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Editorial: Origins, foundations, sustainability and trip lines of good governance: Archaeological and historical considerations

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Origins, foundations, sustainability and trip lines of good governance: Archaeological and historical considerations](#)

Introduction

The late 20th century marked the beginning of a period of dissent from prevailing progressivist social evolutionary perspectives on political transformation (e.g., [Stein, 1994](#); [Ehrenreich et al., 1995](#); [Feinman, 1995](#); [Blanton et al., 2021](#)). This new direction, that eventually incorporated cooperation and collective action theories and the notion of good government, fleshed out key elements of a processual theory in which it is acknowledged that agency, negotiation, and cooperation could shape political change, past and present. We suggest this vantage better aligns anthropological research with the historical and social science disciplines that focus attention primarily on the rise and demise of Western democracies.

We owe a debt of gratitude to those political scientists whose insights about collective action stimulated new ways of thinking, including Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons* (1990) (analyzing cooperation in small groups), Margaret Levi's approach to state formation as seen in relation to fiscal economy and public goods in *Of Rule and Revenue* (Levi, 1988), and the concept of good government (e.g., [Ahlquist and Levi, 2011](#); [Rothstein and Teorell, 2012](#)). Informed by sources such as these, our world-wide comparative study of premodern states identified the same fiscal processes Levi noted in her study of Western historical experience. We confirmed that fiscal systems that emphasized internal financing (i.e., broadly based taxation of citizens)

are associated with policies that expanded governing capacity to include public goods, equitable taxation, wide citizen participation, and checks on the power of governing principals; we also confirmed an association between ruler discretionary control over resources and a relative absence of these good government indicators (Blanton and Fargher, 2008, 2016; Carballo and Feinman, 2016; Fargher and Heredia Espinoza, 2016; Feinman and Carballo, 2018; Blanton et al., 2020, 2021; Feinman et al., 2021). These associations applied to states since the industrial revolution but also to premodern agrarian states, regardless of civilizational tradition, degree of technological development, or scale of urbanization. This research also discovered a causal (“coactive”) process in which good government indicators are highly correlated with production intensification, increased marketplace participation, growing urbanism, population growth, and increased prosperity and food security across social sectors (Blanton and Fargher, 2016, p. 245–282; Feinman et al., 2022).

Critiques of social evolution

Contributors to this volume and those they cite throw a critical light on 20th century neoevolutionists who endeavored to explain how small-scale and egalitarian societies of the Neolithic were transformed into larger and more complex societies. Neoevolutionist theory highlights how an emergent elite abandoned traditional social contracts to build despotic systems of rule capable of mobilizing labor for communal projects, organizing and managing centralized economies, building and managing large-scale water-control systems, and controlling valuable agronomic resources under conditions of scarcity. Mystifyingly, according to top-down theory, the governing elite were seen as powerful change agents while subjugated and exploited subalterns were regarded as poorly organized and easily persuaded by ideologies such as sacred kingship, assumptions that are now under challenge (e.g., Thurston and Fernández-Götz, 2021).

While neoevolutionism is still alive and well in some quarters, its arguments proved empirically untenable and it has also been critiqued for its obvious Cold War ideological posturing, for example in the influential writings of the Cold War warrior Karl Wittfogel (1957) and the socialist ideologue Karl Polanyi (1944). Researchers also recognized the Eurocentrism and progressivism inherent in the work of theorists who uncritically accepted the idea of a sharp divide between despotic Asiatic and democratic Occidental modes of production and government (Blanton and Fargher, 2008, p. 5–11). The neoevolutionist Elman Service (1975) ignored evidence that the theory is misleading in this regard. For example, in his discussions of pre-Colonial African states and chiefdoms he attributed the prevalence of autocratic rule to conquest, theocracy, trade monopoly, and clientship. This conclusion is

contradicted by an abundant literature revealing the presence of egalitarian political structures in which “...the political elite represent, to a greater or lesser degree, the interests of the mass of the people” (Lloyd, 1965, p. 76; cf. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p. 11–12; Beattie, 1967).

Enriching and expanding theories of cooperation, collective action, and good government

The 13 papers contributed to this 2022 FPS Topic solidify the results of prior work while also enriching it by bringing into the discussion cases from a broad temporal spectrum and from a diversity of regions, societies, and cultural traditions. The contributions attest to how the underlying dimensions of good government were created in polities ranging in population scale from Huronia to the vast territory of Indus civilization. Beyond the domain of formally governed chiefdoms and states, evidence is mounting that, in spite of the inevitable cooperator dilemmas (Ostrom, 1990), complex cooperative actions do not necessarily result from centralized and hierarchical leadership as the neoevolutionists had routinely argued (see Holland-Lulewicz et al. and Pluckhahn et al.).

Given that we often lack texts that describe philosophical concepts or systems of rules that shaped past governance, many articles in this collection show ways that archaeologists have refocused their “material lens,” as Carballo expressed it, to distinguish between those strategic actions that aimed to solve cooperator problems at the scale of society vs. those that would consolidate the power of an elite few. Good government policies that provide for non-excludable transportation infrastructure are an important example of how collective action is materialized. This would include city planning that would have enhanced the legibility of urban spaces and would have rendered diverse in-city locations highly accessible, for example, in Pugh et al. the gridded road plan of Maya Nixtun-Ch’ich’ that also provided for storm drainage, and similar city planning as envisioned in Greek democracy (Fargher et al.) and for which there were analogous spatial patterns in Tlaxcallan, Teotihuacan, and Indus cities among others discussed in Blanton and Fargher (2011).

