because they occurred prior to, or just at, the moment of the widespread development of script. As a result, archaeology, oral history, and cultural memory are the means by which prestate circumstances of political, social, ritual, and economic interaction are revealed; using these approaches, researchers have skillfully

integrated what can be known into a compelling series of insights about the process of political consolidation. Frangipane's (2020) examination of the prestate era in Mesopotamia and Anatolia illustrates the dynamic range of regional developments that preceded states. Similarly, Runciman (1982) peels through the subtleties of local leadership in ancient Greece to identify the incremental and shifting power relationships that by degrees became entities that could be described with qualifiers—the protostate, the semistate, the embryonic state—as a transitional set of conditions that did not always result in a recognizable and enduring political configuration. Repeated iterations of conflict and alliance, in what Marcus (2008, p. 257) has called the “cycling” of political authority, resulted in variable expressions of cooperation and collective action (e.g., Blanton & Fargher 2008, Carballo 2013, Fargher & Heredia Espinoza 2016). Dynamic formative stages of social, economic, and political interactions are demonstrated archaeologically and historically in many global regions: Egypt (Moreno García 2019, Regulski 2018), Mesopotamia (McMahon 2012), Mesoamerica (Freidel 2018, LeCount & Yaeger 2010, S. Martin 2020, McAnany 2019, Stark 2021), Central Asia (Frachetti 2012), the Caucasus (A.T. Smith 2003), the ancient Mediterranean (Parkinson & Galaty 2009), the Indian subcontinent (Singh 2008), Southeast Asia (Zakharov 2012), early China (F. Li 2013; M. Li 2018, pp. 115–32), and Northern Europe (Byock 2001).

Through acts of mutual exploitation and through the perceptions of the possibility of mutual benefit, people shaped the initial configuration of territorial aggrandizement and cohesion that eventually resulted in what we recognize as the first states in the archaeological cultures of Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, South America, Africa, and Eurasia (Ando & Richardson 2017, Bang & Scheidel 2013, Feinman & Marcus 1998, McMahon 2020, Moreno García 2019, Yoffee & Seri 2019). Archaeological evidence (including stylistically similar special-access and quotidian material objects, fortifications across a landscape, and differential elaboration in mortuary treatment) provides an on-the-ground demonstration of how states are manifested as a “combination of economic productivity, ideological legitimacy, and military organization” (Runciman 1982, p. 362). Each of these three components of statecraft constituted specific material actions involving purposeful, agentive actions by everyone who provided labor or crafted raw materials, paid obeisance to leaders and deities, or delivered supplies to an army.

Statecraft was achieved not by accident but with a reflexive self-awareness of the trade-offs of this innovative mode of life for rulers and the ruled alike, an awareness that trickles into literature and social memory. The *Mahabharata* of the first millennium BCE, one of the Indian subcontinent's foundational texts, contains a dialogue in which a warrior philosophizes, “We have learned that peoples without kings have vanished in the past, devouring each other, the way fishes in the water eat the smaller ones” (Singh 2017, p. 60). Although construed as a mechanism for the common good, leadership also comes with a price; the *Digba Nikaya*, from a slightly later era, records that at a mythical time of chaos, theft, and strife, a group of people “went to the one among them who was the most handsome and good-looking, most charismatic and with the greatest authority and said, ‘come, being (you) criticize whoever should be criticized, accuse whoever should be accused, and banish whoever should be banished; we will (each) hand over to you a portion of rice’” (Singh 2017, p. 34). Literary traditions the world over contain similar expressions of mutual dependence: the “elected dictator” of Aristotle's writings (Runciman 1982, p. 357); the *Sundiata Epic* of Old Mali, which proclaims of one ruler that “[t]hanks to the strength of his followers, he became king of a vast country; with them Mamadi Kani conquered all the lands which stretch from the Sankarani to the Bourd” (Niane 1965, p. 3); the Zhou-period song that proclaims, “We have finished all our field-work/Throughout the thirty leagues/We are going out to battle/To help the Son of Heaven” [Waley 2005 (1937), p. 126].

