

POLITICAL EVOLUTION, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND AUTONOMY: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF AN “AXIAL” MOMENT

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship in neo-evolutionary sociology has rejected stage-models in favor of multilineal theories that shift the study of sociocultural change away from teleological arguments toward those that emphasize selection pressures and macrodynamics. The paper below adopts a neo-evolutionary frame to revisit one of the most epochal moments in human sociocultural evolution, the urban revolution (about 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, and perhaps the Indus Valley) and the rise of the first political units. Shifting the analysis from conventional perspectives, this paper asks the question why the polity was the first autonomous institution besides kinship and what consequences did this have on the trajectory of the human societies, and more generally, human sociocultural evolution. By doing so, a slightly different historiography is presented in which institutional autonomy corresponds not with stages,

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but rather an historical “phasing” that emphasizes the role that institutional entrepreneurs have played in driving institutional evolution via structural opportunities and historical contingencies.

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in neo-evolutionary sociology have rejected stage-models in favor of multilineal theories that shift the study of sociocultural change away from teleological arguments in favor of selection pressures and macrodynamics (Abrutyn & Lawrence, 2010; Chase-Dunn & Hall, 1997; Sanderson, 1994; Sanderson, 2007; Turner, 2010a; Turner & Maryanski, 2009). This shift can be seen in the hybrid tradition that blends “historical” institutionalism (e.g., Malinowski, 1922; Radcliffe-Brown, 1965) with “evolutionary” institutionalism (Abrutyn, 2013; Abrutyn & Turner, 2011; Turner, 2003), where scholarship has moved away from functionalism to emphasize the types of historical forces conditioning qualitative macroinstitutional changes (Abrutyn, forthcoming; Nolan & Lenski, 2009) and the way these changes feedback on other institutional domains (Turner, 2003). For scholars in this tradition, institutions, or perhaps more aptly institutional domains, are conceptualized similarly to Weber’s (1968) *macro social orders*, Spencer’s (1897) *institutions*, Parsons’ (1951) *subsystems*, or Luhmann’s (1982) *function systems* – that is, *macro structural and cultural spheres of social action, exchange, and communication constituted by individual and corporate actors (as well as conglomerations of actors commonly called fields or niches), who are distributed within divisions of labor, and whose actions, goals, and decisions are facilitated and constrained by their position and the structural and cultural systems of integration, legitimation, and regulation*. Some consensus exists around the most basic and ubiquitous institutional domains: kinship, polity, religion, economy, law, and perhaps education (Turner, 2003).¹

In a sense, institutional domains are reservoirs of structural and cultural solutions, while actors, resources, and rules reflect previous adaptive efforts as well as current ones. Eschewing functionalist needs as explanatory tools, evolutionary institutionalists have begun conceptualizing institutional change in terms of exigencies, selection pressures, and entrepreneurship (Abrutyn, forthcoming; Abrutyn & Lawrence, 2010; Chase-Dunn & Hall, 1997; Sanderson, 1999; Turner & Maryanski, 2008; Wilson, 2002). That is, sociocultural evolution is a process by which macrolevel forces put pressure

on groups, with the resultant solutions being etched into the structure and/or culture of institutional domains (Nolan & Lenski, 2009; Runciman, 2009; Turner, 2003; Turner & Maryanski, 2009), which eventually feed back as second-order selection pressures (Turner, 2010a).

In addition to the introduction of selection pressures and contingency, work on institutional evolution has shifted away from classical, unidirectional (and seemingly teleological) processes like differentiation (for a review, see Sanderson, 2007) to emphasize retrogressive processes like dedifferentiation (Rueschemeyer, 1977), the multilinearity of changes wrought by institutional entrepreneurs and the unpredictable responses by elites and by various other strata (Colomy, 1998), the struggle entrepreneurs engage in for independence and the right to carve out autonomous cultural domains (Abrutyn, 2009), as well as the tenuous nature of their independence and, thereby, the autonomy of the domain (Abrutyn, 2013), and, finally, the cultural (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011) and emotional (Turner, 2010b) dimensions of institutions long ignored or vaguely conceptualized by functional institutionalists (e.g., Luhmann, 1982, pp. 138–165; Parsons & Smelser, 1956) as well as new institutionalists (Nee, 2005).

The shift from the mesolevel (fields or niches) back to the macrolevel of reality (institutional domains) and the push for the return to a historical sociology that includes *all* societies represents an important break with Bourdieu's field analysis (1992), which is overly reproductionist, ignores premodern societies and institutions, and opts for conceptual ambiguity (Abrutyn, 2013; Calhoun, 1993). This shift also moves away from recent iterations of field theories that have made tremendous advances (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), but could be supplemented by a more clear macro-historical theory of institutional domains. Despite these theoretical advances, there have been fewer attempts to apply these processes and dynamics to actual institutional change.²

This paper looks to revisit one of the central moments in human history through the lens of this type of neo-evolutionary institutionalism: the initial evolution of political autonomy. Scholars across a diverse set of social sciences believe the so-called urban revolution (Adams, 1966; Yoffee, 2005) – 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and probably the Indus Valley, and about 2,000 years ago in Peru and Mesoamerica – was as “axial” a moment as any in human history (Eisenstadt, 1963; Johnson & Earle, 2000; Sanderson, 1999). Yet, modern sociologists rarely examine the disembedding of the political sphere from the kinship sphere, marking the first moment in human history that a distinct institutional sphere had acquired some degree of autonomy and, therefore, reconfigured physical,

temporal, social, and symbolic space in qualitatively meaningful ways (Abrutyn, 2013). More commonly, contemporary political sociology either focuses on the rise of the nation-state (Tilly, 1990), comparisons between different types of modern nations (Evans, 1995; Skocpol, 1977), or examines the urban revolution strictly through an economic lens (Frank & Gills, 1996; Sanderson, 1999), which takes away from the discrete logic of polity and *power* (Mann, 1986; Nolan & Lenski, 2009; Parsons, 1963).

