

Failed States and Nation-Building: A Cultural Evolutionary Perspective

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This concluding article of the Special Issue on Failed States and Nation-Building argues that the science of social and cultural evolution can make valuable contributions to our collective capacity for peace- and state-building. It also reviews other papers in the Special Issue, and discusses how the different themes raised by the authors are tied together within the unifying theoretical framework of cultural evolution.

Introduction: Can Evolutionary Science Contribute to More Effective Nation-Building?

Nation-building has been a focus of much debate and empirical analysis in the U.S. policy community over the last several years. Although some influential voices continue to argue against U.S. involvement in nation-building projects, among those who support such efforts a broad consensus has emerged as to what the major elements of a successful nation-building program are. For example, such recommendations can be found in Francis Fukuyama's concluding chapter in *Nation-Building*, entitled "Guidelines for Future Nation-Builders" (Fukuyama 2006), in *Framework for Success: Fragile States and Societies Emerging from Conflict of the U.S.* Institute of Peace (Serwer and Thomson 2007), and in the RAND Corporation's manual *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building* (Dobbins et al. 2007). According to these authorities, the most important priorities of nation-building are (1) security and the rule of law, (2) governance, public administration, and stable democracy, and (3) economic reconstruction and development. An example of a more detailed framework, developed by the USIP team, is given in Serwer and Thomson (2007). Dobbins et al. (2007) 284-page manual is full of detailed and practical advice to aspiring nation-builders.

Given the amount of effort already devoted to this issue, it is legitimate to ask whether the science of cultural evolution can bring anything useful to the table. I argue that we can make a two-fold contribution, on a theoretical side and on an empirical side.

A useful analogy for nation-building is building bridges. An engineer working on a specific bridge-building project needs to have much practical knowledge: what purposes the bridge will serve, what is the lay of the land,

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what is the likelihood of natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, and what are the characteristics of locally available materials. But in addition to this practical and site-specific knowledge, modern engineers also employ theoretical concepts and laws from physics, which provide them with a framework within which to carry out various calculations. Nation-builders today don't have such a theoretical framework; they are similar to ancient engineers who designed and constructed bridges entirely from empirical knowledge that was obtained by trial and error.

Evolutionary science can offer such a theoretical framework (note that *evolutionary science* here means not just biological or genetic evolution, but primarily cultural and social evolution). It will not offer policy makers with precise blueprints for nation-building in any specific situation, but it can provide a set of guiding general principles. To make this a bit more concrete, consider nation-building in the narrow sense, as illustrated by the following quote (Dobbins et al. 2007:xxiii):

The prime objective of any nation-building operation is to make violent societies peaceful, not to make poor ones prosperous, or authoritarian ones democratic. Economic development and political reform are important instruments for effecting this transformation, but will not themselves ensure it. Rather, such efforts need to be pursued within a broader framework, the aim of which is to redirect the competition for wealth and power, which takes place within any society, from violent into peaceful channels.

Put in evolutionary terms, this means that the goal of nation-building is constructing (or, perhaps, growing) a society in which various constituting groups cooperate to a sufficient degree in order to stop violence between them. Cultural evolution has recently made great strides in understanding the evolution of cooperation at the level of large-scale human groupings, such as national units, constituting the United Nations (Turchin 2012). This understanding is still incomplete and much more work needs to be done, but we already have the outlines of a general theory of why and when humans cooperate.

In fact, a theoretical framework, such as the one offered by evolution, is even more critical in nation-building than in bridge-building. It is unlikely that we will be able to do nation-building entirely in the absence of a theoretical framework. Human societies are complex dynamical systems, and interventions affecting one aspect of them tend to produce unintended consequences elsewhere. This point has been admirably made by Carl Coon in his paper for this Special Issue, *Processes Too Complicated to Explain* (but perhaps not to model). It is further developed in the paper by Richerson and Henrich.

In addition to the theoretical role of social and cultural evolution, it can also contribute on the empirical front. One problem plaguing empirical analyses of past nation-building projects is paucity of data—it is hard to disentangle causes and effects statistically when you only have a couple of dozens of cases. One way to expand the sample size for the statistical analysis is to look not only at examples where the U.S., or the U.N., actively intervened in nation-building, but to look more broadly at many hundreds, or even thousands, of cases where nations did their own nation-building. Naturally many of these cases happened long ago and under very different conditions, but having a large sample size and a theoretical framework enables us to bring such factors into the analysis and estimate the effects of different conditions. Furthermore, studying cases of ‘self nation-building’ may be as important as cases of outside interventions. Thus, one of the most successful and frequently cited examples of nation-building by the U.S. is post-World War II Germany. Yet the success of this effort may have more to do with Germany’s own state-building a century before, during the Bismarck’s era of ‘blood and iron.’