The territorial ambitions of state leaders are necessarily interwoven with the capacity of populations within their realms to support them materially and financially, a process made easier when populations are concentrated:

The transition to protostatehood could be made only when some of these petty kingdoms were able to achieve a military superiority over their rivals for long enough to involve themselves directly in building dikes and draining marshes. The higher productivity thereby made possible triggered in its turn a need both for increased corvée or slave labor and for a permanent bureaucracy located in a central capital. (Runciman 1982, p. 364)

The provision of large, landscape-scale investments in highly visible “public goods” (sensu Ostrom 1990) justifies but also further enmeshes the state’s presence in household life in both rural and urban areas (Murtazashvili 2016; Redman 1999, p. 47). As nodes of interaction for commerce and religion, cities and other population centers were an essential element of state formation; cities could exist without states (M.L. Smith 2003, p. 13), but states could not exist without population centers that served as nodes of commerce, administration, and revenue (Blondé et al. 2020, p. 170; Freidel 2018; Monroe 2020; Nash 1979; Stanton et al. 2020; Ur 2020). A city is a locus of change for both leaders and followers, what, according to Swyngedouw (2020), the “polis has always been, namely the site for political encounter and place for enacting the new, the improbable. . . the site for experimentation with, the staging and production of new radical imaginaries. . .” (p. 130). Research in Mesoamerica, for example, shows that cities had populations who were at first focused on the construction of religious monuments and that the development of political leaders came afterward (Love & Guernsey 2022). Thompson (2007, p. 11) assesses cities as places that bring new political agents to the fore, noting the outside role and “strong revolutionary potential” of middle-class groups, which tend to be supportive of the state and concentrated in urban areas.

COMPONENTS OF STATES

Politics

Politics can be described as a process that permeates groups of all sizes, the “everyday choreography of public management” (Swyngedouw 2020, p. 126). Janks (2010, p. 186) identifies the distinction between “Politics with a big *P* and politics with a small *p*” as one that encompasses what appears to be two ends of a spectrum. Big-*P* politics is about governmental-level concerns such as trade agreements, peacekeeping, and genocide, while little-*p* politics is about “the micropolitics of everyday life. . . the minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are. . . the politics of identity and place. . . [I]t is about how we treat other people day by day” (Janks 2010, p. 188). The grinding integration of big-*P* and little-*p* politics results in flashes of coalition or rejection, but it also illustrates that much of what happens on the big-*P* level affects ordinary people unevenly and that much of what happens on the little-*p* level of politics is invisible or of little consequence to the decision-making efforts of an administrative hierarchy.

Yet little-*p* politics dominates conversations and daily lives in ways that continually vex local administrators. In her discussion of the multiple forms of traditional ritual and secular authority that exist in the Afghan countryside, Murtazashvili (2016, p. 129) reported a typical neighbor-to-neighbor dispute from the perspective of a local village leader:

A few days ago, there was a problem between two people. One side had a donkey. Their donkey was running around in the neighbor’s field and eating their wheat. The person went to the district security commander (police chief) and then to the woluswal [district governor]. The woluswal sent the dispute back to me. And I sat between them. I told them that this is not such a big problem. If the donkey eats a lot of wheat, then your neighbor will simply pay you some money. I told them that I didn’t want to hear any more about this donkey.

The interacting and often conflicting lenses of animal volition, human concepts of property, and agricultural vicissitudes provide a glimpse into the social workings of village life wherever it is found. These matters never cease, and, in the context of the state, the smallest scale of settlement unit is the inescapable basis upon which successive nested groupings of decision-making units are made. Village leaders and regional chiefs seek redress from perpetual trifling demands through programmatic solutions from further up the hierarchy not only to acquire remuneration and recognition of their expertise from the state, but also to achieve enough harmony within their jurisdictions to be able to devote their energies toward their own aggrandizement opportunities. The ability of small-scale leaders to upwardly outsource the solution to local grievances is yet another way in which the state as an institution relies on a robust middle-out quest for status and stability (e.g., Regulski 2018).

