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The Rise and Decline of the State (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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The Rise and Decline of the State. By Martin van Creveld (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999) 439 pp. \$54.95 cloth \$19.95 paper

Those of us who study social systems will always do better if we

understand that all such systems are continually evolving, and if we enjoy a grasp of their origins, early history, and recent past. When it comes to the global system, this assignment is demanding, essential, and rarely approximated. It is little wonder that our scholarship has so often been **[End Page 445]** flawed and that most of the system's residents have suffered-and inflicted-great abuse and misfortune.

As we approach the next transition in the system, marked by the decline of the territorial state as its most salient and most powerful subsystem, we are fortunate to have as a guide this analytic-and literate-tour de force. Had this understanding and insight been available and appreciated a century ago, we might have been spared the grief, devastation, and corruption of the two world wars; the wrenching demise of colonialism; and the still all-too-real menace of a nuclear, chemical, or biological holocaust. Some things in the system might still be set aright-or at least mitigated-but it will require major changes in our scholarship and radical changes in our policies. The books, articles, and classes in our field need a thorough housecleaning, beginning with what passes for theory, be it the fatuous distinctions among the three blind mice of "realism," "liberalism" and "constructivism," or their neo-s.

Closely related is our epistemology: the ultra-modest standards for what we consider evidence. Of the hundreds of university programs in world politics around the world, one finds barely a dozen in which modern scientific method is brought to bear. Moving from the impressionistic to the reproducible, and from the ideographic to the nomothetic may not be our salvation, but it would at least give us a fighting chance. Otherwise, we will continue to chase the headlines, perpetuate and then reject the newest fads, and serve as the court astrologers in whichever provincial territory we happen to reside.

No one can accuse this author of methodological dogmatism, revisionism, or faddism. This study is classical history in the best sense, while remarkably aware of the more powerful ideas from economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science. This study is not only brilliant history; it is insightful and brimming with scores of

fascinating and plausible hypotheses, many of which cry out for empirical testing, and a large fraction of which-I suspect-would come out standing tall.

Turning from matters epistemological, the author gets the highest marks for the mix of breadth and depth with which he brings us from prehistoric times through the Middle Ages, telling much of what specialists in those periods have concluded, with particular attention to the intimate bond between the formation of the territorial state and the bloody evolution of warfare. Especially credible is van Creveld's appreciation of the exploitive-perhaps even criminal-role of states (or most of them) from the triumph of the kings until the present day. As President Kennedy put it, "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country!" His may have been an appeal to altruism, but more often than not, our political elites concentrate, and usually with alarming success, on ways to persuade, cajole, or coerce citizens to put in considerably more than they get to take out. **[End Page 446]**

Americans can easily be forgiven in the first months of a new administration for wondering what the state is for. Could it be a large, complex, and moderately efficient mechanism for extracting resources from the citizens and enriching the bureaucratic elite, its allies in commerce, the media, and the universities via an increasingly institutionalized system of baksheesh? Could it be a corporation that sells a dubious physical security to citizens, commercial patrons, and foreign clients in exchange for deference, latitude, and impunity? Is there a chance that it might be an agency that helps to protect our natural environment, educate our children, heal our sick and...

only in non-English versions, and six reach publication here for the first time. Wolf grouped his essays into four categories: Anthropology (attempts to situate both the profession and particular figures within Wolf's own experience of the profession), Connections (relations between local and large-scale social processes), Peasants (explorations—generally based more directly on Wolf's own fieldwork than other essays in the collection—of how rural cultivators live, work, and connect with others), and Concepts (more general reflections on culture, society, modes of production, and power). As a graduate student, by his own account, Wolf drew inspiration for a Marxist (or at least *marxist*) anthropology from the major treatises of Wittfogel, Sweezy, and James.¹ Although he does not say so directly, he also assumed from the start that any valid anthropology would be deeply historical—meaning that it would locate its descriptions and explanations, including those of present-day processes, firmly in time and space.

Early in his career, Wolf's preference for material explanations and historical perspectives brought him to reject two influential approaches with which he had extensive contact: Steward's ahistorical cultural ecology and Kroeber's suprahistorical natural history.² Echoes of those early encounters reverberate throughout the book. More than anything else, Wolf insisted on tracing human practices and institutions to relations among social sites; on emphasizing relations of power, exploitation, and conflict; and finally on placing every human social arrangement that he analyzed in comparative-historical perspective.

Although Wolf distrusted grand theory from early on, these rich essays display a consummate theorist at work. Better yet, as *Journeys of Ruin* demonstrates in detail, this superb analyst of social processes never stopped challenging and rethinking his own smart, distinctive, and far-reaching formulations.

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1. Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, 1957); Paul M. Sweezy, *Modern Capitalism and Other Essays* (New York, 1972); C. L. R. [Cyril Lionel Robert] James, *A History of Negro Revolt* (New York, 1960).

2. Julian H. Steward et al., *The People of Puerto Rico: A Study in Social Anthropology* (Urbana, 1956); Alfred L. Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture* (Chicago, 1952).



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