Cultural Evolution of Norms and Institutions

Economists, sociologists, and evolutionary theorists recognize that a key aspect underlying human ability to cooperate and build functioning societies is social norms and institutions (see the paper by Peter Richerson and Joseph Henrich in this Special Issue). *Norms* are culturally acquired rules of behavior and *institutions* are systems of norms that govern behavior of individuals in specific contexts. Norms and institutions can either work against, or for cooperation. In the latter case we refer to them as *prosocial* (promoting social integration and cooperation).

One of the thorniest questions in sociocultural evolution is how human groups acquired the necessary norms and institutions to enable them to form large-scale multiethnic societies. For example, *generalized trust*, a propensity to trust strangers outside one’s ethnic group, promotes cooperation within such societies. However, it comes at a cost: an ethnic group that adopts such a norm makes itself vulnerable to exploitation by those who restrict cooperation to coethnics. In other words, we have a classical prisoner’s dilemma but played by groups rather than individuals. I will refer to such behavioral rules, which promote integration at largest social scales but impose costs on lower-level units, as *ultrasocial norms* (ultrasociality is the ability of humans to cooperate on very large scales, at the level of whole societies, Campbell 1983). An important subcategory is *metanorms*, such as the willingness to punish those who fail to sanction antisocial behavior (see Jenna Bednar’s paper in this Special Issue).

An example of an ultrasocial institution is the state, which can only exist when various kinds of interest groups cooperate in sharing both the burdens

and rewards of state government. ‘Interest groups’ here could mean ethnic groups, political parties, industrial lobby groups, and economic classes (e.g., employers versus employees). Other examples of ultrasocial institutions include governance by professional bureaucracies, formal systems of education, and organized religions and other integrative ideologies (Turchin 2012). Another excellent example is the prosocial constitutional culture discussed by Jenna Bednar in her paper.

The basic contradiction inherent in ultrasocial institutions, resulting from the tension between higher-level benefits and costs born by lower-level units, makes these institutions vulnerable to collapse. This dynamic has been recognized by, among others, Mancur Olson in *Rise and Decline of Nations* (Olson 1982).

Humans, nevertheless, are capable of cooperating at the level of large-scale societies and are capable of constructing viable states. States appeared in human history around 5,000 years ago in the Middle East and have gradually spread since then. Today, almost all of inhabitable Earth surface is divided between states, although not all of them are functioning well. How did this happen? As far as I know the only theory that offers a logically consistent and empirically tested answer to this question is the theory of multilevel selection of cultural traits, or cultural multilevel selection, CMLS for short. Because this theory offers us the best approach to understanding nation-building we had a strong representation of the CMLS theorists at the workshop: Peter Richerson (Richerson and Boyd 1998, 2005), David Sloan Wilson (2002, 2007), and myself (Turchin 2003, 2006). The CMLS theory has not yet been universally accepted by all evolutionary scientists, but its influence is rapidly growing and, frankly, there is no serious rival in sight, although influential hold-outs remain, such as Richard Dawkins (2008).

The answer offered by the theory is simple. Prosocial (and ultrasocial) norms and institutions spread as a result of competition between societies. If competition between societies is sufficiently intense to overcome the tendency of such cultural traits to collapse within societies, the overall pattern will be of spread. If not, evolution will result in the extinction of these traits. This answer was already formulated by Charles Darwin (1871), but especially in the last two decades the CMLS theory has matured and become much more sophisticated; it now provides a much more detailed and empirically supported account of how human ultrasociality evolves (e.g., Richerson and Boyd 2005).

Although human societies can compete in many ways, the main mode of competition throughout human history has been warfare (see the paper by Ian Morris in this Special Issue). Recent research has demonstrated that those regions (and periods) where warfare resulted in particularly high rates of cultural group selection were precisely the ones where large-scale states and empires repeatedly arose (Turchin 2011). Note that what is important is not how many people are killed in wars, but whether warfare results in cultural

groups going extinct—either as a result of genocide (when groups are physically exterminated), or more frequently as a result of ethnocide and ‘culturicide’ (when losing groups’ culture is replaced with that of the winners). In my work, I have been referring to such hotspots of nation- and state-building as *metaethnic frontiers* (Turchin 2006).