Thus, the goals of this paper are as such: to delineate the central dimensions of polity through the lens of autonomy; to treat political entrepreneurs as historical forces of change and architects of institutional evolution from the *inside-out* (Abrutyn, 2009; Colomy, 1998; Eisenstadt, 1964); to ask and answer the questions: “why was the polity the first institutional to evolve autonomously in human history?” such that a slightly different historiography that considers the “historical phasing” of institutional autonomy is introduced into the sociological discourse; and why was the polity’s evolution an “axial” moment.³ Ultimately, the analysis looks to make explicit the process by which the earliest polities become increasingly autonomous, while shedding light on the types of forces facilitating and constraining contemporary political, and institutional, evolution. Though we will draw from myriad scholars interested in the rise of the first states, the discussion will hone in on the general process of political autonomy and the subsequent consequences this process had for human societies. Our first task is to assess whether polities were indeed the first autonomous domains.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Was the polity the first autonomous institution? Perhaps there is no better illustration of the distinction between *differentiation* on the one hand and *autonomy* on the other than the evolution of polity. For instance, religious differentiation – for example, shamans – likely preceded or co-evolved with political differentiation – for example, chiefs (Radin, 1937 [1957]; Turner, 2003). In addition, archaeological evidence suggests that temple-centric economies predate palace-economies (Lipinski, 1979; Liverani, 2006). But, autonomous institutional space is different from differentiated roles or organizational units (Abrutyn, 2009). For one thing, it is questionable how much differentiated religious organizations, like these temples, penetrated the lives of villagers whose existence remained primarily oriented toward

and organized by kinship (Abrutyn, forthcoming; Liverani, 2006; Stark, 2007). Moreover, as temple personnel's duties and responsibilities expanded, and their desire for more penetration grew (as it brought more human and material resources to realize their goals), "priests" became increasingly burdened by *political activities* like keeping track of grain rations, engineering and coordinating irrigation and canals, and resolving disputes between nonkin. Differentiation, then, is more superficial in the sense that people and groups become identifiably different in their functions and goals, but autonomy implies a deeper cognitive-cultural distinction between the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic spaces of one sphere like polity and others like religion or kinship (Abrutyn, 2009); a distinction that reconfigures how humans orient themselves and understand the everyday reality with which they must contend.

Thus, as religious actors exert more effort in penetrating the realities of non-religious actors, exigencies or problems universally associated with polity, governance, and *power* become equally, or in most cases more, salient than those typically related to religion, the supernatural, and *sacredness/piety*. Polity become the first autonomous institutional domain because of the ubiquitous problems that occur whenever population growth drives heterogeneity and, concomitantly, resource scarcity: collective binding decisions must be made; production and distribution must be controlled and coordinated; conflicts in which traditional kinship remedies are inefficacious must be resolved; and, *power* and the legitimate use of force or violence is struggled over, monopolized, and then requires legitimation. More concretely, polities emerge because of the pragmatic problems that inevitably arise when groups of disparate people or social units engage in recurrent social interaction (Abrutyn & Lawrence, 2010) such as (1) managing economic resources – for example, centralizing storage to protect against drought (Johnson & Earle, 2000), (2) coordinating labor to intensify production and support larger populations (Lipinski, 1979) and to build public works and monuments (Postage, 2003), (3) coordinating and maintaining the (often inequitable) distribution of resources among social units (Lenski, 1966), and (4) defending the group from external threats (Carencro, 1970). These roles are characteristic of polities, as we find somewhat undifferentiated functions in chiefdoms (Earle, 1991). But, autonomous polities differ from chiefdoms because the former are *autonomous* structural and cultural spheres of action, exchange, and communication in which behavior, attitudes, value-orientations, norms, goals, strategies, narratives, and the like all become mediated by discrete symbolic generalized media (i.e., *power* versus *love/loyalty*) that *thematize* and drench the physical,

temporal, social, and symbolic reality of one domain vis-à-vis all others (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011; also, Luhmann, 2012).

Institutions, however, do not just become autonomous. Rather, autonomy is a continuum predicated on the level of success entrepreneurs have in (1) identifying real or perceived problems and finding short- or long-term solutions (Eisenstadt, 1964); (2) articulating a resonant frame of (a) what types of problems exist, (b) why extant solutions are not working and/or are immoral/unjust, and (c) why their solutions are superior (Colomy, 1998); (3) leveraging their innovations and solutions for greater shares of human and material resources and, ultimately, some degree of indispensability via power-sharing agreements with elites and power-dependency with other strata (Abrutyn, 2009); and (4) using their mobility to carve out discrete physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space for the realization and expansion of entrepreneurial interests and goals, as well as further innovating to resolve new problems, expand their influence, and deepen their position in society (Abrutyn, 2012, 2013).

One of the reasons religious domains did not become autonomous before political counterparts rests on the differences in entrepreneurship: the latter pursued monopolies over physical force, which could coerce autonomy, whereas the former initially pursued intellectual or cognitive activities like writing and astrology, which were important activities to be sure, but “affordable” only by political entrepreneurs (Oppenheim, 1975). Religious entrepreneurs would eventually need to “find a marketable function other than simply selling their knowledge” (1986:178), because their skills were “so complex and cumbersome” the cost could “only be borne by... ruling groups” and, hence, religious entrepreneurs in these early years were “far from establishing an independent cultural ... base [and] simply continued to *serve the ruling group*” (Machinist, 1986, p. 202). Essentially, then, their monopolies were kept secret and remained obscure to the masses (Stark, 2007), while political entrepreneurs actively sought to inculcate political roles for the masses and penetrate their daily lives (Scott, 1998). Indeed, it was through political entrepreneurship that the realities of entire villages (and the trajectory of human history) were reshaped and not initially through religion. Essentially, by way of military conscription and warfare, the erection of defensive measures, redistribution of resources during public rituals, creation of public law and agents to enforce it, corvée labor and tribute, and the construction of monuments and public works on scales previously unimaginable, political entrepreneurs penetrated the realities of urban dwellers and villagers in radically new ways (Adams, 1966; Carneiro, 1970; Yoffee, 2005).