Political integration is enacted not only through economic activities but also through emotion and attempts to control hearts and minds, even though these affective elements are also under the sway of other arbiters, including religious groups. Religious leaders are integrated into the apparatus of the state in various ways: in the countryside, as recipients of political largesse and “land grants” with the intent of bolstering agricultural production (e.g., Stein 1960, 1975); in cities, as managers of temples that could be commandeered to become garrisons or tax centers (Clancier & Gorre 2021, pp. 92–93). Rulers can also make simultaneous use of religious iconography and text to display their conquest over territory, whether by implanting donations to religious institutions across a landscape or by capturing and moving religious icons [Liverani 2021 (2002), p. 84; Pattaratorn Chirapavati 2020]. Some cooption and cooperation were likely due to the fact that in the premodern era, religious institutions represented a pool of educated and experienced personnel with not only the skills to contribute to bureaucracy but also the capacity to record and protect the creation of official history. Cooperation with religious authorities can bolster political leaders’ claims of divine sanction for their rule, but leaders also differentially endorse religious groups and foment competition to suit their own purposes, as seen in ancient times (e.g., Clancier & Gorre 2021), in the medieval period (Gunn 2018), and more recently (Fox 2018).

Conflict and Violence

Max Weber’s [2004 (1919)] idea of states having a monopoly of force has percolated through archaeological discussions of the earliest state formation, but the relationship between states and violence is more complex than the oft-repeated formulaic that “violence lies at the heart of the state” (Singh 2017, p. 10; see also Carneiro 1970, McMahon 2014). States are not only formed through violence, but also continually enacted through violence through boundary making (Runciman 1982, p. 366), crossing territorial boundaries to attack other states, enacting control over dissenting groups, hobbling competitors, dismantling the tombs of predecessors (M. Li 2018, pp. 132–33), and policing and punishing those who transgress laws related to physical or financial crimes [J. Martin 2018; Viel 2012 (2002)]. As a result, states direct as much (or more) force against their citizens as they do against other states: Even when a state is at peace with its territorial neighbors, it constantly uses bureaucratic and administrative mechanisms to commit violence against its own inhabitants, biota, and environment. In addition to directly inflicting harm, states endorse both structural and physical violence through tacit or overt support for vigilante groups and carceral organizations.

Although those with the capacity for middle-out integrations with the state, such as the middle class, bureaucrats, administrators, and other professional salaried groups, generally benefit from having the state safeguard their interests, there are also many instances in which state leaders commit violence against real or perceived threats from such groups. The Persian kings of the first

millennium BCE faced revolts by local elites (Clancier & Gorre 2021, p. 101), medieval Japanese inscriptions dismissively record the plaint of local elders to retain community autonomy over taxation (Zakharov 2012), and authoritarian governments today deal with resistance by students and the middle class (Thompson 2007) by manipulating the assignment of subordinates in order to suppress competition for power (e.g., Murtazashvili 2016, pp. 216–17). States are thus not limited in their use of force against enemies; more interesting is the way that states enact constraints and violence against allies.

Mbembe's (2003, p. 11) concept of "necropolitics" encompasses the idea that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die." This power, amply demonstrated in genocidal modern states, implies that decisions about life and death depend on an emotionally distant hierarchical authority that inflicts trauma (e.g., David & Barney 2018). Archaeological and ethnographic evidence suggests, however, that the structural violence of both abstract decision-making and specific instances of cruelty long precede the state, evident even in the smallest of bands where newborn, disabled, and elderly individuals can be summarily killed or abandoned (e.g., Hill & Hurtado 1996, Little & Papadopoulos 1998). States provide many sources of oppression, to be sure, but also paradoxically create the circumstances of collective engagement in which resistance flourishes, whether through subterfuge (Boyle 2010), collective petitions and legal redress (Zakharov 2012), "foot-dragging" while feigning compliance (Scott 1985, p. xvi), or carrying out ostensibly innocent actions such as dancing or carrying umbrellas in ways that play up cross-cutting social, gender, and ethnic distinctions (e.g., Hess 2006, Hiner 2005, Lim 2015, Song 2015). The potential stage for both individual resistance and community solidarity may explain why the state has a powerful affective hold even under conditions of oppression, as seen when those who might escape the boundaries of their states elect to remain or return to their countries of citizenship (e.g., Mandela 1994, Menchú 1984).

