

Editors' Column: The Special Issue on Failed States and Nation-Building

Peter Turchin

University of Connecticut and Evolution Institute

Carleton Coon

Ambassador to Nepal (ret.)

David Sloan Wilson

Binghamton University and Evolution Institute

The rise of a centralized state that commands real authority throughout its territory can be seen as the reverse of the process by which a state loses its authority and gradually crumbles into a 'failed state.' A key aspect of state building involves establishing the internal bonds that make it possible for a disparate congeries of smaller-scale groups to unite within a larger framework. Both formation of larger social units from smaller ones and its reverse, disintegration, can be productively studied from the perspective of cultural and social evolution.

Given the intense interest by policy makers in both state development and disintegration, it is surprising that the many studies addressing the subject have almost always ignored the science of cultural evolution. What explains this puzzling absence? During the twentieth century Social Darwinism became a code word for the justification of social inequality, leading to policies such as genocide, eugenics, and withholding social support for the poor. As a result, the processes governing evolution of societies, groups, and states became a pariah subject, as far as most branches of scholarship devoted to human behavior and culture were concerned.

That situation is changing. Nearly every human-related subject is now being approached from an evolutionary perspective, with results reported in the top scientific and academic journals. These results bear no resemblance to Social Darwinist theories of a century ago. They neither paint a grim portrait of human nature as "red in tooth and claw," nor paint a romantic portrait of an inherently good noble savage. Instead, we see a species capable of the full range of outcomes, depending upon how our genetically evolved dispositions interact with environmental circumstances. Understanding this interaction in detail has enormous potential for informing policies aimed at improving the human condition.

Corresponding author's e-mail: peter.turchin@uconn.edu

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Recent research (some of it reviewed in this Special Issue) indicates that different evolutionary histories can constrain present-day political trajectories. This observation raises a number of questions related to both policy and research. Should the same, generic approach to state-building (or preventing state failure) be used in all problem regions? If not, how should policies differ between different cultural areas? Should we aim at building a modern democratic state in all cultural areas? Alternatively, might a loose confederation, with most decisions delegated to the local level, sometimes be a better solution?

To address these questions the Evolution Institute held a working conference on *An Evolutionary Approach to the Twin Problems of Failed States and Nation-Building* at Stanford University on December 3–5, 2011. The conference brought together academic experts from such diverse fields as evolution/ complexity and social/political science with actual practitioners—diplomats, policy makers, and specialists on one particular cultural region, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The main goal of the workshop was to discuss a future agenda for integrating evolutionary insights with policy-oriented research on failed states and nation-building.

Prior to the conference several discussion papers were circulated to all participants. These papers were discussed at the conference, revised by authors to reflect these discussions, and submitted for peer review at *Cliodynamics*. This Special Issue of *Cliodynamics*, thus, focuses on evolutionary approaches to failed states and nation-building. In addition, the journal continues the publication of discussion articles with commentaries that have been featured on the Social Evolution Forum.

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