The Rise of the First States

Polities do five things (Abrutyn & Lawrence, 2010): (1) defend against real or perceived external threats (Carneiro, 1970), (2) create and maintain internal order (Yoffee, 2005), (3) sustain and protect privileged interests (Fried, 1967), (4) manage and transform economic production/distribution (Evans, 1995),³ and (5) provide various services to the population (Service, 1975). Polities do other things, but these five “functions” appear ubiquitous to all polities (Earle, 1991; Johnson & Earle, 2000), although (a) the degree to which these functions are monopolized by political entrepreneurs, (b) entrepreneurs’ efficacy at each function, and (c) the centrality of each function in respect to entrepreneurial projects varies case-by-case and, in part, is shaped by the particular polity’s level of autonomy. For 95–99% of all human societies that have existed, these functions were deeply embedded in kinship in that the logic of politics remained inextricably linked to the logic of kinship (Turner & Maryanski, 2009). Protoentrepreneurship occurs with the appearance of “big men” and chiefs – or, the first differentiated political actors who, through the invention of redistributive exchange systems, were able to change the structure and culture of society. There is much to learn from their emergence, as evidence suggests humans resisted subordination for a long period of human evolution, suggesting pressures for political differentiation must have been great enough for people to accept the costs (Boehm, 1999). Not surprisingly, the types of pressures Johnson and Earle (2000) identify as generating protoentrepreneurship – managing risk and capital (including human); “foreign” trade; central storage of resources; and mobilizing human resources for protection, fighting, and raiding in times of threat – are very similar to those that would create conditions ripe for true political entrepreneurship (Eisenstadt, 1963, 1964). That is, these conditions produced opportunities for pursuing and obtaining monopolies over the legitimate use of violence – *the key criteria distinguishing political entrepreneurs from other types of entrepreneurs and social units.*⁴

Three key forces appear central to political entrepreneurs securing this monopoly: (1) continuous, intense *warfare* (Spencer, 1897), (2) *geographic circumscription* (Carneiro, 1970), and (3) the presence and growth in magnitude of one or more *exigencies* – for example, population pressure, resource scarcity, rapid heterogeneity, internal instability, and so forth – sufficient enough to exacerbate conflict, become locked in a feedback loop due to circumscription, and surpass thresholds in which qualitatively new structural and cultural solutions are required to resolve the problems lest

the society collapse or be conquered from without (Abrutyn & Lawrence, 2010). As groups grow bigger and get locked into feedback cycles in which solutions to existing problems eventually create new problems or exacerbate older ones, they become increasingly susceptible to shocks like natural disasters or threats from hostile neighbors; this vulnerability creates emergent opportunities to centralize and consolidate power through strong decision-making, raise a loyal army, and create a patronage system that ties landed elites to the rapidly expanding urban center (Flannery, 1972). Meanwhile, political entrepreneurs use administrative, economic, and ideological sources of power to link the peripheral villages and peoples to the center and make the polity something real for village life (Liverani, 2006). When certain thresholds were reached in the population-circumscription-resource scarcity feedback, all that was necessary was a trigger event to make entrepreneurship a viable endeavor and, in reality, a necessary one if the settlement was to survive.⁵ In essence, it is this process that produces the first political collectives committed to political activities like war and defense, long distance trade, administration of territories, and conflict resolution.

Political entrepreneurship and political autonomy require the reconstruction of the social world, often through a mix of coercive force, incentives, and ideological chicanery. The institutional project of political autonomy, then, is tenuous and unstable because political entrepreneurs must hide many of their motives and intentions from other strata by elevating the interests of the collective more than nominally. It is through the creation of a generalized system of exchange that political entrepreneurs can integrate a greater proportion of the population into the autonomous political sphere (Lawler, 2006), facilitate and constrain political action, exchanges, and communication via generalized symbolic media (*power*) (Abrutyn, 2013; Luhmann, 1976, 1982; Parsons, 1963), and make political goals and decisions collectively binding (Eisenstadt, 1963). And though political entrepreneurship has significant costs for many strata, it was *evolutionarily advantageous* to human societies to have political entrepreneurs struggle and gain independence (Flannery, 1972). Though one may feel free to pass normative judgment on this, the objective position is as such: If societies were to grow larger, become more culturally complex, and continue to evolve to the point that we are at now, political entrepreneurs and their success in creating autonomous polities was a necessary condition. Thus, it is undeniable that polities were the first non-kinship domain to attain moderate to high levels of autonomy; the question, then, is what is political autonomy and what does it mean to human societies?

Political Autonomy

In one sense, the process of political autonomy is about centralizing the five political functions listed above in a physical, temporal, social, and symbolic sphere. However, autonomy is more than just centralizing functions, as it also means entrepreneurs monopolizing force and consolidating issues and problems related to the production, distribution, and use of generalized symbolic political media: *power*. As autonomy increases, polities grow to be the central locus for collective binding decision-making, resolving supra-kin conflicts, protecting the interests of some strata over others, and interacting with other societies. Political entrepreneurs must not only consolidate and centralize power to the best of their ability, but they must also *generalize power*, as a symbolic resource, such that it transcends situations while shaping specific actions, exchanges, and communication. It is through the generalized symbolic medium of *power* that political entrepreneurs build discrete physical, temporal, and social political space in which political actions, exchanges, and communications are *predominantly* organized by and around *power* (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011; Luhmann, 1982, 2012; Parsons, 1963; Parsons & Smelser, 1956). Political goals, for instance, differentiate from other types of goals because of their relationship to *power*, “political criteria and by considerations of political exigency,” while the decision makers and wielders of *power* grow “independent of other groups” (Eisenstadt, 1963, p. 19) Through the control over *power* as a symbolic medium, political entrepreneurs reconstitute the reality of a significant proportion of the population by creating a specialized language and culture that impose new collective meanings with new vocabularies of motives, ideological lenses through which action and attitudes are filtered, value-orientations and norms, in addition to structural changes such as new organizational units with specialized functions (e.g., tax collection), new mechanisms of integration (e.g., domination based on relative access to *power*), and a set of resources that reconfigure exchange relations (e.g., *power* as expressed through *franchised authority* given and withdrawn by political expediency and criteria). For our purposes, autonomous polities are defined as *the institutional domain that is the central locus of actors, resources, and rules organized by and around the production, distribution, and use of power through which certain actions, exchanges, and communications become distinctly political in objective and subjective reality.*

