

**Worshiping Power**  
**An Anarchist View of Early**  
**State Formation**

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## Introduction

FOR OVER A HUNDRED years, anarchists have been accused of both romanticism and of radical cynicism; the former, for insisting that humanity's original condition is total freedom and that even now we can create societies free of coercive institutions and live on the basis of mutual aid, solidarity, and voluntary association; and the latter for maintaining that all forms of government, from the most dictatorial to the most democratic, are fundamentally oppressive, and that capitalism is incapable of producing anything but misery. Now, mainstream scholarship is finally lending credibility to the anti-authoritarian intuition of revolutionaries like Mikhail Bakunin and Emma Goldman, and to the subversive theories of scientists like Pyotr Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus.

The question of how and why states were formed is the keystone of Western civilization's creation mythology. Most readers will share my experience of having been brought up in a society where history begins with the appearance of the State. Anything outside its domain is a Dark Age, *terra incognita*, a savage and barbarian land. We are taught that communities created the hierarchical structures of territorial governance that would eventually solidify as states out of a need to organize more efficiently, to respond to natural disasters or population growth, to administer large-scale infrastructure, to defend against hostile outsiders, to protect individual rights through a social contract, or to regulate economic production and surplus value. All of these hypotheses are demonstrably false, yet we are continually indoctrinated to accept them, to keep us from grasping the predatory, parasitic, elitist, and completely unnecessary nature of the State. Official versions of the story of state formation can be triumphant, portraying the State as an escape from barbarism, or they can be cynical, acknowledging the State to be a continuation of human savagery, but at all costs we must believe that state formation was

necessary to human progress and that states are an indispensable part of global society today.

Thanks to social movements and anti-authoritarian struggles in the streets, and a growing recognition—starting with the near nuclear disasters of the Cold War and accelerating with climate change and mass extinction—that the State may well be the death of us all, room has finally been created for the scholarship that backs up what has been obvious for centuries: that the State is the enemy of freedom, human well-being, and the health of the planet. The available data demonstrate the universality of resistance to state formation, the predominance of failed states over successful states, the parasitical and coercive nature of states, and the existence of stateless societies with high population densities, a capacity for defensive warfare, complex infrastructure, and other presumed instigators or products of state formation.<sup>1</sup> Both Hobbesian and

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1 Representing the conservative end of the academic spectrum, with narratives that are frequently Eurocentric and state-privileging, we have the collection edited by Grinin, Bondarenko, et al. They acknowledge that “nowadays postulates about the state as the only possible form of political and sociocultural organization of the post-primitive society, about *a priori* higher level of development of a state society in comparison with any non-state one do not seem so undeniable as a few years ago. It has become evident that the non-state societies are not necessarily less complex and less efficient” (Bondarenko, Grinin, and Korotayev, “Alternatives of Social Evolution” in *The Early State, its Alternatives and Analogues*, edited by Leonid E. Grinin, Robert L. Carneiro, Dmitri M. Bondarenko, Nikolay N. Kradin, and Andrey V. Korotayev [Volgograd, Russia: Uchitel Publishing House, 2004], 5). Note that while questioning the unilineal statist mythology, the idea that history comes down on a single track, called progress—thus the present social forms are the best yet—they still cleave to Eurocentric and ultimately statist concepts like “primitive,” linear complexity (as in, more or less complex, utilizing culturally specific criteria that favor Western civilization). They also frequently impose Western meanings that privilege a certain, cynical vision of

social contract doctrine about the State, which pop historians and social scientists perpetuated for ages through a selective culling of evidence, have been irreparably discredited. The State was not a survival measure to help people aggressively elevate themselves from a “nasty and brutish” struggle for survival in a dog-eat-dog world; nor was the State, at any point, the result of a consensual process designed to protect people’s liberties and well-being.

