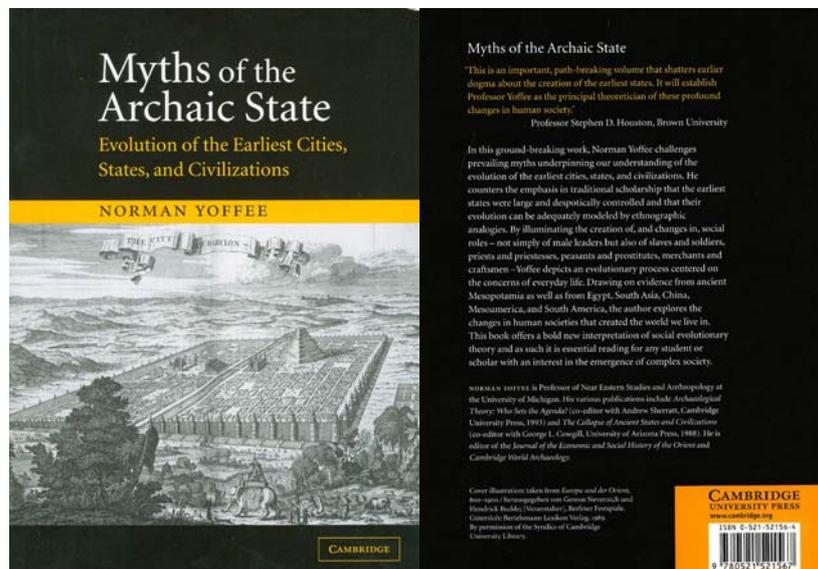


Yoffee, N. 2005. Myths of the archaic state. Evolution of the earliest cities, states, and civilizations. - Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Book review by M. Campagno



The rise of the earliest states and civilisations has become, since the second post-war period, a field of study virtually monopolised by neo-evolutionist thoughts. In that sense, these states, these civilisations, were interpreted as an upper step into the ladder that would lead societies from simple, undeveloped (and thus inferior) stages, towards complex and more developed (and thus superior) stages. For all the rest, the result of the evolutionary process was, usually, characterised in a common way: political systems that occupied huge territories, lead by despotic figures that submitted politics, economics and ideology in to its practically exclusive control.

It is against these conceptions that Norman Yoffee reacts, which the author denominates with the title that gives name to the present book: 'Myths of the Archaic state'. It is true, nevertheless, that Yoffee does not set aside the concept of evolution: according to the author, economically stratified and socially differentiated societies are 'developed' from societies in which these attributes are present in lesser amount and, in the same way, great cities are 'developed' from small villages, and social classes do so from societies organised by kinship. What Yoffee rejects is what he denominates 'factoids', the ideas carved by neoevolutionism which are only sustained by the persistence with which they have been repeated across decades, including typologies and other 'dogmas'. Instead, he proposes to "center social evolutionary theory in the concerns of how people came to understand their lives in the earliest cities and states, how the new ideology of states was instituted in everyday life, and how leaders of previously autonomous social groups in states negotiated with rulers and/or contested their domination" (p. 3).

In order to discuss the fallacies of neo-evolutionism and advance in his proposal to analyse the evolution of the earliest cities, states and civilizations, Yoffee takes into account the general theoretical problems as much as the analysis of historical situations, whether that be in a comparative way or as case studies. Thus, the author both describes and discuss the (pre-)conceptions of neo-evolutionism in the first two chapters, and later considers various aspects of ancient societies, that include the role of the bureaucratic and legal devices of the states, the role of women and the forms of construction of social life, the collapse of ancient societies, the constraints that may impede the emergence of states, the use and abuse of analogies and comparative method, and the author's own perspective on the evolution of the civilisations in the ancient states. Even though most of the historical examples belong to the author's specialised field of study, that being ancient Mesopotamia, the references extend, with similar doses of versatility and analytical rigour, to Egypt, Mesoamerica, the Andes, the Indus Valley, and China.