If political entrepreneurship is about monopolizing *power*, and autonomous polities become the central locus of its production and distribution, then political autonomy must evolve in the face of pressures related

to *power*. On the one hand, political entrepreneurs, as they struggle to secure monopolies over *power*, create second-order problems that can only be resolved through greater political autonomy. In particular, three interrelated second-order problems undergird political entrepreneurship: (1) to achieve political goals, whether collective-oriented or self-interested, political entrepreneurs strive to employ power to *coordinate* and *regulate* other strata, which creates (2) a need for *legitimation* of power-relations and a relatively common meaning structure that makes sense of these new relations, while also demanding (3) new sociocultural and structural mechanisms of political *integration*. Any one of the three puts pressure on the other two, as *regulation*, *legitimation*, and *integration* can only be achieved through the reconstitution of a heterogeneous society via an autonomous political sphere. On the other hand, entrepreneurs strive for independence as they recognize their own interests and see institution-building as a means to securing, maintaining, and expanding these interests as well as new ones that arise organically. That is, entrepreneurs deal in *power*, which often becomes an end in itself.

The consequence of these pressures and the growing ambitions of political entrepreneurs was the appearance of *institutional projects* (Colomy, 1998), or entrepreneurial efforts to resolve real or perceived crises that “crystallize broad symbolic orientations in new ways, articulate specific goals, and construct novel normative and organizational frameworks to pursue their institutional ends” (Colomy & Rhoades, 1994, p. 554). Reflecting the intersection of second-order pressures with ambition, projects are dualistic in goals, which explain their relatively high failure rate as well as the tendency for adjustments midproject to accommodate contradictory pressures (Colomy, 1998). Projects tend to tenuously balance a collective-orientation with the self-interested goals of entrepreneurs as political innovations are centered around integrating disparate social groups, providing a common meaning structure that facilitates exchanges between nonkin actors, and coordinating action to create public good, while also hierarchizing relations, centralizing/consolidating the flow of resources toward the center, legitimating authority and power, and unevenly distributing resources across strata. The more successful a project(s) is/are, the more entrepreneurs become the architects of institutional autonomy, the “switchmen” of history, capable of qualitative, meaningful change through the reconfiguration of physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space in qualitatively meaningful ways for a significant proportion of the population. In short, success is measured by creating distinct physical and cognitive spheres of political action, exchange, and communication that reduce the salience of

second-order problems and allow political entrepreneurs to survive, expand their influence, and reproduce their cultural elements.

Ultimately, political autonomy is a struggle; it is tenuous and it is not always willfully accepted or necessarily beneficial to all citizens. That being said, political evolution is not an inevitable “unfolding” process, but rather the result of Lamarckian-like evolution, or what has come to be called *Spencerian* selection after Herbert Spencer’s evolutionism (Turner & Maryanski, 2008). Spencerian selection pressures emerge where there are no existing structural or cultural mechanisms to handle exogenous or endogenous exigencies, causing entrepreneurs to “develop new sociocultural formations” – e.g., institutional domains and their internal mechanisms of integration, legitimation, and regulation – as a response to “the absence of adaptive structures” (Turner, 2010a, 2010b, p. 24).⁶ Thus, in these earliest societies, the differentiation of polity and political function from kinship and kinship organization produced new problems related to regulation, integration, and legitimation – or problems based on *power* and its production and distribution (Eisenstadt, Abitol, & Chazan, 1987; Lenski, 1966; Mann, 1986). As political entrepreneurs pursued distinctly political activities, they engendered resistance, contention, and competition from their kinship counterparts (Yoffee, 2005). Furthermore, the unintentional consequence of political actors drawing lines between themselves and other actors is that kinship actors, who had hitherto taken for granted their existence because there was nothing else, become aware of their own boundaries, goals, and interests. The salience of nonpolitical corporate identities is compounded by the danger the earliest political entrepreneurs faced in delegitimizing kinship authority: They needed local kinship authority to both support the state and maintain order at the local level, as the apparatuses of domination had not been perfected (Yoffee, 2000). This precarious situation had to be balanced with political entrepreneur’s need for resources to be “freed” from ascriptive circuits, the ability to create public law, and the elevation of regional/city deities over local religions (Eisenstadt, 1963, 1964).

Out of this stream of pressures came some amazing innovations. For instance, Sargon the Great (c. 2334–2279 BCE) – the first known conqueror in history – was faced with integrating the northern Semitic Mesopotamians and the southern Sumerian ones (who were culturally, politically, and economically more developed) into a larger polity, legitimating his claims to *power*, and regulating, at the very least, local governors (van de Mieroop, 2004). One of his earliest political projects involved the erection of a new capital (Akkad) that demonstrated his “god-like” power of building cities

where they had never stood such that the old traditional orientation to local cities was broken and the flow of resources rerouted (Liverani, 1993). His innovations were also intended to pull his support actors out of their ascriptive anchorages, isolating them and compelling loyalty to him and not their territorial associations. Later, his grandson Naram-Sin would be faced with even greater second-order problems rooted in the expansion of Akkad to the point that extant transportation/communication technology became inefficacious. Pragmatically, he did things like standardize weights and measures, while ideologically he declared himself a god (van de Mieroop, 2004).

The more successful the efforts to carve out autonomous political domains, the more entrepreneurs' ambitions grow. Eventually they differentiate internal specialized organizational units charged with handling various political problems. Internal differentiation is both a means to better efficiency and a plan to increase entrepreneurial power by penetrating the lives of greater numbers of people (Lenski, 1966; Mann, 1986; Rueschemeyer, 1977). The consequence of this strategy also amplifies second-order pressures as political entrepreneurs are not only dealing with kinship actors, but now must legitimate their authority, regulate the activities of politically differentiated specialists, and integrate these disparate political support actors. Hence, second-order problems are produced by the fact that specialized corporate units sometimes pursue contradictory goals, struggle for their independence, or, sometimes, make political entrepreneurs highly dependent upon their services in ways that alter the power equation (Michels, 1911 [1962]). Indeed, one of Sargon's principal problems evolved from his decision to not replace local governors with loyal Akkadians (van de Mieroop, 2004); as is true in politics today, local leaders are often more concerned with local problems, as well as their own survival, even if this conflicts with the desires and goals of their superiors.