What’s more, the State is losing its place as the default protagonist of history. Most academics and writers are forced to acknowledge the antipathy the State has had to overcome throughout its development, though they continue to sympathize with this coercive institution. No longer able to glorify it, they try to rescue it as a necessary evil. Today, only pop historians can get away with writing the unqualified tale of great men and the empires they commanded. More serious thinkers, studying social networks, the diffusion of power, or the universality of resistance, are increasingly recognizing the ways that history has been shaped by the conflict between rulers and the ruled.<sup>2</sup> Others, like anthropologist James C. Scott, are picking up the torch carried forward by Pierre Clastres to conduct research from the perspective of populations directly in resistance to state authority.

An increasingly convincing picture of the origins of the State is emerging. However, participants in anti-state movements have

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power in human relations, on social structures, customs, and interactions in societies operating under a completely different paradigm, without showing the slightest courtesy of acknowledging the meanings and values as they are understood in those societies. On the parasitical nature of states, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). For examples of stateless societies organizing complex infrastructure and technologies, see Peter Gelderloos, *Anarchy Works* (Berkeley: Ardent Press, 2010).

2 See, for example, the history of resistance under the British Empire, Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

not necessarily been paying attention, perhaps due to a residual mistrust in the very academic institutions that have systematically played the role of state apologists. I would argue that we should not hold back in modifying and updating our theories in light of new research, especially since our struggles have been the force that has revealed the failings of the dominant world structures and made such research conceivable and necessary. Only by constantly renewing our theoretical frameworks can we show how the manner in which states emerged thousands of years ago is in fact immediately relevant to our daily struggles and tribulations. Unfortunately, many people who oppose the State, or who at least reject the dominant models of governance, fall back on one of several stock theories that are almost as dogmatic and inaccurate as the statist doctrine. For anarchist theory to advance in the question of state formation, the answers provided by the approaches of dialectical materialism, environmental determinism, and primitivism need to be discarded or heavily revised.<sup>3</sup>

In order to critique these three approaches, it would help to clarify the concept of the State. I think it is useful to refer both to the ethical, idealist, and oppositional definition proposed by anarchists, for example the framework Bakunin lays out in "Rousseau's Theory of the State" and *Statism and Anarchy*: "If there is a State, there must be domination of one class by another

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3 Though primitivism is usually the only one of these approaches accused of ideological cherry-picking, they all bring to their historical analysis the very vision they seek to prove; to primitivism, history is a lie covering the primary evil of civilization; to dialectical materialism it is an objective tension of productive forces; and to environmental determinism a mechanistic and humanistic belief that everyone, everywhere, is the same, moved only by the primacy of that physical environment which can be claimed to predate and thus determine human activity. See Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) for the materialist view; Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) for environmental determinism; and on primitivism John Zerzan, *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

and, as a result, slavery; the State without slavery is unthinkable—and this is why we are the enemies of the State"; as well as the structural, evolutionary definition of anthropologists, which gives quantitative and analytical criteria to differentiate the State from other forms of social organization. The latter, in its simplest form, identifies a bureaucratic, territorial, coercive organization with multiple levels of administration, in which power is institutional rather than personal, and power-holders monopolize (at least ideally) the legitimate use of force and the codification of morality.<sup>4</sup> Both of these definitions will be further developed throughout the text. I think it is useful to combine them in an unresolved tension in order to achieve both strategic clarity and analytical clarity, the latter to allow us to distinguish historical changes and the former in order to root our new understanding within a struggle for freedom. There is no learning without taking sides, and there is no theory that does not also project a vision of the future.

According to dialectical materialism, the State is a product of class divisions in society: government is an organizing tool of the owning class, and different forms of governance are determined by a society's economic mode of production. The problem with this theory is that state formation cannot be the product of class divisions in society because it precedes such divisions, as argued by Pierre Clastres. A mechanism of political power is required to permit class divisions to grow, and a mechanism of spiritual power to allow concepts like surplus and duty to appear. On the whole, what early Marxists analyzed as material conditions and superstructure tend to evolve simultaneously, but if one