Other forms of high-access public infrastructure would have enhanced social intermingling in what Green calls deliberative spaces. Public infrastructure that allows for intervisibility between participants in ritualized events enhances possibilities for participants to gauge others’ willingness to comply with social obligations (e.g., Blanton and Fargher, 2016, p. 191–204; cf. Ober, 2008, p. 201) (as Michael Hechter, 1990, p. 21 put it, in cooperative groups “individuals must be highly visible to one another”). Similar social infrastructures in this collection include the urban and deme-level public spaces in Athens and its territories (Fargher et al.); the standard architectural complexes

described by Stark and Stoner in the Classic period Gulf Coast that were readily accessible to households; the vast Period I plaza constructed at Monte Albán described by Nicholas and Feinman; plazas in Tlaxcallan and the massive platform at Tizatlán described in Fargher et al.; the Muskogean council houses and other examples discussed in Holland-Lulewicz et al.; and the Guachimontones of the Teuchitlán polity described by Heredia Espinoza.

Discussion

The notion that political modernity is the inevitable outcome of directed political evolution is challenged by the processual perspective represented in this collection and by the discovery that, as is true today, cooperation, collective action, and good government sometimes will thrive and persist while in other cases they are not highly resilient. Challenges commonly stem from elite opposition to notions favoring egalitarianism and to limits placed on the power of those in positions of authority. But other challenges abound, including the vexing coordination problems presented by tasks such as the broad provision of public goods and equitable taxation (Blanton and Fargher, 2016, p. 115–158). In addition, highly cooperative political regimes are uniquely exposed to potential collapse when the principal leadership fails to adhere to norms, values and practices that inspire citizen confidence and willingness to comply with obligations (Blanton et al., 2020).

In some regimes built around good government, policies and practices that undergirded egalitarian society were abandoned and left little or no social memory, including Indus civilization (Kenoyer, 1997) and the Teuchitlán tradition discussed by Heredia Espinoza. However, there are examples where an impulse to preserve good government survived even when disrupted by intervening phases of relative autocracy. For example, at Monte Albán, Nicholas and Feinman allude to two lengthy phases during which collective government was sustained, the first lasting for 300 years, the second for 400 years. In some civilizational traditions, good government policies and practices were so resilient they eventually were woven into the fabrics of contemporary democracies. The latter is evident in the variable but persistent pattern of collectivity and democracy in Western Eurasia and the Mediterranean that is evident during the Iron Age but might have origins in Bronze Age systems of governance such as the “primitive democracy” of Early Dynastic and later Mesopotamian civilization (Fleming, 2004; Rothman, 2004). Tan’s discussion of the Roman Republic and Fargher et al.’s discussion of *demokratia* illustrate relatively egalitarian Iron Age polities, while Thurston’s northern European example illustrates how notions of egalitarianism could persist from prehistory into the present. Aleksandrov illustrates how traditions of electoral politics crossed the Atlantic

from England and flourished under egalitarian conditions in the New England colonies.

The deep history of East Asia is another example of long-term resilience of good government practices. As early as the Chinese Late Neolithic Liu (2004, p. 247) encountered what she referred to as “group-oriented chiefdoms” (cf. Campbell et al., 2021). While autocracy dominated state-building during the subsequent Three Dynasties period, it was challenged by the Confucian critique of aristocratic governance that was instituted as state orthodoxy during the Han dynasty (Yates, 2001; Feinman et al., 2019). Like the enduring history of democracy in Western Eurasia and the Mediterranean, to varying degrees this egalitarian Chinese philosophy informed state-building policies of later dynasties and still echoes in recent episodes of state-building beyond China. Chinese statecraft of the Late Imperial period was so highly regarded that some of its practices, including open recruitment to positions of authority, influenced governmental reformers of the European Early Modern period (Brook, 2005, p. 189; Creel, 1970, p. 15–27).

Governing practices of the Native North Americans (such as those described by Holland-Lulewicz et al.), particularly the “Great Peace” of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) League (described in Birch’s article), also have echoes to the present day. Most importantly, the League so impressed Benjamin Franklin that it played a role in his federalist design for government. From their research on how Native American institutions and philosophies influenced Franklin and other framers of the Constitution, Grinde and Johansen (1991, p. 239) conclude that “The flowering of the Enlightenment, which was spurred by Europe’s “discovery” of America and its peoples, coincided with the founding of the United States and bequeathed to that nation a marvelous intellectual heritage, which has since contributed to worldwide aspirations for improvements in the human condition.”

Conclusion

Our work and the articles in this collection illustrate that values, strategies, actions, and processes associated with cooperation, collective action, and good government grew in diverse cultural contexts apart from the mentalities or philosophies alleged to have developed only in the growth of Western-inspired democracy. Our work and recent events (e.g., Snyder, 2018) also underscore the realization that modern liberal democracy cannot be considered a radically transformative and inevitable final stage of political evolution. Instead, research grounded in collective action and cooperation theories demonstrates that, past and present, frameworks that foster good government may thrive, become corrupted, or collapse. Because human histories are persistently negotiated and contested, good government neither can be taken for granted nor presumed to progress or improve. We must come to grips with the

reality that there are actions and institutions that we, as citizens and leaders, can take to arrest democratic backsliding and to foster and promote change. History provides lessons to absorb and inspire, but to learn them we must keep doing the work.

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