Partial Polities

Considering the fact that political autonomy is a process beset by struggles and conflict, two important qualifications must be made. First, autonomy, especially in the earliest stirrings of political entrepreneurship, is never full – that is, polities had become disembedded to a high degree relative to all previous societies, but they remained entwined with kinship. Second, autonomy, then and now, waxes and wanes over time as entrepreneurial innovations fail, new unanticipated exigencies challenge previous

adaptations with perilous consequences, and, as will be discussed shortly, political entrepreneurship encourages other forms of entrepreneurship that redirect sociocultural trajectories. As remains true today, political entrepreneurship operated within a biotic and “social environment ... only partially controlled ... operating sub-optimally, unable to maintain ... desired levels of power, authority, legitimacy, and control over the wider society” (Stein & Rothman, 1994, p. 13). In particular, three factors beyond the control of entrepreneurs early on were (1) environmental/ecological conditions, (2) extant transportation/communication technologies, and (3) subsistence capabilities. All three are related to the extraction, production, and distribution of material and human resources; all three are continuous factors in the shape and direction of political autonomy. The fact that the state and, eventually, political autonomy first occurred where it did – for example, Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Indus Valley, Mesoamerica, and Peru – and not in other places like Europe speaks to the contingent nature of local environments and ecology.

Take Mesopotamia, for example: The speed with which polities evolved and could be sustained was highly contingent on environmental/ecological conditions, transportation and communication technologies, and subsistence capabilities (Nissen, 1988; Postgate, 2003). Entrepreneurs needed fertile, stable agriculture to support an urban environment. Moreover, they needed land that could withstand the demands of growing populations and intensification of production. Farmer productivity, available technologies for intensive production, weather conditions, and various other factors shaped the quantity and quality of available resources. These factors constrained the ambitions of political entrepreneurs as they set the limits with which they could act, yet provided ambitious entrepreneurs with reasons to innovate. Other important ecological conditions shaping Mesopotamia included the highly diverse regional micro-ecology and the lack of timber (Liverani, 2006; van de Mieroop, 2004). The former encouraged regional specialization, an interdependent regional division of labor, and eventually, engendered conflicts over water rights and other scarce resources as well as built the infrastructure necessary for imperial ambitions. The latter produced constraints on aspirations, while also encouraging long-distance trade and intersocietal contact, and forced entrepreneurs to innovate. Finally, extant transportation and communication technologies determined the size, scale, and stability of political autonomy, while also shaping the speed with which entrepreneurs could react to biotic and/or sociocultural exigencies. Consider, for instance, that Sargon’s Akkadian empire was most likely limited to a 90 km radius due

to the poor transportation/communication technologies that hampered military conquest (Mann, 1986). Indeed, the poor technology and the exigencies that it produced related to regulating, integrating, and legitimating an autonomous polity pushed entrepreneurs to continuously improve technology, with each innovation contributing to greater levels of autonomy.

Thus far, then, it has been argued that the evolution of political autonomy, before all other institutions could become autonomous, was predicated on the ubiquitous exigencies societies faced as they became sedentary, ecologically circumscribed, locked in population-resource scarcity feedback loops, and eventually reached a threshold in complexity characterized by various exigencies like hostile neighbors, heterogeneity and intensified internal conflict, and various triggers like floods or famines producing powerful selection pressures. Political entrepreneurs, whose appearance and success is neither guaranteed nor always adaptive, innovate and struggle to monopolize the legitimate use of force under the pretense that it allows them to make important collective binding decisions that resolve these pressures. In the course of doing so, political and social differentiation creates second-order problems founded on the generalization of *power* as a resource and the monopolization of its production and distribution by entrepreneurs. The creation of a relatively distinct structural and cultural sphere of political action, exchange, and communication is the result of entrepreneurs "solving" exigencies that surround (1) the monopolized use of *power* to *regulate* and *coordinate* other social units, (2) efforts to *integrate* socially and politically differentiated social units through domination and access to the use of *power*, and (3) the need to *legitimate* the new social order and impose a vision of reality commensurate with uneven, stratified power relations. As political entrepreneurs work to resolve these problems, they begin to carve out autonomous political space; as they carve out autonomous political space, new interests and political goals compete with resolving these problems and political projects become about self-interest *and* collective orientation. Autonomy is the byproduct of political entrepreneurs solving politically based problems and pursuing political goals and interests. It was evolutionarily advantageous to have political entrepreneurs carve out autonomous polities in that it allowed for societies of much greater scale, size, and complexity to continue to exist and reproduce cultural assemblages for thousands of years. There could have been no other entrepreneur at that point because the problems required political solutions, even if they were not always "purely" political.

RECONSTITUTING SOCIETY

Having established the primacy of political autonomy, examined what autonomous polities “do,” and looked at the interrelationship between political entrepreneurs and autonomy, we turn toward the consequences of political autonomy; specifically, the reconstitution of society.

Historical Consequences

Agrarian states are often characterized as stagnant, conservative forces seeking to maintain the status quo (Sanderson, 1999). An institutional analysis focused on institutional entrepreneurship and autonomy turns these conclusions on their head, because, in fact, this period was explosive in political and, later, religious innovation. While political entrepreneurs did try to constrain innovation, it was the unintended consequences of their solutions that was the underlying cause of this dynamism. The inevitable tension between political entrepreneurs and religious specialists predicated on conflicting interests, efforts to suppress religious innovation, and the obvious differences in orientations and lifestyles became a motor of structural and cultural evolution (Abrutyn, forthcoming; Eisenstadt, 1963, 1964). The relationship between these two groups is further heightened by the fact that political entrepreneurs, try as they might, were deeply dependent on their religious counterparts for legitimation. Religious specialists are both a source for solutions to second-order problems and a potentially active entrepreneurial unit (Lenski, 1966). This dependence meant political elite had to carefully manage the power-relations between themselves and religious entrepreneurs. Indeed, it was much easier to manage this relationship early on as religious specialists were not entrepreneurs but rather scribes, accountants, and those responsible for “feeding and watering” the gods (Machinist, 1986; Oppenheim, 1975; Stark, 2007). They remained dependent upon political elites for material and human resources, while many kings were either the head priest or a god incarnate. Nevertheless, political entrepreneurs became highly dependent upon the goods and services of religious elite, and the power-differential was gradually reduced (Rueschemeyer, 1977). At times such as Akhenaton’s rule in Egypt (c. 1353–1336 BCE) or during Ur-Nammu’s dynasty (2112–2004 BCE) in Mesopotamia (van de Mieroop, 2004), this tension would become a motor of antagonism engendering resistance and struggle; the first case ended in priestly rule, while the second

