

Science or Ideology?

A Review of *The Archaeology of Politics and Power: Where, When, and Why the First States Formed* by Charles Maisels (Oxbow Books, 2010)

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The formation of early states is a topic that has attracted the attention of generations of anthropologists, and these researchers have in many cases developed significant new theory that enriched the historical social sciences. *The Archaeology of Politics and Power*, however, is not likely to be regarded as an equally useful theory source. My impression is that here we have an author deploying his knowledge of early state formation as a cover to promote critical and sociobiological perspectives, at the same time using the book as a platform from which to express personal opinions about topics far removed from his main expertise. Maisels confirms his sociobiological and critical stances early, in the preface, with his claim that the state is the foremost expression of power in human affairs, and power is, in turn, “coercive and one-sided ... [its basis being] ... violence ... [and] ... Male human instinct ... for self-assertion and aggression...” (p. xv; a summary of human behavior on page 27 enumerates the following features: hierarchy, violence, victimization, and predation). The sociobiological argument is advanced in chapter 2, *On Human Nature*, where we are told that humans share a biological heritage with apes, especially chimpanzees, whose lust for “killing is a gratifying manifestation of power” (p. 29). This means that power, and with it, I gather, state formation, ultimately must be understood at “...the level of the individual psyche. So it doesn’t do to sociologize, relativize, and ‘contextualize’ [why the quotes?] everything; those are the opiates of the chattering class. Some things just are biological, physical, neurological, somatic, instinctive, that is, evolved...” (p. 30).

Maisels defines the state as a form of control over people and territory through specialized apparatuses of power, including military, administrative, legal, and ideological, an entirely negative assessment which is then supported by select examples of state failure mentioned by the author to confirm his variant of critical theory, for example, the inadequate governmental responses

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to disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. Once having established, to his satisfaction, that the state is a largely negative social force in human affairs, he proceeds to describe the purpose of the book, which is two-fold. First, by reviewing evidence for early state formation he will strengthen his claim that states always formed to privilege the elites in control of them (thus partially aligning his theory with Marx and Engels, although he never unpacks this aspect of his theoretical orientation). Second, by studying early state formation we will learn more about human nature. This is important because, as he puts it (p. 3), “deep political problems” are “fundamentally psychological ones” that can only be resolved through education in “Emotional Intelligence” (not defined), but this will be a long-drawn out century-long process (?). Ordinarily, a researcher actually aiming to learn from the past lays out the conditions under which he/she will accept that the data could be said to falsify the theory, but nowhere does Maisels embrace this epistemological stance. Given this, under normal circumstances I would have put the book down (probably as early as p. 3) and tried to find something more interesting and enlightening to read, but since I agreed to write a review I was forced to move forward. This is when I noticed backtracking on the argument.

Backtracking is evident as early as p. 11, where we are informed that states can be more or less despotic because they may be based either on consent or terror (what happened to the ubiquitous male aggressive instincts?). But by pages 16 and 17 we are back to the critical perspective in a section that constitutes the *de rigueur* (for critical theorists) critique of the functionalists’ argument that states might form in part because they provide beneficial managerial services—although never saying why he doesn’t like these arguments (he just doesn’t). Confusingly, by page 18, in spite of Maisels’s expressed opposition to “managerialism” we have backtracked again when we are informed that a state must offer a “rounded security package” (?) including protection from the gods (I guess they must share the same aggressive instincts driving human males), redistribution (such as protection from famine), defense, and the maintenance of public order. Does this challenge the stated theory? We will never know, because the author then simply drops this subject, so that by the bottom of p. 18 we have suddenly shifted to a discussion of peasant households, followed abruptly and with no warning or transition (or rationale) by a section on persons on the margins of society who “are attracted to millenarian ideology looking toward the ‘total overturning’ [again, why the quotes?] of the established order.” Why?

Throughout the remainder of the book, rather than a systematic comparative treatment of the data on early states we are given selected facts, for example, when the author highlights the autocratic nature of the Chinese Qin state, while ignoring the more egalitarian Han Dynasty that succeeded it. Similarly, while the comparatively egalitarian Indus-Sarasvati civilization is the subject of one of the descriptive chapters, rather than considering the

possibility that its highly egalitarian political structure constitutes an example contrary to his theory, Maisels simply, instead, declares that it was never a state. I also suspect this same kind of selectivity was behind the decision to include a discussion of state formation in the Central Andes while omitting any discussion of Mesoamerican civilization, even though the latter region is widely recognized as one of the world centers of early state-building. In this case, I would venture to guess, Teotihuacan, which many authorities regard as an ancient republic, would have been too difficult to explain away.

In spite of the fact that Maisels' book is biased toward critical and sociobiological perspectives, we are provided with an Appendix B in which the author offers to help people better understand the differences between science and ideology. Here, he defines ideology as a form of reasoning in which "We adopt positions on an emotional-ideological basis; then, using argumentation, attempt to justify those positions to ourselves and to others. This process constitutes rationalization, not reason" (p. 364). Why are ideological arguments so commonly used and believed? It is because "...most people's heads are full of a confusing mixture of impressions about daily and current events, hearsay, disconnected fact-fragments, received religious or folk wisdom, bits of half-remembered school learning, etc." (p. 344). In my opinion, these two statements nicely summarize what Maisels himself has done in the writing of this book.