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4 Bakunin "Rousseau's Theory of the State" (1873) and *Statism and Anarchy* (1873), Leonid E. Grinin, "The Early State and Its Analogues: A Comparative Analysis," in *The Early State, Its Alternatives and Analogues*, edited by Grinin, Carneiro, Bondarenko, et al., 88–136; and Dmitri M. Bondarenko, "Kinship, Territoriality and the Early State Lower Limit," in *Social Evolution and History* 7, No. 1, edited by Henri J.M. Claessen, Renée Hagesteijn, and Pieter van de Velde (Moscow: Uchitel Publishing House, 2008), 19–53.

had to simplify, numerous timelines of state evolution show that what materialists assume to be a cause is more often an effect. Turning material and other forms of determinism on their heads, Christopher Boehm, in an extensive survey of stateless societies, demonstrated that the key factor allowing a society to be stateless was not its mode of production or geographic conditions, but an ethical and political determination to prevent the emergence of hierarchy: what he referred to as "reverse dominance hierarchy," in which special functions were compartmentalized rather than centralized and potential leaders were closely watched, and were abandoned, exiled, or assassinated if they exceeded their powers or acted in a greedy or authoritarian manner. In contrast to a mechanistic trend in academia that would dismiss freedom as a subjective illusion or meaningless concept, we anarchists assert that will, both individual and collective (at which level it is often read as culture), is an indispensable force for shaping our society, our mode of production, and our relationship to the earth.<sup>5</sup>

Capitalism can easily be read as the motor of the modern state, and at a certain moment in European history, the needs of an emerging class of investors, merchants, and workshop owners exceeded the political capacities of the absolute monarchies, with their cumbersome, unresponsive bureaucracies oriented towards the needs of a landowning aristocracy. The bourgeois class forced the creation of rationalized, democratic governments capable of proactive social reengineering, a sort of top-down terrorism that would leave the parasitism of earlier states behind and transform the whole of social life into an accessory of economic production and state power. Never mind that this process can be more accurately read as the imposition of social control than as the accumulation of capital, though the latter has also been an essential force. A longer-term analysis shows that such power struggles have transformed models of state organization many times

5 Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley, Abe Stein (1974; repr., New York: Zone Books, 1989). Christopher Boehm, "Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy," *Current Anthropology* 34, No. 3 (June 1993).

in the past, and that with great frequency states have taken the initiative to transform society and implement new productive models. Sometimes capitalists have modernized government in order to increase their power, and sometimes governments have imposed proactive measures to rescue capitalists from their own shortsightedness. However, capitalists and their predecessors—slaveowners, moneylenders, merchant-investors—owe their very existence to the State. In early states, concentration of political and spiritual power precedes economic stratification in society. Many societies at the cusp of state formation lacked significant forms of economic exploitation. As a general rule, reciprocity is the basis of society and culture.<sup>6</sup> It was the political power that early states accumulated that allowed them to rework the basic foundations of society in order to make exploitation feasible.

Hundreds or even thousands of years of social evolution, along authoritarian or "homoarchic" lines, were required for the emergence of haves and have-nots, individual property, quantification of value, toilers and parasites. And parallel to these proto-state societies, we have examples of alternative forms of social evolution with an equal technological complexity and similar productive techniques, that chose decentralized forms of organization, and non- or even anti-authoritarian cultural values. As regards societies with little or no economic stratification, there are hundreds of examples of human societies practicing a variety of modes of production and different forms of political organization, from hunter-gatherers in California to agriculturalists in southwest Asia, with no clear pattern, no deterministic link between one and the other. Even among primates of the same species, practicing the exact same "mode of production," one can find significant differences in the level of hierarchy between different groups.<sup>7</sup>

Looking at the native populations of the Americas, Pierre Clastres cites examples of societies that switched from sedentary agriculture to nomadic hunting without any significant change

6 Clastres, *Society Against the State*, 49.

7 Bondarenko, Grinin, and Korotayev, "Alternatives of Social Evolution," 6.

to their kinship and other social structures; hunter-gatherer societies that developed sedentary agriculture again without significant changes to what Marxists would term “superstructure”; and multiple cases of neighboring societies with completely different modes of production but almost identical forms of social and political organization.<sup>8</sup>