Chapters 1 and 2 are especially destined to present the theoretical context in which the author intervenes. As from the second post-war period, the neo-evolutionist theories strongly gravitated in the anthropological thought about the advent of ancient state societies. Yoffee gives a critical eye to the main evolutionist propositions of Leslie White and Julian Steward, as well as the subsequent proposals from Elman Service and Morton Fried, and is especially critical of the 'evolutionary stages' model, mainly built from the observation of ethnographical societies, which, according to the author, do not hold the key for understanding societies from the

past. In that sense, Yoffee particularly questions the use of the concept of 'chiefdom', both for its condition as a necessary stage before the state as well as for its ethnographical precedence and the fact that evolutionist scholars have frequently dedicated to classify societies under titles such as this one, before studying the process of social change.

Faced with this situation, Yoffee proposes to reconsider the matter of the emergence of state societies as a result of two simultaneous processes: those of differentiation, *i.e.* the growing dissociation of specific social groups, and integration, *i.e.* the political process by which those differentiated groups remain bonded in an institutionalised structure. The second process in particular, is generated through diverse and ever changing relations of economic (control over the productive resources and mercantile activities), social (the leadership that emerges from the local groups) and political power (the capacity of imposition through the use of force, by means of a specialised organisation), which imply the creation of new ideologies, thus legitimising the new differences. The result of such processes, according to the author, has a double nature: on one hand, the formation of the state (both the government's centre and the territory controlled by that centre); and on the other hand, the emergence of civilisation, a term Yoffee rescues from his own evolutionist forge, to denote with it the culturally homogeneous environment in which the first states are inserted, which usually control no more than a modest territory, at least in its origins.

In chapter 3, the 'central arenas' in which such processes occur are analysed: the early cities. Taking the old concept of city-state, Yoffee investigates a broad diversity of situations in which the state emerges (Egypt, Teotihuacan, Mesopotamia, China, the Indus Valley, the Central Andes, the Mayan world) and concludes that, even in those that, like Egypt, were interpreted in terms of territorial states with cities of little importance, the process always begins with the competition of two or more urban nuclei. The main tendency is what conducts the formation of a pattern of independent city-states, of reduced territorial reach, in the frame of a common 'civilization' in which conquests were frequent although unstable and ephemeral. The rise of the first cities is evaluated by Yoffee as a 'revolutionary' process, *sensu* Gordon Childe, a true demographic implosion that produced a whole set of new social relations both in the interior of the urban spaces and in the links between such spaces and its surrounding territories, which would be subordinated to the centres and become 'ruralised' as a counterpart to the urbanisation process.

The following chapters of the book are concentrated in diverse situations related to the first states, which Yoffee considers in discussion with the traditional neo-evolutionist approaches. Confronted with the perspective that suggests the evolutionary process always implies a greater complexity, chapter 4 proposes that the states try to simplify society in order to exert control, or in James Scott's terms, to make it 'legible'. The quest to reduce the communicating channels with the ancestors so as to be able to monopolise them, in Shang Dynasty's China, is pointed as an example of these procedures of simplification from the state. In similar fashion, the elaboration of a code of laws in ancient Mesopotamia, and especially the famous Hammurabi's code, is not considered as the result of an evolution from some pre-state form of assembly to the state codes both formal and abstract, but instead, as a way, mostly failed, of attempting a simplification of the judicial processes, in order to displace the traditional local authorities in the procedures towards the solving of conflicts.

In chapter 5, Yoffee discusses the neo-evolutionist perception of societies and ancient states as complete and monolithic systems, and proposes, in accordance with recent archaeological perspectives, the analysis of social roles and identities, that were not necessarily under a state's iron grip. In this sense, the study of two cases from ancient Babylonia, dealing with women of both high and low social status, shows not only the way in which "women played out their social identities according to the conflicts and solidarities of everyday life" (p. 116) but also the fact that that daily life was far from the influence of the state device. On the other hand, chapter 6 confronts the neo-evolutionist assumptions that suppose that all social systems tend to persist or expand, doing so through the study of the collapse of the ancient civilisations and states. In fact, from a neo-evolutionist perspective, the collapse can only be understood in terms of 'pathology' or 'maladaptation'. However, through the analysis of the successive states that expand and collapse in Mesopotamia, from the Acadian to the neo-Assyrian state, Yoffee indicates the structural tensions inherent to such states, and highlights the fact that such 'collapses' were not an obstacle towards the regeneration of new states. Beside this, the collapse of the Mesopotamian civilisation would result in a much longer process, due, according to the author, to the "mutation of social identity and suffocation of cultural memory" (p. 153) that is produced as from the advent of the Hellenistic period.

