

Emergence of Civilizations / Anthro 341: Notes 9  
**Some theories of the origins of civilization - Batch I**  
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- A theory (in this context) is just a story that is supposed to explain how something happened
  - it has to make sense: the steps should follow logically from one to the next
  - it should give us the feeling that we understand the process better because of it
- A theory can come from anywhere
  - it is just made up
  - although in practice, a theory is usually inspired by something real
- A good theory may or may not actually be true
  - that is an empirical question; we have to check the facts, and see if the theory fits with the details of any given case
- Let's look at some theories that have been proposed to explain how civilization developed
- **The “social surplus” theory** (V. Gordon Childe)
  - Agricultural technology appears and then improves
    - plows, irrigation, fertilizing, etc.
    - [what might cause this, or does it even need explanation?]
  - these improvements lead to increasing production
    - the “Neolithic revolution” - commitment to agriculture for most food production
    - [but... *does* it, necessarily? Why wouldn't better technology be used to produce the same amount, but leaving people more time for other things?]
  - increased production allows the formation of larger populations and settlements, and finally cities
    - the “Urban revolution”
    - because the greater productivity allows more people to live in a limited area
  - the increased production also makes possible a “social surplus” of food
    - that can support non-food producers, that is, specialized craft workers (such as metalworkers and potters), priests, bureaucrats, merchants, etc.
  - Some or all of this surplus is collected from the farmers, stored, kept track of, and redistributed
    - some of it may be a safety net for farmers in bad years
    - some of it (in reality, most of it) is distributed to specialists who do things other than produce food
      - craft producers
      - priests
      - administrators like the surplus collectors and managers themselves
  - this happens in central locations
    - most notably in centralized storage places like government warehouses
    - under the guidance of community leaders

- who become more powerful due to their control over the stored surplus
- These leaders use the surplus in part to build works such as canals, city walls, temples, etc.
  - these projects justify and legitimize their leadership roles and control of the surplus
  - as the projects get more elaborate, they require still more organization and control of resources
  - which extends the leader's administrative activities and makes them seem ever more necessary
  - and requires ever greater flow of surplus through their hands
- This growing control over resources leads to an emerging elite class
  - based on real economic power
  - rather than being born to a certain customary rank
- The emerging elites organize and institutionalize their activities
  - they naturally try to arrange things so that their own positions are secure and ever more advantageous to themselves
  - this growing, self-protecting, self-interested hierarchy becomes state organization
- **The “hydraulic hypothesis”** (Karl Wittfogel)
  - Small-scale agriculturalists submit to a leader in order to build and maintain
    - large-scale irrigation works
    - and/or large projects to protect them from flooding, like levee systems
  - because they find these works beneficial
    - and they can't do them on their own without coordination
  - these projects require strong leaders, organized management, legitimate enforcement power
    - to engineer the projects
    - to form and coordinate work groups
    - to supply the workers with materials and food if they are taken away from their own farming activities or their household's stored harvests
    - to ensure that everyone contributes their share of the labor
  - The projects thus create a legitimate, accepted structure of leaders and followers.
    - including legitimate means of forcing shirkers to comply
    - for the common good, of course
  - The same, or similar, organization and control continues to be needed after the works are built
    - to maintain the works
    - and to adjudicate disputes over water rights
  - Farmers become dependent upon the artificial water supply and/or security from flooding
    - so the leaders who control those works (and control the legitimate force needed to build and maintain them) come to have real coercive power over the farmers
    - leaders with authority over a canal system can deny water to a farmer
    - leaders who control legitimate power to coerce workers can use it to coerce them for other purposes, too
  - The leaders use their labor-mobilizing power to construct non-hydraulic works such as temples, palaces, roads, etc., and eventually to conduct other activities such as manufacturing trade goods, etc.

