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State-Making and the Origins of Global Order
in the Long Nineteenth Century and Beyond

Not becoming a state: the Icelandic
Commonwealth from colonization to
Norwegian suzerainty.

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Not becoming a state: the Icelandic Commonwealth from colonization to Norwegian suzerainty.

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A mere outline

Iceland was colonized by Norwegian farmers and “aristocrats” fleeing the state-making Norwegian king Harald Hårfagre in the 870s. From then and until 1262-64, when the Icelanders agreed to become a suzerainty under Norway, they lived in a state-less political order usually called the Icelandic Commonwealth. According to both the Political Science/Sociology-based state-making literature (Historical Sociology) *and* the Anthropology/Archaeology-based state formation literature (Political Anthropology), they should not have. Instead, there should have developed a minimalist Weberian-like state, not much different from other North European states of the time.

The Icelandic Commonwealth had an elaborate legal code, including regional and Icelandic-wide annual court meetings, and the medieval Icelanders were clearly capable of complex collective action as evidenced by the communal conversion to Christianity in 999 or 1000, as well as the 1263/4 decision to enter into the Norwegian North Atlantic empire. The Icelandic Commonwealth, however, had no executive power and none or little taxation; nor were there any hint of urbanization, or even nucleation, or public architecture. There was no “front desk” and nobody to “call.”

Using the Icelandic Commonwealth as a venue, the purpose of this paper is twofold: to query whether there is an implicit and disguised teleological bias in the extant state-making/formation literature, that can account for the Icelandic non-conformity with theoretical expectations, and to, in the process, ask whether there are potential cross-fertilizations available between Historical Sociology and Political Anthropology. The first purpose is not itself a disguised argument – it may well be that the Icelandic Commonwealth anomaly *can* be accounted for without significant theoretical adjustments. Also the second purpose is open-ended: given that Historical Sociology and Political Anthropology typically work in significantly different geo-historical environments, there may actually be precious little these field can learn from each other.

Disposition

1) Iceland did not form a state, but were clearly capable of collective action and other state-like practices.

a) Christianization

- b) Decision to be annexed by Norway
 - c) Clearly defined and generally respected law
- 2) According to HS, a state should have formed, because
- a) serious collective goods problems to solve
 - i) trade – import of necessary goods
 - ii) deforestation
 - b) Marked social hierarchy, with a small warrior aristocracy
 - c) increasing competition with larger fighting units
 - i) going from a large range of big-men/chiefs with their 10-20 men retinues to 5 chieftain families with 700-800 men “armies” controlling all of Iceland
 - d) but some things do speak against it
 - e) no external threat (but note that for Mann and others warfare enters the picture only after states already exists, warfare cannot explain, it is too ubiquitous)
 - f) still, significant pressure from the Norwegian king
- 3) Can Political Anthropology explain?
- a) pol anthro
 - b) pol anthro explains the state, not statelessness – a dead-end
 - c) the small sub-literature of statelessness emphasize
 - i) alternative institutions (primarily peace making institutions)
 - ii) Gledhill 39pp shows how some HS theories cannot work (militaristic, also Jessop and/or Yoffe notes this)
 - iii) type of wealth: staple/finance, storable/taxable
 - iv) Iceland’s political economy was very taxable, and yet none or few taxes were collected
 - v) open geography – can you flee an emergent state or not?
 - vi) Iceland was circumscribed (Carnerio)
- 4) Iceland
- a) the theng system
 - b) the feud
 - c) Godi (a sort of non-territorial chieftainship that could be sold, partitioned, etc)
 - d) combine to create a peace-making institution
 - e) that nullified the “need” for a state

A possible conclusion, therefore, could be the formulation of a set of hypotheses¹:

H1: A necessary condition for the development of a state is that there are no “competing” peace-making (mediating) institutions to the Hobbesian solution in place.

This is not the political anthropological consensus approach inverted. I have argued that the feud, and it's always temporary freezing, is exactly such a competing institution/mechanism, preventing an Icelandic state arising from the Settlement period.

Assuming also that these competitors are more attractive than Leviathan. Supposedly, an erratic and unpredictable protection racket would not be, whereas a culturally-ideologically sanctioned modicum of hereditary hierarchy situated in a well-defined (and equally sanctioned) legal code would.