State leaders manipulate human power through the privileging of some groups' access to goods and services, including food, medical care, and education. In addition, the structural violence of taxation consists of many different strategies of extraction starting in the ancient period (Valk & Soto Marín 2021), including tax-farming, which endorses independent contractors to extort local inhabitants (e.g., Johnson & Koyama 2014); excise taxes on food and drink, which disproportionately burden low-income workers (e.g., Blondé et al. 2020, p. 179); and direct taxation with threats of punishment for noncompliance (e.g., Roitman 2005). State strategies of structural violence and resource extraction also affect nonhuman biota (Barua 2021). Infrastructure can be characterized as a form of violence that enforces human power against nature, as seen in the ecological impact of military establishments (Isiksal 2021); dams, canals, and sea barriers, which rearrange local hydrology (Chowdhury 2019; Redman 1999, pp. 133–36; VanValkenburgh 2021); and the delineation of zones of natural resources to favor some species over others [Sellars 2009 (1997), p. 22].

States create and sanction violence against intangibles as well. Memory is manipulated through the creation of new versions of history to replace even what people have witnessed with their own eyes. Given that "[p]ublic memory is innately political" (Goggins 2019, p. 68), it is not surprising that new, "official" histories are promulgated to emphasize the legitimacy of violence and warfare whether through text (Bevernage & Wouters 2018, Porter 2001) or iconography (McVicker 2007). In historical narratives of state formation, sanctioned acts of violence are not initiated solely by a ruler, but in concert with followers' expectations of order at home and the "cartographic desires" of territorial expansion abroad [A.T. Smith 2003, p. 29; see also Desmond 2006, Liverani 2021 (2002)]. External violence in the form of warfare is presented to subjects as a necessary expenditure that integrates their daily lives with battles in faraway places, a zeal for victory over lands that most people will never see. The outcome of warfare consolidates not only the fervor of the moment

but also an accretionary sense of possession in which history is woven into the discourses of the present, as Gunn (2018, pp. 2–3) discusses with reference to the medieval Hundred Years’ War, which “consolidated English national and political identity, as ordinary men and women were taught to pray for the king’s success, honor St. George, and pay taxes for the common good, generating a passion that demanded ‘justice upon the traitors’ when Normandy fell in 1450.” Centuries later, the Continent and the Isle continue their adversarial dialogue, as is the case for so many international conflicts.

Literacy and Power

States make themselves legible through discernable actions that leave a physical trace (McMahon 2020, pp. 35–37; Scott 1998), but people engage with those actions through their agentive perception and the internalization of what they experience, a process that Janks (2010) views as an expression of agentive “literacy.” While states are often accompanied by some form of word capture in inscriptions or portable documents, Janks’s view of literacy is about not just recipients’ ability to read and write, but also the capacity to know about and competently engage with the variety of images, directives, and consequences put forth by state leaders.

The development of writing systems provided the opportunity for communication across distance and allows us today to ascertain the subtleties of governance, conflict, affiliation, and aggrandizement that characterized state growth and change (Houston 2004, Postgate 2013). Like many other bureaucratic innovations, however, writing was a borrowed technology. In Egypt, for example, archaeological evidence shows that the first writing preceded the consolidation of the first state: Ivory “tags” and clay sealings were indicative of the use of writing for merchant transactions as well as for funerary amulets for as long as 200 years before script was used for administrative or royal purposes starting with the First Dynasty (Regulski 2018). Similarly, coinage was at first a mercantile concept but then quickly became associated with the legitimacy of a particular city (Schaps 2014) and with states when rulers recognized the ability of coinage to serve as an easily distributed form of fiscal control (e.g., Sargent & Velde 2002) and propaganda (e.g., Wheatley & Dunn 2021).

In states, text-based literacy exists not only in laws and proclamations but also in the credentials, licenses, and degrees that bureaucracies issue to certify individual achievement. States also create and endorse the financial webs that imbue even the most banal of transactions with a sense of purpose for both providers and purchasers, whether through the creation of banking regulations, official mints, price controls, subsidies, or even the national lottery (the lottery being the most telling instance of all as an example of the promise of state help through individual buy-in; see, e.g., Casey 2006, Schmidt 2019). The effective dissemination of state-level authority through written directives can be extremely rapid, as noted in the assessment by Magnani et al. (2021) of the COVID-19 pandemic; utilizing observations from a remote region of Norway, the authors illustrate how localized responses were soon superseded by the programmatic responses of the state, which are materially likely to be more evident precisely because they are more ubiquitous and standardized even during a crisis of novel conditions.

