

Stefan Breuer: *Der charismatische Staat. Ursprünge und Frühformen staatlicher Herrschaft*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2014, 319 pages

This is an important and immensely learned book. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no comparably detailed attempt to trace the emergence of early states in different regions of the Old and the New World. Drawing on a vast array of anthropological, archaeological and historical sources, Breuer analyzes the transition to statehood in Oceania (where the process was, as he argues, not completed), the Andean region, Mesoamerica, China, Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Aegean. The general stance of his analysis might be described as consistently sceptical about claims made on behalf of archaic political forms; he thus regards widely shared views on early evidence of state power in the Andes, the ancient Near East and the Bronze Age Aegean as misguided. Such doubts also explain the absence of the Indus civilization from his research programme. Its political framework was, as he suggests, probably a cluster of chiefdoms, characterized by a “nonstate type of complexity” (p. 36). In fact, there would be valid reasons to omit this case, even if the criteria of early statehood were to be relaxed: the evidence is, as many scholars in the field have agreed, more enigmatic than in the other relevant instances, and it does not translate into the kind of narrative that Breuer constructs for other regions and civilizations.

But if the merits of the empirical content are massive and obvious, the conceptual framework seems more directly questionable. Breuer takes his clue from Max Weber’s distinction between charismatic, traditional and legal-rational domination, and draws on recent clarifications grounded in more careful readings of the sources (to which he has been a major contributor). But apart from a comment to be noted below, late in the book and immaterial to his discussion of the early state, he does not suggest any revisions at the basic conceptual level. At this point, we may register a *prima facie* objection to the proposal set out in Breuer’s long introduction (pp. 9–37). The typology of domination is one of the most markedly unfinished parts of Weber’s work; it

went through many versions, and the last ones belong to the final phase of Weber’s career; many questions concerning the relationship between the three types and the contextual meaning of each one in particular remained unanswered. In a book dealing with early states, this unfinished conceptual scheme is applied to a field which Weber hardly touched (the main exception is Egypt, but as Breuer shows, his over-modernized views on this subject must now be corrected). It seems unlikely that this major extension can leave the frame of reference unaffected, all the more so when the latter is still in the making.

Not that Breuer regards the Weberian scheme as sufficient for his purposes. He wants to combine it with categories and models developed in recent decades by anthropologists and archaeologists. There is everything to be said for that kind of interdisciplinary contact, and not doubt that those who deal with prehistoric, stateless or archaic societies can still learn some lessons from classical sociology. But a mutually induced critical reflection might take us further than a mere combination of resources. To get a tentative idea of that option, we must first take a brief look at Breuer’s choices.

On the positive side, it is worth noting that Breuer is highly critical of the more faddish notions that still enjoy some popularity among archaeologists, especially the attempts to identify “world systems” in every historical stage and every geographical region; as he argues, they rely on systemic models that are either defined too rigorously to be applicable outside their original modern context, or too loosely to carry any specific meaning (the latter applies to André Gunder Frank’s macro-historical escapades). A holistic prejudice is also evident in neo-Marxist interpretations of the “mode of production” as an overarching structure; but here Breuer finds an opening to the kind of neo-Weberian analysis that he wants to develop. It is the “epigenetic civilizational theory” formulated by Jonathan Friedman and Michael Rowlands, and originally conceived as a way of bringing divergent paths and multilineal evolution into a structuralist-Marxist vision of history. One of its key themes is the control over “imaginary conditions of production”, seen as a possible

and in fact frequent but not necessary road to statehood. These “imaginary conditions” consist of beliefs, symbols and rituals; they should obviously be thematized in their own right, not just in relation to production, and such a turn would seem to link up with Weber’s comments on the ideas that chart the paths of human action. From there is a direct line of thought to the cultural worlds that crystallize around constellations of ideas. But this is not the road Breuer wants to take. His extensive and meticulous work on Weber has never confronted the question whether a comparative analysis of civilizations was emerging as the unifying goal of Weber’s project.

