

THE EVOLUTION OF URBAN SOCIETY

ROBERT McC. ADAMS



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*THE EVOLUTION
OF
URBAN SOCIETY*

EARLY MESOPOTAMIA AND PREHISPANIC MEXICO

BY ROBERT McC. ADAMS



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FOREWORD

LEWIS HENRY MORGAN WAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF Rochester from its founding. At his death he left it his manuscripts and library, and money to found a women's college. Save for a wing of the present Women's Residence Halls that is named for him, he remained without a memorial at the University until the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures were begun.

These Lectures owe their existence to a happy combination of circumstances. In 1961 the Joseph R. and Joseph C. Wilson families made a gift to the University, to be used in part for the Social Sciences. Professor Bernard S. Cohn, at that time Chairman of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, suggested that establishing the Lectures would constitute a fitting memorial to a great anthropologist and would be an appropriate use for part of this gift. He was supported and assisted by Dean (later Provost) McCrea Hazlett, Dean Arnold Ravin and Associate Dean R. J. Kaufmann. The details of the Lectures were worked out by Professor Cohn and the members of his Department.

The Morgan Lectures were planned initially as three annual series, for 1963, 1964 and 1965, to be continued if circumstances permitted. It was thought fitting at the outset to have each series focused on a particularly significant aspect of Morgan's work. Accordingly, Professor Meyer Fortes' 1963 Lectures were on kinship, Professor Fred Eggan devoted his attention to the American Indian, and Professor Robert M. Adams considered

the development of civilization. The first three series were inaugurated by Professor Leslie A. White, of the University of Michigan, who delivered two lectures on Morgan's life and work in January, 1963.

Publication of Professor Adams' Lectures makes them available to a wider public. A complete record of the informal daily seminars held during his visit at Rochester would fill additional volumes, were it available. Students and faculty alike recall these discussions with much pleasure.

The present volume is a revision of the third series, delivered by Professor Adams under the title, "Regularities in Urban Origins: A Comparative Study," on April 6-22, 1965.

ALFRED HARRIS

*Department of Anthropology
The University of Rochester*

PREFACE

THE SUBSTANCE OF THIS STUDY WAS PRESENTED IN APRIL, 1965, AS a third annual series of lectures at the University of Rochester in honor of Lewis Henry Morgan. I am indebted to a number of colleagues at Rochester, including especially Edward E. Calnek, Alfred Harris, and René Millon, for critical comments at the time they were delivered, which subsequently were incorporated in the revised text. Further suggestions and comments, which also have served as a basis for revision, were made by many of the participants at a Burg Wartenstein conference on "The Evolutionist Interpretation of Culture" in August, 1965. Particularly to be thanked for advice on that occasion are S. N. Eisenstadt, Friedrich Katz, and the conference chairman, Eric R. Wolf. Since other, less direct contributions to the final form of the manuscript must have stemmed from the plenary discussions of the conference, it is appropriate also to express my gratitude to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, under whose sponsorship this unusually fertile gathering of diverse specialists was convened. Among my colleagues at Chicago, I have benefited from comments made by Lloyd A. Fallers and Pedro Armillas. Finally, I am much indebted to Miguel Civil for a number of illuminating suggestions on how some of the Sumerological materials utilized in this study might be more solidly and imaginatively interpreted.

It was a singular pleasure to lecture on this theme in

L. H. Morgan's city and in his name. Surely we are all victims to some degree of the narrowing professionalism and increasing timidity that accompanies the development of a mature field, but anthropology still represents not so much an academic discipline in the prevailing sense as a broadly generalizing and comparative tradition of empirical inquiry. And one of the most significant parts of that tradition began with Morgan, as did the recognition of the immediate subject of these lectures as an enduring problem. However reoriented or diluted the line of descent at times may be, I hope that the main course and conclusions of this study justifiably can be said to continue in the direction he led us.

ROBERT McC. ADAMS

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I

THE PROBLEM AND THE EVIDENCE

THE GENERALIZING, COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ORIGINS OF EARLY states has been an important research theme since before the emergence of anthropology as a conscious, distinctive intellectual approach. Indeed, the view that "savagery," "barbarism," and "civilization" form stages in a universal evolutionary sequence lay very close to the core of thought and speculation out of which anthropology arose. With the subsequent, increasingly conscious and refined, acquisition and analysis of both historical and ethnographic data, the deficiencies of this view became so strikingly apparent that for a long time the diversity of cultures received greater stress than their similarities. If today the tide has begun again to run in the opposite direction, perhaps at least a part of the explanation lies in the persuasiveness and vigor with which it has continued to be affirmed over the years that the early civilizations provide a significant example of broad regularities in human behavior.