case evolved into a tenuous power-sharing arrangement. Generally speaking, as long as the king could legitimately claim high priest or god incarnate status religious entrepreneurs rarely struggled for anything more than greater position *within* the polity; that is, they did not seek independence and, therefore, did not attempt to carve out an autonomous religious domain.

Yet, eventually, religious entrepreneurs would strive for independence and religious autonomy. By the so-called Axial Age (c. 900–100 BCE) and the appearance of a burgeoning class of religio-cultural entrepreneurs in India, China, Israel, and Greece, an historical dynamic would emerge from the relationship between political and religious entrepreneurs (cf. Eisenstadt, 1986; Schwartz, 1975). Unlike the religious actors deeply embedded within the polity and, ultimately, striving for political reward (Chang, 1986; Machinist, 1986), these actors were radically different and, therefore, the tension between political entrepreneurs and a nascent class(es) of religious entrepreneurs was creatively explosive. Unlike the more stagnant religious specialists, these new actors articulated new goals; delineated new decision-making processes; and demarcated physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space (Abrutyn, forthcoming). Their religious projects were not just about drawing distinctions but were also critical of extant solutions to real or perceived exigencies (Eisenstadt et al., 1987) and, thus, were aimed at carving out religious space in which their monopoly over religious resources meant they could evaluate, judge, critique, and shape political goals by nonpolitical criteria and, thus, hold political entrepreneurs accountable (e.g., Thapar, 1975). Thus, they strove to monopolize *psychic* violence by constructing new soteriologies, universal messages, and the organizational frameworks necessary to transmit these new visions of reality across populations and generations (Weber, 1968). Pragmatically, they sought to penetrate and leverage dependency from the masses through universal messages directed not at the kings and gods, but at the middle and dispossessed classes (Stark, 2007). The struggle between religious and political entrepreneurs would become one of the most important historical forces throughout various regions, culminating in the dramatic split between the Catholic church and the various European kingdoms during the time of Pope Gregory VII (Berman, 1983).

Sociological Consequences

Beyond the historical implications of political autonomy, there are several sociological consequences worth illuminating. Autonomous polities reconstituted human societies through the construction of relatively discrete

generalized system of action, exchange, and communication. In the earliest societies, action, exchange, and communication were face-to-face, reciprocal, direct, and organized by kinship logic (Turner & Maryanski, 2009). As the size and scale of societies grew, and action, exchange, and communication were no longer always direct, reciprocal, and, therefore, face-to-face and personal, symbolic media emerged to facilitate integration (Abrutyn, 2013; Luhmann, 2012; Parsons, 1963; Turner, 2010a, 2010b). That is, generalized systems of exchange and communication arose that were founded on indirect, impersonal relationships, where relationships were not predicated on direct reciprocity, but rather on the assumption that returns come from others in the system (Lawler, 2006).⁷ Because political elite cannot directly exchange and, often times, communicate with individual subjects/citizens, media are necessary to erect generalized systems of exchange in which less tangible things like “security” or “economic prosperity” are exchanged by elites for loyalty, subordination, and the like.

Though often associated with *money*, media are more than just tokens of value; they are symbolic bundles of meaning constituted by value-orientations, ideologies, norms, preferences, and so on (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011). For example, Simmel (1907) argued that *money* was not just a facilitator of economic exchange but was a symbol with objective meanings that reduced physical and cultural distance between impersonal economic actors by integrating them into a basic normative system of exchange and, in Luhmann’s (2012) assessment, communication. The pursuit and acquisition of media – in the case of polity, *power* (Parsons, 1963) – implies some degree of acceptance and internalization of a normative system of exchange (e.g., terms of exchange) and communication (e.g., appropriate themes of discourse) (Abrutyn, 2013). When erected, a generalized system predicated on the circulation of a medium assuages pressures surrounding regulating behavior and attitudes, integrating disparate social units, and legitimating the various claims made by elites. Thus, institutional domains become spheres of action, exchange, and communication via the production, circulation, and application of generalized symbolic media because media are “the building blocks of cultural systems” that facilitate and constrain “action and interaction by providing a means for constructing themes of discourse and, ultimately, for the development of ideologies or evaluative beliefs of [an institutional] domain” (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011, pp. 285–286).

Additionally, media manifest themselves in objects that are not tokens of economic trade but rather social exchange as *external referents of value* – for example, cars are symbols of *money*, degrees of *learning*, and black robes and gavels of *justice*. The generalization of basic human concerns into symbolic bundles, language, and objects acts as a *vehicle of culture*

through which entrepreneurs can shape the universe of the domain: They are the “conveyer belts that link the global system to the local life-worlds” (Vandenberghe, 2007, p. 312), which afford entrepreneurs the ability to make autonomous institutional domains real “separate systems for analytical purposes *as well as in the situations of daily life*” (Luhmann, 1976, p. 511, emphasis added).

Power and Reconfiguring Space

Among the few scholars interested in generalized symbolic media, consensus exists regarding the polity and its medium of exchange or communication: *power* (Abrutyn, 2013; Abrutyn & Turner, 2011; Coleman, 1970; Luhmann, 2012; Parsons, 1963; Parsons & Smelser, 1956). Political struggles are defined as individuals or groups striving for *power* and the right to make collective binding decisions and/or to mobilize force; the two dominant political ideologies, progressive/conservative, provide justification and explanation concerning political entrepreneur’s use and limits of *power* (Luhmann, 1982); novels and texts, movies, and Internet sites about the polity, whether about warfare, the presidency or congress, or spy movies, reinforce themes underscored by *power*; narratives and cultural myths of heroes, like Gilgamesh (Kramer, 1963) or King David (Albartz, 1992), center on stories concerning *power*; and, the physical (e.g., palaces and capitals), temporal (e.g., annual holidays), and social (e.g., president-citizen) spaces of polity are drenched in symbols and themes of *power* (Joyce, 2000). And though in real life, political actors do not act, set goals, or make decisions solely toward *power*, the fact that pundits and citizens can evaluate and spot corruption implies a generalized understanding of the basic norms and expectations of political action, goals, and decisions vis-à-vis other types.

