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Ronald M. Glassman. *Democracy and Despotism in Primitive Societies. A Neo-Weberian Approach to Political Theory*

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BOOK REVIEWS

POLITICAL SYSTEMS

Ronald M. Glassman, *Democracy and Despotism in Primitive Societies. A Neo-Weberian Approach to Political Theory*. Vol. I. Primitive Democracy. Vol. II. Primitive Despotism. (Millwood, NY: Associated Faculty Press, Inc., 1986).

The two volumes of this set are very different. The first, "Primitive Democracy," is based on a wealth of examples and should be on the shelf of everyone interested in the subject. It is in effect an outline study of the "sociology of law, power, and legitimate domination" at those levels of political organization which anthropology commonly designates as the "band" and the "tribe" (one section on each). As an outline study it is carefully organized and sticks to each subject under discussion rather than wandering off on interesting but not immediately relevant tangents. It is easy to dip into for a quick refresher on any given topic and includes the occasional vivid example suitable for keeping the attention of undergraduates who are not yet convinced of the importance of sociology and anthropology, e.g. a discussion of the lack of warfare at the band level of organization ends with the comment "As Ti!Kay, the headman of one of the Bushman bands, remarked, 'Fighting is very dangerous; someone might get killed.'" (p. 111). The book concludes with an extensive discussion of impediments to despotism in band and tribal society. The only major fault is the lack of an index, and this is partly made up by an extensive secondary table of contents.

The second volume, "Primitive Despotism," proposes a general model for the process whereby humanity moved from tribe to civilization. Very briefly summarized, the proposal is that the rise of agriculture was essentially a female process, thereby transferring a great deal of the status of breadwinner from the (hunting) men to the (gathering, then horticultural) women and leaving the men with too much free time. To use this time and regain status, the men resorted to a vast increase in warfare among the local horticultural units of society. This created a power conflict between the war chiefs, whose power was rising, and the tribal elders and shamans, whose positions were thus becoming endangered. An alliance of the authorities of elders and shaman exploited the terror of the supernatural to control the war chiefs. The war chiefs responded, at least in some societies and particularly those which emphasized herding over farming, by intensifying the warfare and creating their own terror-institutions over their own warriors, thereby becoming despotic kings and establishing a level of organization which could evolve indefinitely. Glassman does not use the terms "chieftdom" and "state," so

his interpretation of this new organization may be different from that current in the literature.

Speaking in general, this transition from precivilization to civilization suffers anthropologically from an extreme lack of examples, so anthropologists typically specify historically known polities as being close enough to the original condition to serve as experimental subjects. Glassman also does this, giving most attention to African agricultural societies and particularly emphasizing the political activities of Shaka Zulu. There is secondary reference to those Polynesian islands that happened to be despotically organized, and also an occasional note of archaeological material. Thus each reader's reception of the book is likely to depend on his agreement, or lack of it, with the validity of the examples, assumptions and research directions on which the proposed model is based.

I find one major flaw in the assumptions: If one uses the word "early" to refer to institutions and polities not far removed from the establishment of agriculture and multi-village organization, then in this book "primitive" is equated to "early" without discussion whether the equation is proper. This is a common Western fallacy, enshrined in no less a study than Claessen and Skalnik's *The Early State*. We Westerners are mesmerized with technology, a culture trait that has existed at least since Anna Comnena swore about "those Franks and their damned machines!" during the First Crusade. So we automatically assume that the growth of civilization is a technological progress, and thus that "primitive" means "mechanically undeveloped" means "early." But our technological progress is not only a uniquely Western value, it is also almost equally uniquely a Western achievement, accomplished by no other civilization on Earth. Likewise even literacy is a tool or technique, and it has long been known that when civilizations achieve common literacy they lose another tool, the training for an enormously capacious verbal memory. If instead of emphasizing complexity in the development merely of technology, one considers civilization to be an exercise in the development of complexity of any kind, then such complexity can be achieved in many other fields besides physical technology.