This volume is concerned with the presentation and analysis of regularities in our two best-documented examples of early, independent urban societies. It seeks to provide as systematic a comparison as the data permits of institutional forms and trends of growth that are to be found in both of them. Emphasizing basic similarities in structure rather than the many acknowledged formal features by which each culture is rendered distinguishable from all others, it seeks to demonstrate that both the societies in question can usefully be regarded as variants of a single processual pattern.

The independent emergence of stratified, politically organized societies based upon a new and more complex division of labor clearly is one of those great transformations which have punctuated the human career only rarely, at long intervals. Obviously it deserves study as a crucial part of mankind's cumulative achievement. Yet surely it is also an untidy problem, on whose component elements closure can be achieved only slowly and painfully by marshalling every technique, every potential source of insight and evidence in the arsenal of scholarship. Herein, perhaps, lies the major reason for the durability and attractiveness of the problem as a specifically anthropological focus of interest.

The available evidence in the form of written sources, to begin with, is too circumscribed in purpose and too limited in amount to permit us to advance very far with the unaided approach of the documentary historian. Hence we fall back on other sources, which all too often are incommensurate with whatever contemporary documentary data there may be. In particular, archeology becomes a primary means of investigation, although the conclusions that archeological data permit often seem to support an edifice of inferences different from that erected on the basis of the documents. Still another line of inquiry leads back through later materials of a literary or mythical genre, relying on the attractive but always somewhat hazardous assumption that usable accounts of preliterate events and institutions have survived thus in traditional, encapsulated form.

With sources as inconclusive as these, the only approach that can retain even a vision of the central, crucial problem of the emergence through time of a whole new set of institutional relationships is one that is "contextual" rather than "textual" in emphasis—that proceeds by offering, testing, and refining or replacing as necessary a series of structured summaries or syntheses rather than confining analysis to fragmentary, isolated cultural components. With some rare but notable exceptions,

on the whole it would appear that few but anthropologists combine a sense of the importance of the pivotal episodes of man's cultural evolution, a necessarily reconstructive or synthetic outlook, and a tolerance for ambiguity—all of which are required to work effectively on so elusive and yet intriguing a problem.

One other aspect of the origin of the earliest urbanized societies may be mentioned, which, arising from the character both of the data and of the transformation itself, has made it a special concern of scholarship within an anthropological tradition. Given the present limits to our detailed understanding of the process of change in any one area, we have a problem for which the comparative approach our discipline always has been identified with is highly suitable or perhaps even imperative. Given, further, the essentially independent internal sequences of cause and effect leading to statehood in widely different areas and epochs—whatever the precise role of external stimuli may have been—we have a problem that is peculiarly amenable to comparative treatment.

While the emergence of states has been a long-standing focus of anthropological discussion, it is impossible to deal more than very briefly here with the historical succession of views and issues that have characterized its development as a problem. The balanced appraisal of this development is a problem in intellectual history, a discipline with its own demanding methodology. A researcher in one generation, in attempting to trace the genealogy of the assumptions and concerns most vital to him, tends systematically to distort the issues that commanded the attention of his predecessors. Ideas, of course, are transmitted upward through time, from generation to generation, but they emerge and are periodically reinterpreted in a context of discussions and unspoken understandings that is continually changing and that is never confined to the bounds of a single discipline.

To cite an example pertinent to our own theme, what are

we to conclude from Lewis Henry Morgan's concluding insistence in *Ancient Society* on the transcendental role of a Supreme Intelligence in propelling along the evolution of civilization out of savagery and barbarism? To some, this insistence is part of a ringing refutation of the view that Morgan properly may be regarded as a progenitor of materialist conceptions, which he stimulated in others. To others, including myself, such an interpretation misconstrues both Morgan's major aims and his most enduring contributions.¹ But the more important point is that the issue of intellectual parentage, insofar as it rests on essentially post hoc evaluations, has as many answers as there are articulate, self-professed children. Only a quite different kind of study than we have yet seen, resting on all the technical apparatus of the competent intellectual historian with highly developed sensitivities to modes of thought and discourse of the Victorian era, may convincingly tell us how much of Morgan's deism was a formal concession to the temper of his times and how much a deeply held conviction that shaped his views of society.

