

The STATE in Human Societies

Excerpts from *Experiencing World History*, Adams et al, 2000, pages 9-11

Human beings, said the Greek philosopher Aristotle, are political animals. Most humans have always lived in groups, and living together involves needs for defining relationships, regulating interactions, and maintaining order. Through leadership or joint decision making, people have to figure out what the rules are, how to make choices for the group, and how to preserve and defend the shared community. While these vital activities are part of human history at all times, as far as we know they do not necessarily involve a formal state, defined as an institution with some specialized leadership and assigned powers. Hunting-and-gathering groups and many agricultural societies have been stateless.

Civilizations, however, have states.... The rise of states reflected growing complexity, as people needed more formal institutions to define property, protect against outside attack, and provide some economic policies. It also reflected growing prosperity in communities to afford formal rulers (often living in considerable luxury) and officials, including some paid military groups. With states, new divisions separated who had some direct voice in politics from those who did not; states involved more elaborate definitions.

A great deal of history has always been about states and policies. Rulers early on found that they enjoyed accounts of their glories and those of their ancestors, so much early history involved chronicles of the great deeds of kings. More recently, the growing power of nation-states encouraged history lessons to focus on the development of the nation and its political institutions, seen as the central point of human activity and providing examples of loyalty and good citizenship....

States' policies clearly affect the course of civilizations, but the crucial point is to analyze how states function, what kinds of actual contacts they have with other facets of society [for example cultural systems or social structures] and with key social groups, from elites to ordinary people. This approach, emphasizing political developments as interactions, looks at states in the context of societies....

Different societies develop different beliefs about what states can and cannot do, about what constitutes legitimate uses of power and what does not. Looking at the impact of the state on society requires particular attention to government *functions* and their effectiveness, and not just to formal structures such as monarchies or democracies.

States vary from one another for a number of reasons. Technology and economic levels provide crucial contexts in which to evaluate states. The effective power of states, particularly those that rule over sizeable regions, depends heavily on available communication and transportation technologies. Record keeping is another crucial technology, which is why the Chinese invention of paper... reflected and furthered an unusually bureaucratic state tradition. Economic performance sets resource constraints and opportunities. Both technologies and economics characteristically differ from one society to the next – in the past and still today – which is one key reason that state impact on ordinary people varies so much.

States also vary because of different cultural values. While all states seek to preserve order, if only to protect their own existence, some cultures emphasize order more than others and define order more rigorously. Certain value systems argue that devotion to political life and governance is the highest human good, whereas others contend that, though states may be necessary, religious goals come first, even limiting the degrees of allegiance owed to rules and rulers in this world.

The same factors that cause states to vary from one civilization to the next also cause change. It is important to balance the momentum of certain political traditions with the recurrent possibility of major shifts. New ideas, technologies, and resources have helped states grow in most civilizations in the modern world, causing new tensions between state activity and private organizations and individual rights. While some disputes continue, preferred political structures have tended to move away from monarchies toward alternative forms and have tended to downplay explicit religious functions in favor either of greater tolerance or of different kinds of cultural control. Most states have also downplayed emphasis on control by a traditional privileged class, installing at least superficial mass participation. But some common directions of change have not created uniformities, and comparison of difference and the reasons for them remains essential. The Chinese state, for example, still assumes it has certain powers over individuals that American and Indian states do not.