The approach chosen in the book under review is starkly opposed to civilizational analysis. Breuer collapses the worlds of beliefs, symbols and rituals into the Weberian category of charisma. Recent scholarship has undeniably shown that this notion is more ubiquitous and more significant in Weber’s work than mainstream interpretations tended to admit; but it has also highlighted Weber’s failure to define it in a clear and consistent way. If it is to be used in the systematic fashion envisaged by Breuer, a minimum of stabilizing content is required. Breuer’s solution to the problem is to describe charisma as a “trans-epochal phenomenon, linked to anthropological constants that are relatively resistant to the social and the natural environment” (pp. 18–19). This claim is not substantiated by anything more than a general reference to “biocultural” and cognitive-psychological foundations. But if that is where we are supposed to look, the first step would be to face the unending and multi-faceted controversy about the relative weight of natural and cultural factors in the making of human destinies. The dispute is at least as vigorous in anthropology as in any other discipline, and at least for those of us who tend to think that the defence of culture as human creation is a more convincing stance than any naturalist reductionism, the identification of charisma with an infra-cultural core is implausible. And Breuer does not move in that direction; instead, he returns to Weber and defines charisma in terms of non-everyday (*ausseralltäglich*) dimensions of social life.

We can, in that sense, speak of charismatic objects, symbols, experiences and activities. As often noted, Weber never clarified the relationship of this fundamentally transpersonal and primarily religious meaning to the emphatically personal and primarily political one that figures in his sociology of his domination; for Breuer’s argument, it is essential to shift the balance towards the former side, and he therefore criticizes Weber for conflating the routinization (*Veralltäglichung*) and objectivation (*Versachlichung*) of charisma with its de-personalization, understood as a step towards disappearance and displacement by traditional or legal-rational domination. For Breuer, the most decisive transformation of charisma is its institutionalization, and it includes – especially in the early stages discussed in the book – a personal component. “Kingship and the state” are thus to be explained as results of “an institutional turn of charisma” (p. 41).

This is an attempt to integrate the different aspects of charisma, more efficiently than Weber did, and make the concept more suitable for explanatory purposes. The problem is that it starts with the very vague notion of a “non-everyday” (perhaps more precisely “trans-everyday”) dimension. For phenomenologically inclined readers (including the present reviewer), the most obvious response is to take this term as a shorthand reference to distinctions within the lifeworld, and if the historicity of the latter is taken seriously, we must consider cultural variations in the meaning, extent and importance of phenomena or perspectives defined as transcending the framework of everyday life. That line of thought leads to a comparison of cultural world-articulations. Breuer hints at such possibilities with reference to Philippe Descola’s efforts to re-centre anthropology around a comparative analysis of basic world-views, but then neutralizes that idea by positing a rough correlation between Descola’s models of world-views and stages of social development (pp. 19–20). The issues raised by Descola’s work are too complex to be discussed here, but a familiar classical source may help to take our point further. In Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the distinction

between everyday and non-everyday spheres seems to converge with the one between sacred and profane; this is one among several manifestations of the original omnipresence of religion. Durkheim's argument is empirical, based on what he thought was an exemplary case, as close to human origins as sociological or anthropological inquiry could get, and should not be mistaken for an unconditional equation of the sacred with a realm beyond everyday life (an inverted version of that claim seems to be at work when it is proposed to replace the notion of sacred rulership with that of the charismatic state). Durkheim did not live to develop the projects foreshadowed at the end of *Elementary Forms*. But it seems clear that if he had gone on to deal with the later history of religions, he would have taken note of their varying impact on the distinction between everyday reality and dimensions beyond it. Moreover, he outlined a model of socio-cultural differentiation that would allow us to trace the emergence of key institutions from the original all-encompassing religious framework, and although this programme was not carried out, the overall thrust of his work suggests that he did not regard this differentiating process as exclusively modern. To mention only the most prominent cases, it seems clear that the spheres of politics, philosophical and/or scientific inquiry, and aesthetic creation have their specific ways of transcending everyday reality. It is true, and reflected in Durkheim's comments on certain trends of the modern democratic imagination, that projections and appropriation of the sacred appear in these other contexts; but this secondary sacralization is a separate problem, and should not be obscured by conceptual levelling. The notion of charisma seems either too loaded with connotations derived from its most familiar pre-Weberian use (the informal authority of religious virtuosi), or – if separated from that context – so vague that it threatens to bring on the night in which all cows are black.