I would also be remiss if I did not mention early Marxism’s intrinsic racism as a reason for contesting its explanations of state formation. Such racism, implicit in a pro-imperialist framework that lauds Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, and portrays the colonization of less developed (read: non-Western) countries as progress, becomes explicit when Marx and Engels speak of “barbarian nations,” “lazy Mexicans,” “energetic yankees,” “the interests of civilization,” and so forth. Either we abandon the project of forcing non-European societies to pass through a Eurocentric dialectic, or we must erect absurd figures like an “Asiatic” or “African mode of production” to shore up a theory that simply does not square with the historical record.<sup>9</sup>

8 Clastres, *Society Against the State*, 194–95.

9 Quotes and criticisms of Marxism from Tariq Khan’s “Come O Lions! Let Us Cause a Mutiny: Anarchism and the Subaltern,” *Institute for Anarchist Studies*, anarchiststudies.org, April 2, 2015, which summarizes the opposing takes of anarchism and Marxism on imperialism, peasant and indigenous populations, and anti-colonial movements. On the African mode of production, see Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch Catherine, “Research on an African Mode of Production” in *Perspectives on the African Past*, edited by M.A. Klein and G.W. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1972). For a typical Marxist view of a non-Western society practicing “primitive communism,” see L. Baudin, *Une théocratie socialiste: l’État jésuite du Paraguay* (Paris: Génin, 1962). Regarding the Guarani tribe, the author asserts that, “their mentality is that of a child” (14). And as we anarchists prefer to base our evaluations on actions rather than words, it is worth noting that every single Marxist-inspired regime to date has carried out genocidal policies against any indigenous or non-Western group within its borders, as it

Environmental determinism fares better under scrutiny than materialism, since there is a solid correlation between environmental factors and social evolution. However, we can easily fail to notice that environmental determinists are far better gamblers than theoreticians. Albeit with great acuity, they perform what is in the end a simple, if not simplistic, operation: the selection of geographical factors that advantage state formation, like river valleys, distance from the equator, fertile plains where major irrigation works are feasible, etc. The problem is, they set these factors to masquerade as an explanation when in fact they tell us absolutely nothing about causation. This is where gambling comes in. Geography clearly aids or impedes state formation. If you can correctly identify just one of a hundred factors that make state formation more feasible, given a broad enough sample (like, say, all of human history) you will statistically come out on top. That doesn’t mean that the one factor you have been able to identify is the only factor, nor that it is a trigger or cause. What it comes down to is that environmental determinists are unable to take any single river valley or fertile plain and predict that in a certain moment in history, there will or will not be a state there.

Hindsight also plays a big role. An alien observer, knowing only the geography of Earth and using the determinist method, would probably select China as the likeliest spot for a world-dominating state to emerge. We can explain why this wasn’t the case, as Jared Diamond does: China had *too many* factors working for it, allowing political unification to occur too early, so that

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sought to impose its particular vision of the Western trajectory of economic development. This is nothing but a socialist alternative to the practices of the World Bank and IMF. We would do well to heed the insistence of a radical group of Mapuche at the forefront of their struggle for land reclamation: to identify themselves as proletarian would be to willingly complete the process of genocide that, in their case, has not yet fully erased their traditional, communal way of living. I think it is fair to assert that neither Marx nor the vast majority of Marxists who have had access to state power ever intended to allow “primitive communists” a place in their future world.

the evolving state did not benefit from the positive pressure of a dozen disunified, competing states, as did Europe. But it's always easier to tailor an explanation when we know the outcome. And I doubt that the environmental determinists would have been able to predict the alternating patterns of statism and statelessness in the European subcontinent, in the Rif, or in North America, or that they would have wagered on the Andean plateau as the locus of state formation in South America, as opposed to the Plata or Bio-Bio river valleys.