H2: A weaker, and more plausible, version of this formulation is that the absence of such competing institutions are permissive of the development of states.

H2b) The presence of competing institutions puts higher demands on the generative force of the causes leading to a Hobbesian solution.

That is, another configuration of mechanisms making up the process is required as well as, perhaps, another set of initial conditions. Or at least either.

H3: Other causes, such as strong external threat, may out-compete these alternative institutions and generate states.

I.a. environmental crisis, social volatility caused by famine, plague, etc. This means that, per “mainstream” comparative history/historical sociology complex processes made up of varying configurations of interlocking mechanism are dependent on initial conditions for how they play out.

¹ It is my belief that these hypotheses are potentially usefully testable both qualitatively and quantitatively, with additional conceptual work. That is, they will lend themselves to neo-positivist and critical realist work. However, I also believe that they are more useful as generative of ideal-type situations that can aid in the construction of analytical narratives.

H4: In the particular case of medieval Iceland, the feud and its attendant resolution mechanisms disallowed a state from developing.

Primarily by acting as a centrifugal force, never allowing sufficient centralization of power, while still not causing rampant disorder or chaos. Some would call it a “low level equilibrium” although I think that only reflects a normative bias in favor of the state, or, alternatively, teleological fundamentalism.

5) A deeper look at political anthropology

The very early years of political anthropology were dominated by an evolutionary paradigm that postulated an increasing political economic complexity, either with a liberal touch pace Adam Smith, or a socialist touch pace Engels. This paradigm was all but destroyed by German American anthropologist Franz Boas, who towards the end of the 19th century turned the whole field towards historicism and relativism. When the Boasian revolution had run its course in the 1950s and 1960s anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, Service, Sahlins, and others reformulated an evolutionary approach – neo-evolutionism – to political anthropology and political development.² Neo-evolutionism soon broke down in several distinct theories (i.a. voluntarism, coercive, circumscription) that in a vein familiar to political scientists emphasized conflicting vs. common interests, competition, economy vs. ideology, exogenous vs. endogenous factors, etc. Two strands of thought formed the core and the unifying theme: evolutionism and stages.

Evolutionism in a nutshell is the idea that political communities evolve from less complex to more complex over time. Complexity can be defined or operationalized with a range of markers. The most common of these are how many levels of hierarchy there are – both at an individual and settlement level. Thus, if there is only one or a few important person(s) in one community there is little complexity. If instead you have a settlement pattern such that there is one central nucleation having power over several other nucleations, that in turn have power over a third tier of nucleations;

² Note that neo-evolutionism in political anthropology has nothing to do with sociobiology or evolutionary psychology. Neo-evolutionism is a systemic level set of theories that ignores individual agency and view political development much as one thinks of the development of an ecosystem. There are, of course, important differences between neo-evolutionism and IR neorealism, but also interesting similarities.

and further if in each tier of nucleation there are identifiable hierarchies of rulers, there is more complexity. Power, in this context could in turn be defined as flow of economic resources, control of “international” relations such as war and trade, or corvée labor. Other markers of complexity include the degree of division of labor, the presence of public architecture, public (as opposed to internal to the mind) recording systems – i.e. writing etc, nucleation and urbanization, and the ability to distinguish between office and person. The neo-evolutionism of the 1950s and onwards tried to cleanse itself of the “scientific” racism of the pre-Boas evolutionism, and did at least not explicitly argue that more complex was better. Evolutionism here was adaptation to environments and circumstances, not a teleological march.³

The second unifying theme in neo-evolutionism was the idea that human political history can be divided into stages. Each political community can, with the help of the markers of complexity, be placed in one of these stages. The idea is, certainly, reminiscent of Adam Smith’s stages of history, but not identical. Various neo-evolutionist theorists came up with different sequences of stages, largely depending on what they identified as the most central aspect of human existence: economic organization, ideas writ large, or something else. The most famous of these is Elman Service’s band, tribe, chiefdom, and state. That which moves political community from one level to the next was fiercely debated. Service himself, for instance, essentially argued a managerial thesis, where communities saw the benefits in higher centralization as collective action problems could be more easily solved. Others emphasized conquest as the driving force.