In the case of the distribution of state tokens both past and present, the recipient’s literacy is a necessary complement to the state’s proclamation. Ancient texts all seem equally authoritative to us today, particularly when we view them in durable form as a stone inscription or as a formatted document, but the viability of any text can be measured only in the ongoing act of reading: A proclamation without an audience has no power. The Indian king Ashoka, indisputed ruler of the Ganges region of Pataliputra (modern Patna) who introduced the concept of stone inscriptions to the subcontinent in the third century BCE, noted this mismatch between authorial intent and

recipient enthusiasm with a certain poignancy on a political inscription in the far-flung region of Kalinga; in the text, he commanded that the inscription should be regularly read aloud, even if there was only one person present to hear [Thapar 1997 (1961), p. 258].

The lived landscape of the state is “read” and internalized by its inhabitants at all levels of the sociopolitical hierarchy as a phenomenological process in which the landscape simultaneously encodes reminders of power, sources of memory, and the contemporary moment (M.L. Smith 2020). Even the most basic creations of infrastructure—roads, bridges, dams—have a style of construction, if not also a style of decoration. The power of imposition and the literacy of use are engaged through art and architecture both in the countryside and within the urban realm (Bahrani 2014, Morgan 2023, Porter 2001, Ristvet 2015). Power is expressed through urban planning such as the creation of new capital cities (Harmanşah 2012, Joffe 1998, Mkrtchyan 2017) or the replanning of extant areas (e.g., Jordan 2004), but the receipt of that power depends on individuals electing to live there. Leaders express knowledge and authority through the design of infrastructure (Cowen 2020), while end users express their knowledge and authority through their use, misuse, and abuse of infrastructure (Anand 2015). State leaders and ordinary people mutually create and engage in literacy through ephemera such as flags and through intangible phenomena such as songs and performances. From the Brandenburg Concertos to the songs of Bruce Springsteen, politicians and musicians facilitate mutual admiration and support, but there is also opportunity for opposition when musicians request that their music not be used in political campaigns (Stockdale & Harrington 2018).

Borders and Boundaries

Concepts of landscapes and placemaking long predate the state, in which the search for a suitable environment has been conditioned by an emotionally informed perception of landscapes starting with our earliest human ancestors (e.g., Rockman 2009, p. 61). Individuals’ agentive forays beyond their homes have always been wrapped in a mantle of risk and reward, but the technologies of the state along with the capacity to create and sustain peaceful conditions within borders are expectations harbored by both state leaders and state inhabitants (e.g., Neustadt 2011). The nested integration of different units of population, from the household to the village to the region, is carried out across different planes of activity, in which central places serve as nodes that direct resources inward toward state leaders and state largesse outward toward progressively smaller settlements (e.g., Lawrence & Rey 2020). Today, states are held in place because of their boundaries; every nation has terrestrial or aquatic edges defended by both static treaties and active militaries. States’ external relations of power have often been marked by the transgression of perceived territorial boundaries (M.L. Smith 2005) in which frontiers take on a tangible material presence in areas that are often far from a state’s biggest population centers. Although the concept of a boundary is central to the phenomenology of the state from the perspective of both leaders and inhabitants, actual boundaries are continually subject to negotiation whether on the largest scale during warfare (e.g., Magosci 2002) or on the smallest scale as seen in the negotiation over the possession of new solid ground that emerges in rivers between nations (e.g., Yong 2020).

Ancient states’ claims to their surroundings were effectively demonstrated in the optimistic language of control, such as the Romans’ reference to the entire Mediterranean as “mare nostrum” (“our sea”) by the first century BCE (Gomes 2020, p. 498) or the centralizing reference to the “Middle Kingdom” as early as the Shang period of the second millennium BCE (Kwong 2015, p. 785). When optimism (with its attendant broadcasting of the potential of force to back up the claim) was insufficient, states also constructed physical barriers such as the 220-km Très Long Mur of third-millennium Ebla (Lafont 2010), the multiple defensive walls of the first-millennium

ce Sassanians (Howard-Johnston 1995), or the multiple walls of China (F. Li 2013). Roads, while technically an infrastructure that crosses boundaries, have nonetheless also marked the ability of a political entity to define its landscape through the end points of travel, such as the 100-km causeway between the Maya sites of Coba and Yaxuna (González & Stanton 2013), Inka roads of the Andes (Hyslop 1984), Neo-Assyrian roads (Düring 2018), and roads of the Roman Empire (Kolb 2019). Today the internal mechanisms of roads and railroads can still mark a sharp terminus of national jurisdiction and identity, such as the abrupt incompatibility of rail gauges between Spain and France (Canizares 2000) or the switch from left-side to right-side driving at national borders (Sparke 2000).