In an even broader sense, the controversy over Morgan's formal relationship to (a variety of) idealistic and materialistic positions is irrelevant to the problems of cultural evolution as he understood them. These positions have assumed a detailed significance—both stemming from and ramifying into spheres of political allegiance and action—unknown in Morgan's time. At least to judge from the variety of causal factors he adduced for successive evolutionary stages, Morgan's approach is better characterized by its flexibility than by any insistence on a philosophical position that is internally consistent by latter-day standards.

The problem of tracing the genealogy of evolutionary thinking with reference to the emergence of early states is further obscured by the changing context in which that thought

1. Cf. the exchange between M. E. Opler, T. G. Harding, and E. B. Leacock in *Cur. Anthropol.* 3 (1962), 478–79, and 5 (1964), 109–14.

has occurred. Since ancient history, ethnohistory, and archeology have essentially emerged as disciplines during the past century or so, the empirical base upon which reconstructions and theories have been formulated has been subject to radical and cumulative changes. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, Morgan and his colleagues knew little of the civilizations of the New World save an essentially synchronic picture that could be drawn from Spanish contact sources, and for the Old World had little to draw upon save the immediate antecedents of classical Greece and Rome and the testimony of the Old Testament. Within these limitations, the failure to perceive important developmental trends in late pre-Conquest nuclear American societies, for example, is hardly surprising. Even the reliance on extrapolations from putative "survivals," so often criticized now, may have been regarded at the time as an inadequate but inescapable and heuristically valid way in which to make a beginning with the data at hand. Of course, what contributed most to transforming this situation was the development of archeology to the point at which long, well-founded sequences of change and interrelationship in time and space could be formulated even in the absence of written records. But progress was almost equally marked in the recovery and decipherment of early documents.

In addition to the immense increase in the depth and breadth of available data over the past century or so, there have also been broad qualitative changes in the context of inquiry. Consider Morgan's classic formulation of the problem as he saw it:

As we re-ascend along the several lines of progress toward the primitive ages of mankind, and eliminate one after the other, in the order in which they appeared, inventions and discoveries on the one hand, and institutions on the other, we are enabled to perceive that the former stand to each other in progressive, and the latter in unfolding relations. While the former class have had a connection, more or less direct, the latter have been developed

from a few primary germs of thought. Modern institutions plant their roots in the period of barbarism, into which their germs were transmitted from the previous period of savagery. They have had a lineal descent through the ages, with the streams of the blood, as well as a logical development.

Two independent lines of investigations thus invite our attention. The one leads through inventions and discoveries, and the other through primary institutions. With the knowledge gained therefrom, we may hope to indicate the principal stages of human development. [1963:4]

If my object were merely to insist anew on the authenticity of a viable scholarly tradition that descends to us from Morgan, it would be enough to perceive in this and similar passages an astonishingly modern emphasis on empirical exposition of the course of cultural evolution, a primary commitment, as Eleanor Leacock puts it, "to the rationality of historical law" (in Morgan 1963:vii). But the apparent anachronisms are as striking as this continuity of emphasis, and they shed a greater light on the changing context of study.

Morgan's tendency, in the first place, was to counterpose the cumulative growth of technology and related cultural items, on the one hand, with institutional developments that were visualized as the unfolding of potentialities already inherent in the germ. Thus he saw the idea of government, in a sense apparently not really distinguishable from the developed institutions of his own day, as having existed far back into the stage of savagery. What is missing, in our terms, is the world of thought succinctly summarized in Julian Steward's seminal expression, "levels of sociocultural complexity"—a framework of functionally interconnected institutions forming the structural core of a distinctive set of social systems.

Apparently not having known of the sharply discontinuous character of evolutionary advance generally, Morgan, in his conception of the course of cultural evolution, tended at times to assume that it had an "orthogenetic," preordained character. Moreover, rather than seeing the ordered sequence of small

increments of change as a continuously adaptive process moving through time, he was content to chart the fortuitous presence of innovations in technique as convenient symbols of arbitrarily demarcated stages, without devoting much thought either to the character of the transitions between them or to the interplay of factors propelling the change. And, even where innovations of a societal rather than a technical character were brought forward, as in the case of the emphasis Morgan attached to the advent of private property, it is noteworthy that this was formulated not as the appearance of a new and profoundly important set of organized social relationships—a stratified grouping of classes—but only as a discrete new idea or feature.