To sum up, this conceptual analysis does not support the proposal to redefine archaic state power as charismatic rather than sacral. The widely accepted notion of sacral rulership allows for varying forms. Kingship was clearly

the most common type; divine kingship in the strict sense was a specific and relatively rare version; the relationship to the sacred differed from one civilization to another and from one historical phase to another. For example, the contrast between Egyptian and Mesopotamian kingship was not as clear-cut as earlier scholars assumed, but some basic divergences are still acknowledged; on the other hand, the Egyptian imaginary of divine rulership obviously underwent significant changes (both these points seem to be confirmed by Breuer's analyses). Further distinctions raise the question of divided or secondary power centres. The division of power between king and temple is a recurrent and controversial theme in discussions about the most archaic civilizations. Similarly, the balance of power between the sacral ruler and the economic, military and administrative elites of the society in question what subject to change and often difficult to assess. Here we need only underline the point that these differentiations – all taken into account in Breuer's analyses of particular cases – are perfectly compatible with the general notion of an archaic state anchored in the sacred.

Any definition of archaic statehood must prove its worth by helping to grasp the emergence of the state as a historical process; and in that context, it should also do justice to the pre-comprehension that Breuer shares with virtually all authors working in the field: the view that this innovation represents a major turning-point in human history. A minimalist conception of the state as a regulating centre with a territorial domain does not meet these criteria. For a more adequate model, Breuer draws on Max Weber's general theory of the state (in contrast to the specific one, focused on the rational bureaucratic apparatus invented in the West, and favoured by some later readers of Weber's work). When it came to characterizing state power in cross-cultural and trans-epochal terms, Weber stressed the monopoly of legitimate force. It has rightly been objected that many early political formations, intuitively and more or less unanimously classified as states, were far from achieving such a monopoly. Breuer therefore suggests a more historical version of

Weber's claim: political associations (*Verbände*) that show a tendency to monopolize legitimate force should be characterized as states (p. 15). Obviously, the cases to be compared – especially the very numerous ones where the evidence is exclusively archaeological – will often be difficult to assess on that basis. But that does not invalidate the implicit basic point: a historically grounded theory of the state must be conceived in processual terms. Unfolding dynamics of state formation and transformation, rather than stable types or permanent structures, are the main theme to be clarified. This was the general message of Norbert Elias's work, to some extent blurred by his one-sided focus on the infrastructures of statehood (the aspects that Breuer wants to subsume under charisma were largely neglected), but a more multi-dimensional approach can nevertheless build on his insights and extend them into new fields. In particular, the emergence of the state is to be analyzed as a process, rather than an invention or a once-and-for-all historical watershed. To quote the concluding statement of Breuer's introduction, "the state is certainly domination in space", but a closer examination of statehood "cannot do without the *longue durée* and thus the dimension of time" (p. 37).

As Breuer explicitly notes, this emphasis on temporality applies to the early state no less than to later formations. We might ask whether that view is easily compatible with his attempts (in the empirical chapters) to draw a clear line between states and pre-state societies (the question becomes particularly acute when the state is contrasted with the chieftom, supposedly a category with clearly defined content and boundaries. If we treat pristine state formation as a long-drawn-out and emergent process, we may be able to identify turning-points and convergences of multiple trends, as well as blockages and reversals; but it becomes more difficult to pinpoint a take-off that would mark the beginning of a new form of political life. The problem is compounded by the incomplete and elusive character of the record. It is now widely accepted that political organization is part and parcel of tribal societies, and it is no less clear that the trends culminating in the archaic states

and civilizations, studied by archaeologists and historians, were conducive to major transformations. We will most likely have to accept permanently blurred borderlines and transitions between these two states of affairs.