Although Jared Diamond, nearly alone among neo-environmental determinists, has gone a long way to distance the theory from its white supremacist and colonialist origins (see Friedrich Ratzel and Ellsworth Huntington), he still relies on an excessively monistic explanation for human social evolution that entirely cuts out the political will of societies to exercise coercive power or practice reciprocity and cooperation. Within his optic, every society, given the proper geographic opportunity, will develop a state and commit the same atrocities of slavery, genocide, imperialism, and exploitation as the West. This starry-eyed humanism, in the end, is an alibi that naturalizes and universalizes certain oppressive values promoted by Western elites. Anti-Western nationalism is not the answer, since elites of other cultures have also organized atrocities, as Diamond correctly points out. Casting the problem as universal, and thus inevitable, is nothing but complicity with the atrocities our rulers systematically carry out, which we can choose to support or resist. The answer to the quandary lies in the theoretical realization that elites around the world must be atrocious in order to wield power, and the recognition that today, the predominant power structure, and thus the one that it is most relevant to criticize, is the one imposed by Western civilization. The gravest consequence of Diamond's humanism, insisting that everyone everywhere has always been the same (thus, carriers of the dominant social values) is to invisibilize the very real and often effective struggles for horizontal, cooperative societies. Freedom and well-being become the mere consequences of external factors. Moral qualms solved: get back to work.

Finally, primitivism can make a legitimate ethical argument against sedentary civilization and animal husbandry, but on a

theoretical level it cannot account for hierarchical cultures in some hunter-gatherer groups, nor for agricultural societies with high population densities that were resolutely anti-authoritarian and ecocentric before colonization. Primitivism enjoys an absolute legitimacy insofar as it constitutes a revindication of what is probably the healthiest way that people can relate to their environment, and a way of life that tens of thousands of people around the world still practice, despite the efforts of states to forcibly colonize and settle them. No society is free that does not permit nomadism and ecocentric forms of living; democratic rights, seen from the perspective of hunter-gatherers, are just another recipe for genocide. Primitivism, therefore, is commendable for championing what Marxism callously assigns to the dustbin of history and environmental determinism writes off as a non-competitive economic mode. But on the theoretical level, primitivism is demonstrably mistaken as regards the origins of oppression and hierarchy, and such a mistake is relevant to our attempts, here and now, to win back our freedom. Also, paradoxically, certain expressions of primitivism fall into an ironically rationalist absolutism—for example, in their consideration of language, tools, and social planning—that is by no means a faithful expression of an ecocentric or “primitive” worldview. And certain expressions of primitivism fall into the positive racism of romanticizing an exotified Other; the term itself, in fact, preserves the exotification implicit in the statist dichotomy between the civilized and the primitive.

All three of these approaches, in addressing the question of state formation, tend to focus on explaining the creation of the very first states rather than the spread and survival of different state models that have been created and adapted throughout history. At most, they identify a mechanism that limits or impels a unilineal growth in the power of the State, whether that be geographical conditions, economic development, or the inner principles of civilization itself. This focus assumes the State to be a superior model, a Pandora's box that spreads its evil throughout the world from the moment it is opened. While state organization can produce certain advantages in the conquest of other societies, the supposed superiority of state organization,

even from a strictly administrative-military standpoint, must be problematized.

Complementary to the simplistic view of state formation is a simplistic view of statelessness, almost entirely restricted to one anthropological type, the hunter-gatherer. This anthropological view is either fettered by the romanticism of the primitivists, or the conservatism of a Harold Barclay or Ted Kaczynski, both of whom can be commended for appreciating their subject without imposing a rosy, idyllic lens to make the subject more palatable, but not for their failure to question and reinterpret the patriarchal and Eurocentric ethnologies that have corrupted their data sets.<sup>10</sup> They deal, in other words, with an anthropological view of statelessness that internalizes at least a part of the characterization, inserted by European observers, of stateless peoples as static, backwards, and brutish, ignoring the historicity of stateless peoples and their ability to champion and implement ideals of liberty, however imperfect the practice. Lacking this vital human element, they nonetheless cut the crap and advance a hard-to-dispute claim that the misery of statelessness is far better than the misery of the State.

