
Circumscription Theory and Political Change: From Determinism to Mechanisms and Parameters

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For more than 40 years, since its publication in *Science*, Robert Carneiro's (1970) circumscription model for the origin of the state has been widely cited, holding a central role in subsequent discussions and debates concerning political evolution. Here, I have the privilege to comment on the modification and broadening of that seminal model by its author (see also Carneiro 1987, 1988) and to offer further amplifications and critiques that endeavor to reposition this stream of work in historical context and give it broader applicability in the future.

As initially proposed, Carneiro (1970: 738) argued that the origins of all archaic states were 'a predictable response to certain specific cultural, demographic, and ecological conditions'. His approach was meant to be explicitly scientific, reflecting a deterministic or law-like vision (see Carneiro 2004: 279) for the manner in which the scientific process was applied to archaeology, a perspective in vogue at that time (*e.g.*, Watson *et al.* 1971). To his great credit, and despite the pivotal role that his original model assumed, Carneiro has clarified and tinkered with this theoretical frame in the face of new findings. In the present reconfiguration, the role of circumscription is explicitly downgraded a bit and replaced by resource concentration as the model's ecological component in *certain* contexts. Likewise, the explanatory target now is placed less precisely on the unitary and immediate origins of state development. Rather, the author's familiar core set of factors (population pressure, circumscription, resource competition, warfare) is advanced as having had a causal role at *some* point in episodes of increasing political complexity (see also Carneiro 1998).

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The small steps taken away from deterministic, unitary thinking and modeling are constructive. Yet, long-standing rigidities and false dichotomies embedded in the model require further redefining and reframing, if this line of thought is to gain wider utility and support. For example, Carneiro has long juxtaposed coercive models with purely ideological foundations of the state, denying alternatives and ignoring the reality that coercion and voluntary cooperation are often both operating simultaneously as the broader interests of leaders and followers are persistently brokered into political and power arrangements that may regularly shift (*e.g.*, Roscoe 2000). Reliance on coercion alone is expensive, particularly where transportation costs are steep, and difficult to maintain over extended periods.

The role of agency in social networks is potentially far more nuanced. For example, in one of the most powerful, militarized states in the history of this planet, it was just reported that the United States government was shorted 385 billion dollars worth of taxes in 2006. Globally, evasion of taxes is estimated to cost national treasuries over three trillion dollars annually, a clear indication (but just one of many) that political affiliation can be situational and less than full. The withholding of tax or tribute is just one of many potential means of subaltern resistance, and it is part of the reason that leadership is considered by definition relational (Ahlquist and Levi 2011: 5). Although some presiding theorists have long held that such subaltern agency is unique to the modern world or just the recent West, this perspective is not borne out empirically (*e.g.*, Attwood 1997; Blanton and Fargher 2008; Little 1991; Popkin 1979).

Recognition that coercion often has been over-weighted in modeling past leader-follower interpersonal dynamics does not deny the observation that warfare has in many contexts played a role in political evolution. Yet, the ubiquity of warfare in the human career has served as a potent critique of the circumscription model. Here, perhaps, it would be worthwhile to move past the model's stress on conquest and subjugation as a central component and distinguish between offensive and defensive warfare. To put it a bit too simply, when it comes to the interests of both leaders and followers, concerns with defense are a far more likely basis for cooperation, shared sacrifices, and ceding of elements of autonomy than are calls for risky offensive conquests.

Likewise, in his explicitly scientific approach Carneiro's continued reliance on population pressure seems more guided by habit and faith rather than by rigor, especially when such pressure may be too subtle 'to escape detection'. Yet, few would quarrel that demographic variables, such as population growth, density, and interpersonal interactions, are important components for modeling political evolution (*e.g.*, Feinman 2011).

So where does this leave us? Perhaps, farther along than it may appear. Carneiro's career-long reflective theorizing has in fact helped isolate many of the key parameters and mechanisms that must be taken into account when examining historical instances or sequences of political evolution: degrees of boundedness (constraints on mobility), resource distribution, population density and growth, defense and warfare, and networks of interaction and cooperation that are forged and broken (based on their interests) between aspiring leaders and subalterns. Yet, to advantage these insights requires a conceptual reframing that shifts our modeling from the construction of law-like propositions and deterministic, unitary sequences toward an approach that examines processes and mechanisms, the interrelationships between key variables that may lead to varied outcomes. As the philosopher of the social sciences, Jon Elster (1989: 9; see also Tilly 2001), has observed: the social sciences 'can isolate tendencies, propensities, and mechanisms... What they are more rarely able to do is to state necessary and sufficient conditions under which the various mechanisms are switched on. This is another reason for emphasizing causal interrelations or mechanisms rather than laws'. When considered in the light of this more contemporary vision of science as applied to social-historical disciplines, Carneiro's theoretical legacy has given us much to reflect and build on.

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