With that in mind, another look at the sacral connection may be useful. It should help to gain a better view of the shift to statehood, but it will also have to be adapted to the conceptual and evidential limits indicated above. A convenient starting-point is Marcel Gauchet's theory of the early state, not mentioned in Breuer's discussion (an understandable omission, since Gauchet does not engage in the concrete historical analysis that is all-important for Breuer). Gauchet's interpretation of the emerging state as a "sacral transformer" is the cornerstone of a "political history of religion" that has aroused controversy, especially about later historical stages, but it has yet to be assessed in the context of archaeological and anthropological debates. As it stands, it is no doubt too dependent on notions of an abrupt break; a more processual version could still retain the idea of a reorientation, turning away from patterns of order ascribed to mythical ancestors and towards an empowering of rulers with some kind of sacral (not necessarily outright divine) status.

This view is not incompatible with a multi-linear conception of primary state formation. Max Weber had noted the varying power balance between priests and warriors in early phases of social development, and the long-term effects of such constellations. Breuer links both sides of this agonistic relationship to charisma, more systematically than Weber did, but tones down the role of military charisma, as against the magical and religious types. He stops short of ascribing primacy to the latter, but a revised version of Gauchet's thesis can take us further in that direction. A complex conception of the sacred, drawing on Durkheim but expanding his definitions, would combine three aspects. The sacred, in contrast to the profane, is – as Durkheim duly emphasized – the dominant side of a fundamental division; it is also, as he less clearly saw, central to the constitution of the world as a unifying horizon and a field of meaning; and it is, as he implicitly recognized, an

enduring but mutable frame of reference for the structuring of social power. In short, it would seem to possess an integrating capacity lacking in other factors involved in the rise of the state. Breuer is no doubt right to insist on the multiple lines of development contributing to this process, and his argument is backed up by the “dual processual theory” of American archaeologists (in fact, the duality in question seems to have multiple meanings for different authors: it refers to monocratic and oligarchic power structures as well as to priestly and military leadership, and sometimes to patrilineal and matrilineal succession). But I do not think that his empirical analyses include a clear case of military state-building bypassing the sacral connection.

At this juncture, a brief comparison with another foray into the same field may be in order. Norman Yoffee's book on the early state and its interpreters [*Yoffee 2004*] is mentioned in a footnote to Breuer's introduction, but does not enter into the subsequent discussion. There are some basic affinities between the two books. Both authors set out to demolish theories that exaggerate the strength and the dimensions of early states; Yoffee links these retrospective illusions to neo-evolutionist views, whereas Breuer is less concerned about that background and – as some of his formulations suggest – more receptive to certain evolutionist ideas. But more importantly, there are three distinctive aspects of Yoffee's argument that seem relevant to the issues raised by Breuer. In the first place, Yoffee develops a more explicit critique of the tendency to equate the institutions of surviving tribal societies (our supposed “contemporary ancestors”, as he calls them) with those of prehistoric ones; and on that basis he questions the notion of the chiefdom, which turns out to be very difficult to define in precise terms and very dependent on selective projections of anthropological evidence into the past. Secondly, he proposes to study the rise of the state in connection with processes of differentiation and integration, both types being defined in ways that go beyond functionalist assumptions while emphasizing the distribution and concentration of power and wealth. Finally, neither wealth nor power develop independently of ideas about their proper

uses and possibilities, and the role of ideologies in the rise of early states thus becomes an important theme, however difficult it may often be to grasp his aspect of the picture.