Until c.1500 AD the most important metaethnic frontiers (from the point of view of state- and empire-building) were the steppe frontiers between settled agriculturalists and pastoralist nomads. This is why the historical pattern of state formation has been precocious state-building activity in the ‘imperial belt’ situated to the south of the Great Eurasian Steppe (Lieberman 2008), and gradual spread of state-level organization to the rest of Afro-Eurasia (state-building in the New World followed a somewhat different trajectory, but it was governed by the same general CMLS principles). After 1500, however, the early-modern Europeans took over from the Inner Asia nomads, and locations where state-building was particularly intense shifted from steppe frontiers to ‘gunboat frontiers’ (Turchin 2011). The precise role of Europeans in state-building varied. At one extreme, new states were built by European immigrants (e.g., the United States). At the opposite extreme, European pressures caused native societies to build or rebuild their nations themselves (the Japanese in the nineteenth century; the Chinese in the twentieth century). Also interesting are intermediate cases, such as India, in which the new nation that became independent in 1947 combined native cultural elements (e.g., the role of Hinduism) with institutions transplanted by the British (e.g., democratic form of government).

This account, which merges evolutionary theory with quantitative historical analysis (and parallels in many ways Ian Morris’ paper in this Special Issue), has several implications for the issue of nation-building. First, nation-building missions of today can learn much from historical cases, most involving nation- and state-building by societies themselves. Additionally, there is one interesting case of nation-building that appears to be most relevant to the issues of today: nation-building by imperial powers. As an example, consider the role that the British Empire played in the rise of modern India. Such case studies are highly relevant even though the British contributed to nation-building in India largely inadvertently.

Second, inter-state competition plays an important, perhaps even decisive role in nation-building (this is a direct inference from the multilevel selection theory). Because the primary mode of such competition has been warfare, we are faced with a paradoxical conclusion that warfare was responsible for the evolution of complex, large-scale societies. This theme is developed at length by Ian Morris in this Special Issue. Strong states, thus, imposed internal peace and order and abolished internal warfare, but the primary reason for strong states was interstate competition and warfare. This may be an unpalatable conclusion, and nobody is proposing that we engineer a war between, for

example, Afghanistan and its neighbors to promote nation-building in Afghanistan. On the other hand, we cannot simply ignore such unpalatable truths—they have to be dealt with somehow. One relevant idea is that of multiple Darwin Machines (Calvin 1987), which implies that we retain a focus on competition, but channel it into nonviolent forms (this is the conclusion also reached by Richerson and Henrich).

Centralization/Decentralization Dynamics

In this section I discuss connections between the ‘conceptual grammar’ offered by the institutional framework of Richerson and Henrich, and the issue of centralization versus decentralization, which is addressed in various ways by Jenna Bednar, Thomas Barfield, Antonio Giustozzi, and Leonid Grinin.

Most states are highly centralized organizations (an important exception, confederacies, will be discussed later). The need for centralization is usually taken for granted by American policy makers. For example, the goal of nation-building in Afghanistan was from the beginning a unitary centralized state, instead of, for example, a loose confederation of largely self-governing regions and ethnic groups.

However, for most of our evolutionary history humans lived under uncentralized, non-hierarchical systems. The first hierarchically organized human societies, chiefdoms (Earle 1991), appeared around 7,000–8,000 years ago, and first states appeared c.5,000 years ago. Even after that and until very recently the majority of people lived in stateless societies. This is important because the state can only exist if a substantial majority of people has internalized the social norm of respect for (or obedience to) authority.

Internalized norms of respect for authority are important for the functioning of all large-scale societies, whether organized as traditional monarchies or modern democracies. Other norms are also needed, such as the one requiring leaders not to behave in blatantly self-serving manner, which is critical for legitimating the state authority (Bellah 2011). The consequence of this is that it should be very difficult to construct the state in societies where such norms are not internalized, as is apparently the case for Ghilzai Pashtuns of eastern Afghanistan (see Thomas Barfield paper in this Special Issue and Barfield 2010).