Anthropologists already in the 1980s, and perhaps before, developed a deep dissatisfaction with both evolutionism and the stages idea. Evolutionism was criticized for positing a *unilinear* evolution, for viewing political community or society through an organic lens, and for disregarding human agency. The stages model was criticized for simply not matching the ethnographic or archaeological record. There was simply too much variation within each stage for it to make sense to subsume political communities in under them.

Anthropologists, political and others, by and large lost interest in political evolution and long term political history in the 1980s and on, as they turned to the modern state and modernity and globalization as their

³ How successful it was in these two attempts I leave to another discussion.

preferred objects of analysis. The torch was carried on by archaeology, however.

Archaeologists have as much theoretical debate as any social science.⁴ However, there does seem to be a consensus, based on the archaeological evidence, on two issues. First, that human communities in the long term go through evolution (with occasional devolutions), and second, that archaeology needs some sort of classification system with which to benchmark when quantitative changes accumulate into qualitative changes. Prominent archaeologists Timothy Earle has, together with colleague Allen Johnson, suggested the local group (\approx band), the local group (\approx tribe and chiefdom), and the regional polity (\approx chiefdom and state). Taking the lesson from the debates in anthropology, archaeologists are sensitive to variation within each category however, and ask themselves how to theoretically deal with this issue. One answer they have come up with is to posit the stages as an Y axis, and then to suggest that the X axis is constituted by the tension between a corporate way of organizing power and a network way of organizing power, and to claim that this at least captures an important share of the variation within each Y axis category.

A network mode of organizing power is essentially focused on individuals or families. A successful leader, for instance a skilled warrior, gathers individuals around himself, reward them with spoils of war or raids, and expect their support in turn. With time, these followers in turn gathers followers, and a pyramid-shape network of patron-client relationships obtain. Perhaps the archetypical image relevant here is the Germanic warrior band developing into European feudalism. In theory, the scope for expansion and growth of this network is limitless. New members can always be subsumed at the appropriate level. This mode of organizing power, archeologists argue, are congenial for the development of states, as the person at the apex of the pyramid is easily turned into a king, and people at the base into serf or slaves.

A corporate mode of organizing power is identity based. It does not have a person or a family at the center, but a group defined by various criteria. Around the world, ethnographers have identified a range of various group identities that function to organize power: clans, lineages, age cohorts, gender, secret societies/brotherhoods, religious sects, mafias, street gangs, guilds, and so on and so forth. The argument goes, in archaeology, that corporate modes of organizing power are detrimental for

⁴ Whether archaeology is a social or a natural science is partly a geographical question and partly a personal question. For most, it is both.

state development. Corporate groups cannot subsume each other in hierarchies, as the identity and cohesion is thereby lost. A political community characterized by a corporate organization of power is heterarchical, whereas network communities are hierarchical. Of course, clearly corporate communities may in various ways transform into hierarchical/network communities, and then develop into states, or break down into corporate communities again, as evidenced by state making on the Eurasian steppe.

Coming back to Iceland again, I will argue that what happened was the following. In Norway, in the 9th century, the corporate community was transforming into a network community. Some people fled from this to, i.a. Iceland. On Iceland they knowingly set up institutions designed to work against networks and for the maintenance of corporate groups. The two foremost institutions were the ting (courts) system and the Godi (“chiefs”) system. These two institutions in turn reinforced the in itself centrifugal institutions of feud, and feud resolution. This system worked quite well for some 200 years, but at around 1200 the network mode began to dominate. Seeing no solution to the endless fighting between 5 prominent families (sometimes concentrated into two alliances) the Icelanders decided to enter the Norwegian empire.

My argument, then, will be that there did not develop a state in Viking age and medieval Iceland since it actively developed a corporate mode of organizing political power. I believe that IR and the state making literature can benefit from considering this argument in the context of i.a. failed states, post-conflict state building, and the variable trajectories of historical state making.⁵

⁵ In this last context it would sort of add a dimension to i.e. Tilly’s coercion and capital dimension.