Specifically regarding Africa, the African polity is peculiar in that complexity was, so to speak, an off-the-rack suit of clothes, ready-made when conditions became appropriate for it and easily thrown away when conditions became inappropriate again. Thus for example Murdock (1959:37) noted that "the states . . . appear to be essentially as similar as peas in a single pod. . . It is almost as though all of Africa south of the Sahara were permeated . . . by a mental blueprint of [the same] political structure, transmitted from generation to generation as part of a traditional political culture." If these African polities had originated independently of each other from an originally precivilized condition, one would expect rather more variation in the observed results. Many forming states have emerged based on a feudal-manorial structure, but in Africa one finds instead "in principle something nearer to a bureaucracy

... in which power was wielded by officials, who held their offices during the king's pleasure, and who could be transferred from post to post, promoted, demoted, or even destituted by a word from the king (Oliver and Fage 1962:44-45)." There were at least three levels of hierarchy in the larger kingdoms, not necessarily hereditary. Of the West African cities described by the first Europeans, 24 probably had over ten thousand people each. Further south the aggregates were smaller, but the capital of Kongo had between 20,000 and 50,000 people, the kingdom as a whole probably at least two to three million. Comments by Arab traders suggest this arrangement was in place on the east coast at least a thousand years ago. Thus one may wonder whether Africa is really so "primitive" (that is, "early") as is often conceived. Glassman responds (II, 178) by defining African royal bureaucracy to be the original condition of civilization and feudalism as a post-bureaucratic situation caused by the collapse of an expanded military kingship in favor of the local military commanders. Certainly this statement could fit at least most historically known feudalisms, since all of them have empires somewhere in their background. Nevertheless it remains only an assertion that bureaucracy is the original condition, and the assertion is valid only if, for example, the African states used as principal examples are in fact specifically "early" rather than specifically African. This remains to be determined.

The other major flaw I find in the work is that, although the cause of the transition to despotism is hypothesized to be the establishment of agriculture, very little attention is given to the archaeological evidence from the time of this establishment. The transition has been identified within a period of some centuries in four areas: the Near East ca. 6000 bc (Libby radiocarbon date) (Renfrew 1973:199, and other sources; see Hord 1986). In Mesoamerica farming villages with a dependence on agriculture rated at 40% growing to 55% occurred in 1500-900 bc (MacNeish 1967a:23-24, 1967b:300). In Peru maize became an important main crop ca. 800 BC (Higgs 1986:188) and during Chavín times, presently estimated ca. 1500-300 BC, "some basic foodstuffs and domesticated plants spread through the whole" area (MacNeish et al. 1975:82). In eastern North America "major changes in subsistence and settlement" began about AD 700 (Asch et al 1979:84), such that maize became a hundred times more common in Mississippian contexts than previously, to the extent of suggestion of a classic peasantry (Fowler 1969:366, 374). Of all these only the Mississippians provide clear evidence of an emphasis on warfare, which began no more than a few centuries before Mississippian times. Coe hypothesizes Mesoamerica of 1500-900 bc to have been an Olmec conquest area, but the point is heavily debated; militarism is not an accepted condition until at least Late Preclassic times (ca. BC/AD). Christine Niederberger's recent *Paléopaysages et archéologie préurbaine du bassin de México* makes no note of warfare nor of such indicators as destructions followed by fortifications in this period (Imogen Seger-Coulborn, personal communication, ISCS 1988 meeting). There is no evidence of fortification in Peru until the end of Chavín times nor of destruction followed by fortification in the Near East until ca. 5000 bc.

Thus the evidence of the influence of agricultural development on the growth of warfare remains at best ambiguous; except among the Mississippians, warfare does not seem to have become established until agricultural dependence was very great indeed. The evidence may, however, suggest some degree of a pattern of the beginning of warfare some 1000 years after the establishment of agriculture in the Neolithic Near East, Olmec Mesoamerica and Chavin Peru; and the climax of Mississippian development also occurred some 1000 years after the climax of the commercially and artistically impressive, but only protoagricultural, Middle Woodland (Hopewell) period in the eastern United States. This may fit Glassman's hypothesis, but the point remains unaddressed.

These caveats aside, the book remains an interesting exercise in modeling the transition to civilization. The concept that civilization began as a competition in institutionalized terrorism is certainly unpalatable, but not necessarily therefore wrong. Whether the model stands up to examination in light of further evidence, it is coherent on the evidence offered and should provoke much thought on "early" polities and their development. People interested in the issue should read it.

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