One example of the Ghilzai inability to construct an effective government is described by Thomas Barfield. The ethnic composition of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which ruled Afghanistan between the ‘Saur Revolution’ in 1978 and the Soviet take-over in 1979, was heavily Ghilzai. This short period of the PDPA rule was characterized by extreme internal conflict. As Barfield notes (2010:228), “of the PDPA’s eighteen thousand original members and the twenty-eight thousand who joined after

the coup, half would be killed, purged, or leave the party in the twenty months before it was toppled.”

Furthermore, human societies are multilevel structures (Turchin and Gavrilets 2009), and different systems of cooperation may coexist at different levels. Thus, consistently hierarchical systems encompassing all, from the lowest peasant to the emperor, were actually a rarity in history. The best-known unifier of China, the Qin emperor Shi Huang, attempted to impose such a system on the Chinese society, but the attempt was abandoned by the Han Dynasty emperors who came next. The successful, long-lived empires in history have been typically organized as hierarchical pyramids at the top, standing on a multitude of local societies integrated by diffuse non-hierarchical networks (like an Eiffel Tower sticking up from a cloud). An alternative is to have many smaller pyramids whose tops are networked by a diffuse authority system, such as the European Union today (although many now argue that the current economic crisis has revealed glaring weaknesses in such a political structure).

An additional dimension of state organization is the scope of state functions (e.g., Fukuyama 2004: 4). Many premodern empires had states of very limited scope. Minimally, they strived to impose internal peace and order (at least, within core areas) and took over external warfare and diplomacy. Many reserved the right of high justice, while leaving low justice to local lords and communities. Few attempted any kind of economic policy, and even fewer provided welfare services.

These considerations create a useful conceptual framework for thinking about what kind of a state would fit best local conditions in any particular case of nation-building. Specifically for Afghanistan, should it be organized as a unitary state or a confederation? Before reading Jenna Bednar’s article, my inclination was for the latter, because I was unaware that data actually do not provide unambiguous support for federalism’s ability to encourage prosocial tendencies. Bringing the issue of scope in, should the federal government attempt to provide the full spectrum of services that typify modern democratic nation-states, or should the scope be limited to the provision of internal peace and order? As Thomas Barfield notes, the Musahiban rulers of Afghanistan left local communities pretty much to their own devices, instead focusing on preserving internal security, protection against external enemies, and dealing with the international community. Perhaps such a minimalist state would be the best solution for ending civil war? As far as I know, no such discussions were conducted within the policy community when current nation-building project in Afghanistan was launched.

The Flip Side of State-Building

As we noted in the Editors' Column introducing this issue, the process by which a state loses its authority and gradually crumbles into a 'failed state' can be seen as the reverse of the rise of the centralized state. But whereas there are not that many alternative ways to get everything 'right' and arrive at a coherent and well-functioning society, there are innumerable ways for things to go wrong. As Leo Tolstoy said in the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Citizens of modern Western democracies take their large-scale and reasonably well-functioning societies for granted. They don't realize how inherently fragile complex societies are, and how easy it is to destroy the cooperative equilibrium that provides the glue that holds such societies together. One reason for this complacency is the belief that the political institutions of mature democratic states will channel competition between rival interest groups into non-violent forms. However, in order for this to work, the rival factions of political elites must be ready to cooperate with each other and, when the chips are down, willing to agree on a compromise (Goldstone 2002). Yet recent developments in both the United States (the 2001 budget wars between the Democrats and Republicans) and the European Union (the inability to agree on how to resolve the European debt crisis) suggest that the willingness of the political elites to compromise has been declining.¹ This is a truly worrying trend. Remember that the United States in 1860 was a reasonable, albeit imperfect, democracy. Yet, when the ability of the Southern and Northern political elites to cooperate evaporated, the democratic structures of governance were unable to prevent the outbreak of the bloody civil war that caused the loss of more than 600,000 lives.

A second reason is historical myopia. In most Western countries it has been more than a century since they experienced serious revolutions and civil wars. The last wave of massive political instability in the Western World was during the nineteenth century, with the Revolutions of 1848–49 in Europe and the American Civil War of 1861–65. Political instability since then was either localized (as in Germany during the post-World War I period) or mild by historical standards (the protests and riots of the late 1960s–early 1970s). It is natural to conclude that the modern democratic societies are immune to state collapse; that failed states and bloody civil wars can happen only in exotic places, such as Somalia or Afghanistan. This is a natural, yet premature conclusion.