Again, the earliest political entrepreneurs had to integrate disparate populations, legitimate their authority, impose a system of political meaning, and regulate behavior. Building a generalized system of political action, exchange, and communication could resolve these problems, as it would differentiate political space from other types of space. Political projects included building “public” space controlled and coordinated by political entrepreneurs vis-à-vis “private” space controlled by kinship entrepreneurs. Physically, entrepreneurs shaped space by erecting massive buildings, stone stelae which spoke of the king’s deeds and philanthropy, and the use of walls and other barriers. Joyce notes:

By creating different kinds of space within sites, the continuing elaboration of monumental architecture served to create spatial arenas with restricted access, a

constantly visible form of exclusivity ... [while changing] the patterns of habitual movement of all the inhabitants of the site, [and] creating and marking centers and peripheries ... [Moreover,] monumental art permanently inscribed a small number of figures as actors linking the natural and supernatural world ... [Ultimately, these monuments] provided a history ... that gave members of new polities a ready-made store of understanding about the meaning of such architecture. (2000, p. 72)

Temporally, the creation of new holidays or annual public rituals drew people into celebrations that supplemented the “daily rounds” which had naturally shaped the rhythm of life (cf. Chang, 1983; Kramer, 1963); for urban dwellers detached from bucolic life, the polity’s new temporality changed the way life “felt.” Social relationships were also reconfigured as “kings” need “subjects” or “citizens” – that is, generalized roles must be created and must be accessible to most people. These relationships were indirect and impersonal by definition, but exchange and communication between kings and their generalized counterparts were consummated in symbolic exchange rituals.

Often times, *power* is conveyed and exchanged through performative acts that are both signals of one’s *power*, the terms of exchange, and the “signature”/promise to uphold the “contract” (Reed, 2013). For example, it was common for new Mesopotamian kings to rebuild or make more grandiose local temples (Postgate, 2003). This gesture was essentially the signing of a contract between ruler and ruled, with the former promising to enter into positive dealings with the local deity in exchange for promises of material prosperity; the return on this promise was loyalty, obedience to royal decree and law, and continued provision of tribute or corvée labor. This symbolic relationship was “performed” in person, physically by the king laying the first brick in person, and then providing the people with food and drink for weeklong celebrations (Kramer, 1963). The more successful political entrepreneurs were in gaining structural and symbolic independence, the more these physical, temporal, and social changes were “drenched” in the symbolic essence of *power* – for example, architecture became cognitively associated with *power*, as did celebrations and public rituals, roles, and role-sets. Integration, legitimation, and regulation rested on the degree to which they were capable of building a “generalized structure of authority” through the production and distribution of the generalized medium *power*, such that they could resolve disputes between disparate kin, occupational, or ethnic groups; maintain “the central symbols of the society;” and deal with foreign entities by, for instance, “undertaking defense and expansion of the society” (Yoffee, 2005, p. 17).

The Effects of a New System of Generalized Exchange

Beyond any other consequence, generalized systems of political action, exchange, and communication *impose* a new normative and organizational framework that penetrates the lives of a significant proportion of the population. Where a central concern such as security, resource such as *power*, and right such as making collective binding decisions are monopolized to some degree, it becomes difficult to resist the reconfiguration of actions and attitudes. For instance, in Adams' (1966, pp. 151–152) discussion of Mesoamerica and Mesopotamia, he points to the creation of “at least partially autonomous, impersonal standards of public service” and “a conception of abstract impartial justice” as having the effect of generalizing *power* “to which the entire body of citizenry was equally subservient.” Political entrepreneurs are the earliest source of Weberian rationality, as they seek to make the world “legible” (Scott, 1998). Oppenheim (1964, p. 118) remarked that “it had always been the policy of ... kings to organize into settlements those elements of the population who lived outside the cities” by urbanizing “nomadic or unsettled populations into a controllable way of life.”

On the microlevel of social reality, political autonomy penetrates by making “legible” the social world around them, regardless of whether they desire rationality. In particular, it destabilizes old traditional patterns by altering the value and meaning of *power*. To be sure, local *power* still circulates along ascriptive circuits, but it is forcibly reconstituted by larger penetrating circuits from the political core (Abrutyn, 2012). Moreover, the use of certain types of *power*, especially force, requires authorization from political entrepreneurs who are loathe to relinquish monopolies (Lenski, 1966). Finally, one can imagine what it is like to not have surnames, for instance, and be coerced into adopting them as was the case with the conquered Filipino (Scott, 1998). Less local efficacy means less self-efficacy.

At the mesolevel, political entrepreneurs and their efforts to differentiate a “professional ruling class, largely divorced from the bonds of kinship” whose functions were tenuously balanced between executing decisions more efficiently and expanding administrative power further reshaped the social world by transforming “residential patterns” from those based on blood to those based on “occupational specialization” (Flannery, 1972, pp. 403–404). Bourdieu (1989, p. 23) talks of the ability “to manipulate the objective structure of society,” “to impose and inculcate a vision of divisions,” and most importantly, “the power to make groups.” Political entrepreneurs are the first actors capable of doing so on a grand scale (Scott, 1998), and their efforts create a series of unintended consequences that both limit the degree

to which they can make the polity autonomous as well as generate the historical dynamics that would push human societies toward greater complexity.