STATES EXIST AND ARE NOT GOING AWAY

To modern theorists who see the state primarily through a negative lens as an inherently exploitive concept, an acknowledgment that the state can uniquely achieve some outcomes of perceived benefit helps to explain why the state came into existence not merely once or twice, but over and over again in history. Archaeological assessments of the conditions of early state formation highlight the potential for conflict that accompanied agricultural development and settled village lifeways at the end of the Pleistocene as a scenario in which “the intolerable struggle for scarce land or resources triggers warfare, which leads to cooperation, competition, mutual defense, and eventually state government to keep peace and allocate resources” (Flannery 1972, p. 406). Today, states are the only (or most likely) entity to systematically enact and enforce policies that preserve natural or human resources for the long term [e.g., Sellars 2009 (1997)], address social injustices in the present through the continual upgrading of laws that reflect social evolution (e.g., Nicol et al. 2018), create infrastructure and other high-cost emplacements that exceed local capacities of revenue and labor management (e.g., Murtazashvili 2016, p. 209), sponsor health care and health innovation (e.g., Proksch et al. 2019), invest in human capital through the support of educational institutions (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos 2018), and take actions to protect individuals through programs of rescue and compensation at times of crisis in ways that create “legibility” through both the memory of aid and the creation of a durable landscape of care (e.g., Dash & Walia 2020).

Within states, the dialogue of both leaders and followers is not about whether the state should exist, but about what type of government, representation, taxation, and citizen-to-state and state-to-citizen services are desired and appropriate. The existence of the state is a foundational element of external relationships as well. In ancient times, rulers engaged in communication to affirm their mutual respect while asking for favors and alliances (e.g., Moran 1992); more recently, sovereign states have become increasingly integrated with larger nested hierarchies that have charters of integration and formal processes of interaction [the League of Nations, the United Nations, the European Union, ASEAN, APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), BRICS, and OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries)], as well as with shape-shifting collectivities such as the G5, G7, G8, G20, and the numerically larger number of countries encompassed in the “3G” (G.S. Smith 2011). In all these configurations, the state is understood to be the basic unit of representation whose internal political, social, and economic dynamics are encoded in the actions of membership and punctuated at each international meeting.

CONCLUSION

From unsteady beginnings thousands of years ago, the concept of the state has completely permeated and structured human societies such that no feasible alternatives to the state can at present be envisioned. Despite the existence today of other institutions that could supplant the state (e.g., international organizations or a global network of commercially interconnected cities), the state

remains the fundamental unit of household life and international policy making. States carry within them and intensify the factors of interaction that were present in human societies stretching back to our species' ancestral beginnings, but the phenomena of politics, violence, literacy, and borders became intensely intertwined when population sizes, territorial extents, and layers of administration grew larger in an ongoing, dynamic process. Throughout history, states have appeared and disappeared, grown and consolidated, split and regrouped, all the while changing leaders and cycling through periods of greater and lesser power vis-à-vis their territorial neighbors.

The ongoing dynamisms of internal interactions and boundary negotiations give states a powerful configuration and territorial trope for action, making any specific state inherently fragile (*sensu* Yoffee & Seri 2019) while making the overall concept of the state surprisingly robust and resilient. In both modern and ancient states, the mutual dependence of leaders and followers has been not only promoted by rulers seeking to affirm the righteousness of their positions, but also personalized by the state's inhabitants who adopt for themselves the reflected glory and comforting sturdiness of a territorial entity much larger than themselves. The fact that states can ever supersede humans' propensities for localized interactions speaks to the strength of collectives captured within territorial containers, in which everyday actions of strategic acquiescence constitute the glue that holds states together.

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