¹ This is written in June 2012. I sincerely hope that my pessimistic assessment is incorrect, and the current trend of unraveling cooperation among the American and European elites will be reversed in the coming years.

Historical research indicates that complex large-scale societies undergo long-term oscillations in their demographic, economic, and social structures, termed *secular cycles* (Turchin 2003, Korotayev et al. 2006, Turchin and Nefedov 2009). This means that many historical societies experienced long periods of a century or longer of relative political stability, which were interspersed with century or longer periods of instability and recurrent state collapse and civil war. Thus, Western democracies don't yet have a long enough track record to demonstrate that they really solved the problem of state collapse. "It is too soon to tell" (as the Chinese Communist leader Zhou Enlai may have said in response to a question about the impact of the French Revolution).

Many among policy makers and general public think that history is irrelevant to our current problems—the world has changed too much, and any lessons drawn from the study of the Roman Empire have little, if any relevance today. As all authors in the Special Issue argue, explicitly or implicitly, this attitude is misguided. "This time is different" was the triumphalist slogan of stock market speculators in the years prior to the 2008 financial crisis. But as the overview of the eight centuries of financial folly has shown, the current crisis was driven by fundamentally same forces as in history (Reinhart and Rogoff 2009).

Nobody is denying that the world has changed dramatically in the last two centuries. As a result, modern societies have escaped the Malthusian trap. But as Leonid Grinin's contribution to this Special Issue shows, there are other 'traps' waiting for the unwary (see also Korotayev et al. 2011). In particular, Grinin discusses how the process of modernization can contribute to such factors causing political instability as rapid urbanization, development of 'youth bulges,' and globalization. His analysis shows that accelerated development and, in particular, rapid economic advance can cause various kinds of imbalances within the social system, and ultimately result in systemic collapse. In other words, unintended consequences, discussed in Carl Coon's article, strike again.

Conclusion: Evolutionary Thinking Yields New Insights

The way a problem is perceived depends strongly upon the theoretical lens through which it is viewed (Wilson 2008). A new theoretical perspective can change the way a problem is seen at a foundational level and make some aspects of it obvious that were invisible before. I believe that even at this early stage, we can already offer at least two such examples of such "transformation of the obvious" (Wilson 2008).

The first example deals with the cultural region encompassing Afghanistan and Pakistan, or 'AfPak' (this region was the empirical focus of the Stanford conference). This region spans three Eurasian zones with very different

evolutionary histories and cultures. This diversity offers scope for an application of the comparative method to the issues of peace building.

Most of Pakistan belongs to the imperial belt of Eurasia (in Ian Morris' terms, it is within the 'lucky latitudes' zone). This cultural area is characterized by a precocious development of cities and states (since the Bronze Age) and a long history of large empires. As a result, since independence Pakistan has had a relatively strong state (especially after shedding Bangladesh), and the difficulties it faces right now are akin to those causing periodic collapse of historical empires (which Pakistan resembles in its largely agrarian economy and traditional elements of social structure).

The area encompassing Northwestern Pakistan and Southern Afghanistan, or 'Pashtunistan,' had a very different history. This cultural area is part of 'Zomia,' the transnational mountainous area that stretches from upland Southeast Asia through the Himalayas and Tibet into the highlands of Afghanistan and Central Asia (van Schendel 2002, Michaud 2010). A striking feature of this area is a very rare incidence of state-level forms of social organization throughout its history. Statelessness, lack of writing, and shifting agriculture (swiddening) have persisted in Zomia despite its prolonged and intense interactions with the surrounding lowland empires that had intensive agriculture, cities, writing, monumental architecture, and all other trappings of civilization. While in most world regions the overall evolutionary trend has been towards ever more complex state-level societies, in Zomia (until very recently) evolution went in the opposite direction. According to a recent history of upland Southeast Asia, the Zomians practiced "deliberate and reactive statelessness" (Scott 2009). Despite their adoption of agriculture, the Zomians retained the egalitarianism that was a characteristic of small-scale sociality of pre-agricultural humans. They were able to do so because the rugged landscape they inhabited largely insulated them from selective pressures of large-scale warfare. The Pashtuns exhibit many characteristics of Zomians: fiercely egalitarian and highly prejudiced against hierarchy.