- This process leads to very powerful leaders
  - Wittfogel's book proposing this theory was called *Oriental Despotism* - he was thinking of absolutely powerful rulers.
- **The “circumscription” theory** (Robert Carneiro)
  - Population rises
    - [does this need to be explained, or can we just assume it?]
  - Rising populations lead to competition for land
  - Competition for land leads to warfare between settlements
  - If this happens in a place where the environment is “circumscribed” by geography
    - i.e. in a river valley surrounded by unfarmable mountains or desert
  - or is “socially circumscribed”
    - i.e. the region is surrounded by areas that are already populated by people capable of repelling newcomers
  - then groups that are defeated in battle cannot easily just move away from the conflict
    - but instead remain on the land as a population subservient to the victors.
  - These defeated groups become a lower class
    - paying tribute to
    - and dominated by
    - the victorious group
  - which becomes the upper class.
  - This process would result in a very rapid formation of class society
- **The “success in competition” theory** (William Sanders and Barbara Price)
  - this is a "social Darwinism" view
  - Population growth leads to...
  - competition within and between groups *for members and territory*, that is, for continued existence as a group
  - "success" in this competition means that the group continues to exist and increases in size relative to other groups, for any of many possible reasons:
    - through internal population growth
    - by attracting immigrants from other groups, or marriage partners from other groups
    - by absorbing neighboring groups
    - by surviving disasters better than others
    - by suffering fewer casualties in conflicts
  - "competition" in this context has a specific, unusual meaning
    - although competition between groups may involve conflict, it does not have to; it may not even be consciously recognized by people
    - this competition is also *not* the same as competition in economics
    - instead, it is like competition between populations in evolutionary biology or ecology
  - Sanders and Price suggest that in many cases, a group that is more complexly organized and able to coordinate complex actions by members of the group is likely to do better in the competition for continued existence

- complex organization would involve more different specialized activities, and more layers of hierarchy and decision-making
  - caveat: they suggest that more complex organization is only helpful to groups that are above some minimum size (maybe 10,000?)
  - The claim here is that smaller groups do not gain a substantial survival benefit from coordinating their strategy
- That is, a group that is more complexly organized under a leader or governing institution might be more successful than less organized groups in:
  - war, surviving attacks and gaining resources from the losers
    - which could help the group's population grow relative to the losers
  - obtaining distant resources and producing craft and other specialty goods
    - because they can organize to redistribute surplus agricultural production to specialist craft producers
    - and to carry out procurement and trading missions
    - making the group more attractive to join, the members healthier, producing more children, etc.
  - producing food (and the surplus needed for all the other activities)
    - because they organize to build, maintain, and administer productive works, especially irrigation projects.
  - etc.
- So the more complex groups in an area tend to persist and grow because they are "out-competing" the less complex ones, which shrink and disappear
- At every step, greater complexity is rewarded with persistence and growth
- Greater complexity creates more and more activities to be managed, coordinated, and controlled
  - leading to ever more complex political and economic arrangements
  - which eventually reach the level of complexity required to classify as "civilization"
- In this view, civilization is "adaptive" or successful in evolutionary terms
  - so if a group happens to change in the direction of civilization, in general it will survive and grow more than groups that do not
  - of any set of competing groups, one has to be the most complexly organized
    - that is the one that tends to persist and grow the most
  - eventually, only the more complex -- that is, "civilized" -- groups remain
- This theory implies that, in the long run, complex social organization is an inevitable result of natural selection acting on social groups
- **The "war finance" theory** (David Webster)
  - The scenario starts with settlements that have come to be organized as chiefdoms
    - the chief's position is hereditary
    - his power is based on his ability to reward supporters
      - by giving them some of the gifts or payments of food, craft goods, and exotic items that he receives as customary perquisites of being chief.
  - The chief's power is limited
    - since he depends on his kin and followers for the very goods that he rewards them with.

- this is thought to be a fairly common kind of social organization
  - we can either simply assume comes about occasionally
  - or we can agree to investigate the origins of chiefdoms separately
- population rises
  - [again, can we just assume this, or must it be explained?]
- rising populations lead to competition, raiding, and warfare between these settlements with chiefs
- In such a situation of constant, small-scale raiding and warfare
- a successful chief will frequently capture small amounts of land or goods
  - some of this will be recognized as rightly his (or hers), because of his role as military leader.
- This influx of wealth from an outside source gives the chief additional goods to redistribute, and increases his power
  - his "income" from raids or warfare "finances" his activities
- in addition, this same success in war increases the chief's standing at home
  - and may reduce support for internal rivals
- As the chief redistributes the captured gains to his followers (typically as compensation for services such as craft production, military or "police" service, political support, etc.)
  - wealth and status differences in the society increase
    - because some people are getting this outside wealth and others are not
  - the chief builds up a body of people who depend on him for this income
    - some will be quasi-professional soldiers, who he needs in order to keep producing the income from raids or warfare
  - This unequal distribution of war income increases social stratification
    - classes develop (leaders, soldiers, commoners...)
    - as well as other special interest groups not based on kinship relations, but instead on access to the chief's generosity
      - maybe record-keepers, religious specialists, diplomats, craft specialists working for the chief's court, etc.
- This process contributes to the emergence of the state, although Webster suggests that probably other processes are involved, too.
  
- These theories are just a few of many that have been proposed.
  
- We will look at some more later in the course
  
- For now, these theories, along with definitions of civilization that we considered earlier, will give us some questions to ask of the evidence about the origins of civilization in Mesopotamia