In comparison with Morgan's usage, there has emerged not merely a difference in terminology but a significant conceptual advance beyond his demarcation in terms of convenient, easily recognizable traits of successive stages in what he seems to have regarded as a preordained path of progress leading upward to civilization. The more recent view is one that, instead, focuses attention on the disjunctive processes of transformation connecting one qualitatively distinctive level of sociocultural complexity with another. In fact, for purposes of systematically comparing the seemingly parallel and largely independent processes of growth leading to the formation of early urbanized polities or states, the concept of major, successive organizational levels now seems perhaps the single most indispensable one. Such levels may be regarded as broadly integrative patterns whose basic functional relationships tend to remain fixed (or, at least, tend to occur in fixed sequences), while their formal, superficial features vary widely from example to example. Given the much greater variability in the occurrence of individual features associated with the Urban Revolution than Morgan was aware of, including even such seemingly basic attributes as the degree of urbanism in settlement patterns and the invention of writing, the employment of the

concept of levels permits us still to proceed beyond the acknowledgment of diversity to the recognition of genuine evolutionary parallelisms.

While the unearthing of new data on the history of cultural development undoubtedly played a part in changing the ways in which we formulate the course of cultural development, in the main the comparatively rapid, widespread, and unopposed acceptance of a view stressing the disjunctive aspects of evolutionary change probably is to be attributed to the broad shift toward similar views for biological evolution as a whole. After all, the stress that cultural evolutionists place on the expanded potentialities for adaptation conferred by new levels of cultural complexity surely has the Darwinian insistence on the central role of natural selection as its prototype. Just as ecological studies have become a major facet of research in modern biology, so we find a closely related growth in the emphasis given to studies in cultural ecology. Even the concept of levels of sociocultural integration itself is operationally very similar to the idea of organizational grades as the major units of evolutionary advance in the biological world. At a more abstract level, the main course of cultural evolution increasingly has come to be viewed as a succession of adaptive patterns, each new cultural type tending to spread and differentiate at the expense of less efficient precursors.

There is an interesting further parallelism between studies in evolutionary biology, on the one hand, and those in cultural evolution, on the other. Perhaps the most profound change in the former during recent decades has come through the recognition of the population as the unit within which adaptation takes place and upon which selective pressures act. The concept of a population as the unit of evolutionary potential, variable in the behavior of its constituents as well as in their genetic constitution, encourages the corresponding study of human societies rather than individuals as the adaptive units, even though corporate human behavior is mediated by the

unique factor of culture. Perhaps also, although this remains more a matter of future possibility than of present performance, recognition of the importance of biological variability may encourage fuller study of cultural heterogeneity and dissonance as basic features of both adaptation and change.

There is no need to dwell at length on definitions of the entities with which this study deals. The major characteristics of early states have been repeatedly described, and in any case I am more concerned with the *process* of their growth than with a detailed discussion of their characteristics. There is no more adequate term evoking this process than that introduced by V. Gordon Childe, the "Urban Revolution."² Among its important advantages are that it places stress on the transformative character of the change, that it suggests at least relative rapidity, and that it specifies a restricted, urban locus within which the process was concentrated.

Yet it must be admitted that there are potential distortions involved in the use of the term as well as advantages, quite apart from the specific attributes Childe attaches to it. The more common usage of the word "revolution," for example, implies aspects of conscious struggle. Possibly there were overtones of consciousness about certain stages or aspects of the Urban Revolution, although the issue is unsettled. Any implication that such was generally the case, however, is certainly false. Again, the term perhaps implies a uniform emphasis on the growth of the city as the core of the process. At least as a form of settlement, however, urbanism seems to have been much less important to the emergence of the state, and even to the development of civilization in the broadest sense, than

2. Childe 1950. For a more substantive presentation of his views in the specific case of Mesopotamia see Childe 1952, esp. chap. 7. Both works emphasize archeological rather than textual findings, leading to a corresponding interpretive stress on technological aspects of change. No attempt has been made in this essay to duplicate or replace Childe's treatment of this theme.