Northern Afghanistan belongs to the third zone. It developed under the influence of the Great Eurasian Steppe. The dominant ethnic groups there, the Uzbeks and Turkmen, belong to the Turko-Mongolian world. In contrast to the Pashtuns, who have almost no history of successful state-building (apart from the short-lived Durrani empire), Turko-Mongolian people accept the legitimacy of hierarchical differences. "Hierarchy was embedded into the very DNA of their social organization" (Barfield 2010:81). Central Asian nomads have a long history of hierarchical societies, which in the Great Steppe took the form of great imperial confederations (the best known of which is the Mongol empire built by Chinggis Khan). Additionally, there are innumerable examples of Turko-Mongolian nomads establishing conquest empires in agrarian regions.

Different evolutionary histories clearly imposed an imprint on present day trajectories of these three areas. For example, Northern Afghanistan experienced relative stabilization after a turbulent period following the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, with ‘warlords’ (who are not very different from khans) imposing relative security on a regional basis. In Southern Afghanistan, however, the conditions of insurrection and instability continue to prevail. It is as though, as some scholars proposed, the Pashtuns (and especially eastern Pashtuns, see Thomas Barfield article in this issue) never evolved an ability to cooperate in groups larger than a tribe on a sustained basis, except when temporarily unified by a common external threat. Note that the crux of the matter is not tribal organization—both the Pashtuns and the Uzbeks are tribal people. However, respect for authority is ‘in the cultural DNA’ of Turkic people, whereas fierce egalitarianism and resistance to hierarchy are equally ‘in the DNA’ of the Pashtuns.

This observation raises a number of questions related to both policy and research issues. Should the same, generic approach to state-building (or preventing state failure) be used in Pakistan, Pashtunistan, and Turkistan (to give this region its former name)? If not, how should policies differ between these cultural areas? Finally, should the goals be different? For example, whereas in some areas a goal of building a modern democratic state may be realistic, in others the best policy may be to aim at a loose confederation with most decisions delegated to the local level (at least in the short run, and in evolutionary terms the short run is longer than the attention span of most policy organizations). These are precisely the kinds of questions where evolutionary science could yield significant insights.

The second example is discussed by Antonio Giustozzi in this issue. Above I have already referred to various cases of historical nation-building, including self nation-building and ‘inadvertent’ nation-building. In fact, much of historical nation-building, which occurred on metaethnic frontiers, had unintentional character and was rife with unintended consequences. When the Imperial Rome forced formation of supertribal units on their Rhine frontier (because they found it more convenient to deal with a few ‘kings’ rather than a bewildering multitude of tribal groups), the Romans certainly did not intend to set off the evolution of such large confederations as the Franks and Alamanni. Yet that is precisely what happened, and as we well know the new Germanic kingdoms ended up conquering much of the Roman Empire. Nonlinear feedbacks are also evident in the repeated and synchronized formation of gigantic agrarian empires in China and imperial confederations of steppe nomads (Turchin 2009).

When viewed from this angle it seems clear that the prolonged intervention of first the Soviet Union, and now the United States in the Afghanistan has created a selective regime that favors the evolution of increasingly more cohesive and militarily capable groups. As Giustozzi points out, even as late as

2002–03 the Taliban was a loosely coordinated, uncentralized, and militarily ineffective organization. Since then, however, it has been rapidly evolving by developing a more integrated military leadership, adopting new technologies (improvised explosive devices and personal computers), and by strengthening ideological indoctrination of its cadres. Of particular interest is the increased degree of centralization, because the Taliban draws most of its troops from eastern Pashtuns, who are fiercely egalitarian and resistant to authority. This development shows that although cultures have a lot of inertia, nevertheless they do change in response to strong selective pressures.

In conclusion, I readily acknowledge that the science of cultural evolution has not yet developed to the point where it could yield specific recommendations to policy makers attempting to fix failing states and “make violent societies peaceful.” Yet I hope that the papers in this Special Issue show that cultural evolution has a great potential to become a unifying theoretical framework for such efforts. To make progress on this question we need more research on cultural evolution of state forms of social organization, both theoretical and empirical. We also need a dialogue between policy professionals and evolutionary scientists, broadly understood to include anthropologists, political scientists, and historians (after all, history and cultural evolution have a similar relationship to that between paleontology and biological evolution). The Stanford workshop made a start, and it is my hope that the collection of articles in this Special Issue will be of use in the future efforts to increase our collective capacity for peace- and nation-building.

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