Far and away the best anarchist description of state formation is Fredy Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!*<sup>11</sup> Perlman is writing myth, this is the strength and limitation of his essay, but in many ways he hits the nature of state formation on the head, providing a convincing historical, structural, and psychological explanation for the development of states. On both a factual and mythical level, the greatest weakness of his argument is its unitary intent. He tries to portray a single event of original

10 See, for example, Harold Barclay, *People Without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchy* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1996); and Ted Kaczynski, "Letter to a Turkish Anarchist," *theanarchistlibrary.org*, 2003.

11 Perlman, when he declares he is not an anarchist, does so in direct contrast to contemporaries of his who declare themselves anarchists but do not live up, in Perlman's eyes, to the anarchist ideal. Perlman, meanwhile, consistently champions anarchy and anarchism.

state formation, explaining all other states as consequences of the Mesopotamian experience. Here more than anywhere else he contradicts the factual record and gives us a myth that is profoundly unhelpful, the Pandora's box of state formation, an evil that once unleashed cannot be contained.

Because politogenesis<sup>12</sup>—state formation—has tended to be such a fragile, fragmented, halting, and often unsuccessful process, I will focus first on the far more common phenomena of secondary state formation and state re-formation before working back to the rare occurrence of original states forming without any guiding model. This should also situate the conversation where it belongs: how to understand and prevent the resurgence of state power wherever it has been toppled, rather than mystifying the first states in order to plot the exact alchemical combination that allowed their appearance. After all, human societies are capable of organizing anything, including states. Is it such a mystery that societies without the experience to know it was a very bad idea would do such a thing?

When we talk about states, we should keep in mind that we are discussing a social arrangement that evolved following a wide variety of evolutionary pathways, in very different conditions, on different continents. As previously mentioned, there are also different reasons for studying and thus defining the State.

As Howard Zinn said, "You can't be neutral on a moving train." Anarchists study the State in order to attack it, and to create something that will be more conducive to total freedom and

12 Though the word *politogenesis* was originally coined as a synonym for state formation, more recently, some scholars talk about non-state alternatives of politogenesis (e.g. Bondarenko, Grinin, Korotayev, "Alternatives of Social Evolution"). However, given their lack of interest in exploring the reality of anti-authoritarian societies (or more accurately, their interest in preventing the emergence of any such category), and given the anarchist critique of a fundamental social alienation resulting in the division of political and economic spheres, an alienation that is not present in all societies, I opt to use the term in its original sense.



a healthy relationship with the planet. We lay at the State's feet a great many atrocities. It is the primary culprit for slavery and genocide on every continent, for the worst wars in human history, for mass incarceration, and for the destruction of the planet. Anarchists define the State as a centralized, hierarchical system of political organization based on coercion and alienation, the primordial alienation being the theft of each person's ability to decide over their own lives, the suppression of self-organization so that power could be centralized, delegated, and institutionalized.

Anarchist definitions of the State, like the one offered by Bakunin, tend to be imprecise precisely so they can be inclusive. Anarchists have not dedicated their lives to the Idea, the dream of total freedom, or died on the barricades and on the scaffolds to replace one form of hierarchy with another, softer hierarchy. A broad, inclusive definition allows anarchists to confront domination in whatever form it might take, including within our own movements, and to be ever ready to adapt to an unfolding understanding of how power operates. Anarchism, therefore, has been able to grow beyond the European workers' movement in which it first achieved a named existence, to recognize parallel roots in anti-authoritarian struggles on other continents, to become a part of early anti-colonial struggles, and to play a leading role in the fight against patriarchy. This latter is an important example; patriarchy, it turns out, is a system of oppression that precedes and can exist independently of the State. Anarchism, as the formulation of a desire to combat all domination, is best served by a broad definition based on opposition to any impediment to freedom rather than to a specific historical structure.