In chapter 7, through the consideration of the ancient societies of Chaco (New Mexico) and Cahokia (basin of the Mississippi), the author evaluates the 'constrictions' that would have impeded its 'growth' and proposes that these evolutionary trajectories, far from constituting an intermediate phase according to neo-evolutionist standards, are different from those that lead to the emergence of the states. In chapter 8, Yoffee proposes 'new rules' for the game of reconstructing historical processes that lead to the states. According to the author, the use of analogies with ethnographic societies should be reduced to the basic level of theories (that of identification and classification of archaeological material) and not be utilised in the reflections of middle and

high level (those dealing with general and specific explanations about the organisation and social change). Instead, the comparisons, especially those between ancient societies, may constitute very appropriate procedures to establish similarities and differences and provide in depth comprehension of various evolutionary trajectories.

Finally, chapter 9 proposes an evolutionary analysis of civilisations and states in ancient Mesopotamia, which is centred in the initial conditions and the ‘emergent properties’ in the period of animal and plant domestication, and identifies the existence of a series of ‘spheres of interaction’ (in relation to the interregional flow of certain goods) that imply a cultural connection between politically autonomous entities. It would be within that frame and in the intensity of those new interactions that new ‘urban’ identities would emerge, beside the old kinship identities, and the state itself would be created. From Yoffee’s point of view, these tendencies may be interpreted through a ‘model of growth’ that does not conceive the emergence of the states as processes of exceptional change but instead as “expected products of post-Pleistocene circumstances”, and thus “the histories of societies that do not become states require as much explanation as do the various kinds of the earliest states that did evolve” (p. 231).

Even though many of the positions Yoffee expresses in the book were known by previous interventions from the author, ‘Myths of the archaic state’ has the merit of gathering them in a way that, with all certainty, offers one of the most incisive global criticisms to the neo-evolutionist paradigm on the emergence of ancient states. Yoffee demolishes the evolutionary ‘ladder’ myth towards despotic states and, instead, proposes to see more heterogeneous processes, with multiple identities and social roles, in which the complexity may produce simplicity, in which urbanisation generates ‘ruralisation’ and in which the diverse social contexts are marginalised by an exhaustive state control. In the opinion of the present reviewer, however, given that Yoffee aims his critic towards neo-evolutionism without leaving the evolutionist frame, there is a ‘myth’ he fails to overcome: the myth of the ‘growth’ of societies, which implies that societies develop in an expectable sense, no specific constrictions mediating. This metaphor of growth, ever imported from biology, does not have much to offer to historical thinking: quite contrary, it tends to dissolve historical novelties in a slow *continuum* in development, which appears to be the last reason behind the processes of change.

On the other hand, the present reviewer, despite coming from an openly non-evolutionist position, has a less drastic position towards the concept of chiefdom societies than Yoffee has, to whom it is but a mere ‘factoid’. Certainly, it was created as a ‘step’ in the evolutionary ladder, and it was carved from an ethnographical observation. Nevertheless, if considered beyond that evolutionist forge, it may be still useful to think about ancient societies: not to suppose that there was in the past the same type of society that ethnography recognises in the present but as a model for the interpretation of evidences that always will be scant. It is true that, as Yoffee suggests, it would be preferable to compare with other similar experiences in the past, but not less true that those other experiences have been thought by taking models elaborated from the present. In fact, it is symptomatic for Yoffee to propose the consideration of the constitution of the Monte Alban urban centre in the light of the information that offers the foundation of Jerusalem by king David (p. 191): this last one only exists in the Bible, and present-day archaeologists tend towards discarding the historical dimension of that episode. Even when it is possible that the ‘Jerusalem model’ may be used to think of Monte Alban, it is only, in the full sense contained in Yoffee’s definition, an absolute ‘factoid’.

Beyond these last comments which, certainly, would deserve a detailed discussion, ‘Myths of the archaic state’ constitutes an excellent book about the contemporary thinking of the emergence of cities, states and ancient civilisations, thus offering the reader the possibility to dispose of one of the most acute and actualised insights on these problems from an evolutionist perspective. If such perspective is not the only one to consider such processes, Yoffee’s book will undoubtedly be a work of reference to keep thinking about them over the next years.

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