On the one hand, as noted above, they come to increasingly depend on the religious elite who eventually become competitive entrepreneurs and, in some cases, succeed in building distinct religious spheres that lead to uneasy power-sharing agreements between political and religious elite, while other times subordinate the polity to religion altogether (Eisenstadt et al., 1987). On the other hand, the bureaucracy becomes the first set of corporate units integrated by legal-rational criteria (Eisenstadt, 1963). The contradictions between their gradually evolving rationalized orientation to the world would come into conflict with the grandiose, traditional and religious orientation of the king and nobility (Rueschemeyer, 1977). These two central “arenas” or fields of conflict would shape the trajectory of social change across societies up until Europe in the middle ages introduced new combatants in the form of economic and legal entrepreneurs (Abrutyn, 2009, 2013; Berman, 1983).

Besides these two dynamic forces, partial or incomplete political autonomy continued to be the rule. The near constant rise and fall of polities through history was predicated, in part, on the disjunction caused by polity and kinship each having nearly distinct legal, economic, and religious domains. Consider the contradiction between the “moral economy of sharing usually imposed by kinship” and the “amoral” economy produced by long-distance trade (Yoffee, 2005, p. 35): An entirely foreign hierarchy of wealth and status could not easily be reconciled with the logic of kinship. Again, these contradictions often led to the decline, disintegration, conquest, or, ultimately, collapse of many ancient societies as political entrepreneurs continued to experiment with political innovations and fail. But, it could be argued that this contradiction also produced fertile conditions for the eventual emergence of economic, legal, and educational-scientific entrepreneurs in Europe (Abrutyn, 2009); a historical moment which clearly changed the trajectory of Western civilization and, over time, the rest of the world.

Finally, political autonomy was the first source of extra-kinship domination. To be sure, the pursuit of political autonomy and independence was a double-edged sword. Political entrepreneurs were capable of creating extended periods of peace that benefited ever-growing proportions of the population, even if the majority of the people remained exploited in terms of tribute or taxation. Political entrepreneurship, recall, is always tenuously balanced along collectively oriented goals and self-aggrandizement; though

history is littered with the horrible consequences of the latter type, plenty of political entrepreneurs pursued goals and made decisions that would bring peace and prosperity to many people. Domination, though a loaded term in modern sociology, is another form of integration that creates interdependence between both super- and subordinate. It certainly alters the fortunes and life chances of different strata, but it also was a necessary arrangement to resolve conflicts between nonkin, ensure the subsistence of a non-productive urban populace, protect the prosperity of the populace against external threats, and maintain the bonds between the mundane and supramundane worlds.

CONCLUSION

It would be difficult to say political autonomy was inevitable, as hindsight forces us to ignore the possible alternatives; but either way, the creation of autonomous polities brought about massive transformations in the macro, meso, and microlevels of social reality – transformations that can arguably be called irreversible. The discussion above elucidated the process by which polity first became autonomous, the implications for social reality then (and implicitly today), and the consequences of political autonomy. The central contributions lie in the historicity of the analysis, the focus on political entrepreneurs, and the construction of autonomy and institutional reality from the *inside-out* and the *bottom-up*. As such, it adds to the evolutionary institutionalist project currently underway by moving the analysis away from differentiation toward the process of autonomy and maintaining a commitment to historical analyses that avoid abstractions not matching actual processes.

Moreover, the discussion also speaks of the relatively recent interest some sociologists, especially evolutionary sociologists, have had with the rise of the earliest states and the urban revolution (cf. Abrutyn & Lawrence, 2010; Chase-Dunn & Hall, 1997; Sanderson, 1999; Turner, 2003). Though a slightly different take on the historiography, it does not contradict studies focused on the rise of the state (or political entrepreneurs in our terminology), but rather supplements it by adding an institutional approach. Two future directions are implicated. The first, theoretically driven, would look to delineate this same process at other moments in history when other institutional domains became autonomous for the first time, such as the Axial Age and religion or the Middle Ages and economy; these studies

would, like the one above, supplement current research in this area by providing a richer institutional analysis to support the various other theoretical frames used to describe and explain these moments. Methodologically, a more focused case study of a specific polity or an historical analysis of a political domain over the course of time would help deepen the theory, while also providing historical specifics that help explain the variation in entrepreneurial success across cases and time as well as the variation in trajectory of polity.

NOTES

1. Other possible institutions in many modern societies include science, medicine, art, sport/entertainment, and media (Abrutyn, 2009, 2013; Abrutyn & Turner, 2011).

2. For examples of broad stroke efforts, see Sanderson (1999), J. Turner (2003), Nolan and Lenski (2009) and, for examples of recent work on specific institutions, see Abrutyn and Lawrence (2010) and Abrutyn (forthcoming).

3. The term “axial” generally is used by religious scholars to label the 700–800 year period in which the majority of the world religions emerged independently (c. 900–100 BCE) (Eisenstadt, 1986). The point is that history irreversibly “turned on an axis” during that time period.

4. The one “chiefdom” case that may challenge this argument is Hawaii, which had numerous state-like features, and was arguably a state (Earle, 1991). This discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this paper and really reflects a rare exception to a more general rule.

5. Some examples of trigger events have been identified. In Mesopotamia, climate change that affected the sea level (Fagan, 2004; Nissen, 1988) alongside unpredictable annual violent flooding generated numerous selection pressures for rapid political evolution (Abrutyn & Lawrence, 2010; Liverani, 2006). In Mesoamerica, it appears as if the hostile raids of some more ‘advanced’ groups pressured the rapid innovation of their targets who quickly outpaced and conquered the aggressors (Sanders & Price, 1968).

6. Several caveats should be noted: there are no guarantees that (a) these pressures will be perceived, (b) they will be perceived correctly, (c) entrepreneurs will or even can innovate to address these crises, (d) entrepreneurs will successfully articulate and diffuse their innovates across a population, or (e) solutions will work in the short- or long-run (cf. Henrich, 2001; Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Runciman, 2009; J. Turner, 2010a; Turner & Maryanski, 2008, 2009; Wilson, 2002). In addition, those solutions that seem ‘successful’ may only work in the short-run, may only be beneficial for some groups, and may be purely accidental. Put another way, this is not the old “evolutionary” teleology of functionalism or old evolutionism (for a review, see Sanderson, 2007).

7. Actor “A” gives to actor “B,” who in turn gives to actor “C,” who then gives to actor “A.”

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