Within the limits of this review, it is not possible to discuss Breuer's regional case studies in detail. An adequate response would, at any rate, require specialist knowledge of each field. But some strengths of the argument should be underlined. Breuer notes the importance of interstate relations, and the very different forms they could take in various parts of the world. There is, for example, a very marked contrast between interstate dynamics in Mesoamerica and China. He signals the importance of great empires in the Old World (p. 15), and is well aware of the pioneering turn towards empire in the Near East (beginning with the third-millennium expansion of Akkad). He is no doubt right to reject over-enthusiastic attempts to depict late fourth-millennium Uruk as an empire and his account of the very gradual Egyptian shift to empire-building, culminating in the New Kingdom, sounds convincing. The refusal to recognize the Inca state as an empire seems more problematic. Here the unquestioning application of the Weberian concept of patrimonialism obscures the originality of a state that achieved extraordinary power despite limited technological resources (Breuer is, however, on the right track when he criticizes traditional narratives, still accepted in some recent literature on the Incas, that describe them as coming from nowhere; in fact, they built on a long history of state formation). Another instance of misplaced scepticism might be the conclusion that Oceania did not make it to statehood. It is not clear, at least not to the present writer, that Breuer has effectively countered the claims of other authors – notably Patrick V. Kirch – who have found evidence of archaic state structures in Polynesia. And to add a last comment on empirical shortcomings: The trajectory of the Hittite state in Anatolia, whether we define it as an empire or not, would have merited inclusion alongside Egypt and Mesopotamia, all the more so since Breuer mentions the interesting hypothesis that the collapse of this great power, very likely brought about by internal fissures

and conflicts, may have been a decisive factor in the regional crisis of the Late Bronze Age.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Breuer does foreshadow one fundamental criticism of the kind that strikes at the very core of Weber's sociology of domination. This happens in the course of a chapter devoted to ancient Egypt, a civilization with an exceptionally long and continuous history. But there were also significant shifts and innovations within its framework, and it is logical to raise the question whether traditional domination replaced the original charismatic pattern. If I am not mistaken, Breuer tends towards a positive answer, but realizes that Weber's typology does not provide a sufficient reason to defend it. As he writes, Weber envisaged the transformation of everyday routines into custom, tradition and ethos; Breuer objects that "an ethos never emerges from repetition and mimesis, only from reflection, distance and explication" (p. 257).¹ This is a far-reaching concession from an author otherwise very inclined to stay the Weberian course, and we should at least note the most obvious implications. Reflection, distance and explication were at work in all the great historical traditions, and they produced very different conceptions of legitimate power; it may even be questionable whether the notion of legitimacy is uniformly applicable. It is not at all clear or plausible that a general conception of traditional legitimacy would make sense. As Breuer notes, the Weberian concept won't do, and neither he nor anybody else has produced an acceptable alternative. The relationship to the sacred is certainly a recurrent theme, but its various articulations are worlds apart (it is enough to think of the Chinese mandate of heaven, the Islamic caliphate, and the medieval Western Christian notion of the king's two bodies). Moreover, a general model of sacral legitimacy would lump these traditions together with archaic civilizations. And there is a further (for our purposes final) comment to add. If reflection, distance and explication were active in premodern traditions, they were doubly so in the modern era. Taking

that as a cue, it quickly becomes clear that the notion of legal-rational domination is far too narrow and covers only one aspect of the problematic that has figured in modern traditions of reflection and debate on the legitimacy of power. We need a broader framework, but here I can only suggest that Shmuel Eisenstadt's bipolar conception of democracy, constitutional and participative, and his analysis of the paradoxes resulting from this combination might prove more useful than the standard Weberian approach. It should be added that both the constitutional and the participative pole can appear in extreme and mutually estranged forms that amount to a negation of democracy. All this is beyond the scope of a review. But we seem to have reached a point where a radical reconstruction of Weber's sociology of domination becomes urgent.

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References

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Marcin Kula: *Kartki z socjologii historycznej*. Warsaw: Scholar, 2014, 253 pages

In 2014 Marcin Kula, a rigorous Polish historian and historical sociologist well known to readers of "Historical Sociology" had already published three books with the term "historical sociology" in their titles. The first one was *Kartki z socjologii historycznej* ("Pages from Historical Sociology"), published by Scholar, a reputable Warsaw publishing house. The second and the third are published versions of his lectures in historical sociology, entitled *Trzeba pracować i produkować. Wykłady z socjologii historycznej* ("It is Necessary to Work and Produce. Lectures in Historical Sociology") and *Trzeba mieć*

¹ I take the liberty to note that I argued along similar lines in an essay on Max Weber [Arnason 2012].