Social scientists offer us more precise definitions, though these are devoid of any commitment to take a stand against elitism or defend free communities. In fact, their more mechanical, detached analysis allows them to be useful to states. There are certainly more career opportunities in advising international agencies how to prop up failed states than there are in advising rebellious movements how to destroy their oppressors. Nonetheless, the extensive resources they command have allowed them to make precise distinctions and to shed light on evolutionary

processes that were lost to popular memory. Some of the key factors of current definitions that may be useful to contemplate are:

- a minimum of three levels of hierarchical organization (e.g. the capital, provincial capitals, and towns or local administrations) which allow for delegation and chains of command;<sup>13</sup>
- unitary decision-making and an explicit chain of command, which ideally do not permit contradictions, even if contradictions are regularly produced in practice (i.e. the whole apparatus strives to avoid contradiction, and when different governing bodies arrive at different decisions, the conflict must be arbitrated to decide which body has jurisdiction or constitutes a superior authority);
- the administration of a redistribution of resources, from the toilers to government functionaries, which can include symbolic rulers, bureaucrats, soldiers, priests, and others, or to government projects, such as the construction of infrastructure or monuments;
- authority that can be delegated (i.e. it is institutional rather than pertaining exclusively to a charismatic individual) and that flows from a centralized point of legitimation, often abstract (the gods, the law, the people);

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13 Others propose a four-level site-size hierarchy in the archaeological record to qualify as a state. This criterion requires four types of settlements, from the smallest—the household or hamlet—to the village, to the regional capital, to the largest—the supreme capital (H.T. Wright, "Recent Research on the Origin of the State," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 379–97). However, four levels of settlements could be incorporated in a three-tier political organization, as the smallest settlements would be too small to host agents of the central authority and would be politically dependent on the nearest village, the smallest unit to be organized by the central authority.

- this centralized point of legitimation, though it may be operated upon by a variety of institutions and social groups, is collectively held to be singular, and in its ideal form harbors no inner contradictions, despite incessant struggles by elite factions to control it;
- identity and authority are territorial rather than kinship-based (although new states are rarely powerful enough to fully suppress the kinship paradigm, and have to gradually undermine it while also making use of it, allowing territorial and kinship paradigms to coexist);
- the execution of war-making, punishment, conflict resolution, and normative authorities, and the intent to monopolize these authorities.

The astute reader will notice a substantial gap between these two classes of definition. In fact there have been a great many societies that were not anarchic, that had hereditary or religious elites and did not place a high value on the rejection of authority, but had little or no coercive powers and no bureaucratic organization; perhaps the elites were not even able to parasitically exploit the labor of their subordinates and neighbors. The academic definition, focused on exact typologies, cannot include such polities as states. This reflects scientists' colonial past and present; the implicit purpose of their definition is to spread the model and oversee the evolution of primitive societies into the club of statehood. Because the anarchists' definition is ethical, and their goal is just the opposite—to destroy state organization and help societies free themselves from coercive authority—they cannot give a free pass to hierarchical societies that lack the degree of stratification and institutionalization that the anthropologists are looking for. The ambiguity created by relying on two different definitions with a vast grey space between them does not, however, present any real methodological problems for my investigation. On the contrary, the intermediate group that inhabits this grey space is of great theoretical importance. Sometimes, "grey" polities resisted transitioning to statehood, while in other cases they developed states at the first opportunity.

Different case studies can help illustrate the role that economics, social structure, and culture played in this open-ended evolution.

Now we know what we are looking for when we investigate politogenesis, and we know the sorts of explanations that are inadequate or discredited. In broad strokes, then, how can we explain state formation? It is now undeniable that there are multiple pathways in the evolution of states. I will not offer a single cause nor a single evolutionary model. There are several models we could consider, building off the work of a great many specialists. However, within each model, I find more particularities than similarities. As such, throughout the following chapters, which are divided thematically, I highlight the basic models when they appear, but place the weight of the narrative on the particularities of each case. This may not be the best format for rapid summarizing, but its advantage is in avoiding potentially dogmatic simplifications.