The Arrival of the Gods

This is no bad subject. For the last two and a half thousand years people in Europe have reflected on how the state originated. Aristotle was the author of the famous phrase: *anthropos physei men estin zoon politikon*. The correct translation of this is that man is by nature an animal destined to live in a state. «Political» is wrong. The point was to counter the Sophists who were arguing that the state, the Greek *polis*, was unnatural because it legitimated slavery. Heraclitus was of the opinion that it was war which made some masters and the rest servants. For Thomas Hobbes, it was voluntary subjection in order to avoid the war of all against all; and from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, we then learned that the state was the result of the development of objective spirit.

The Arabian historian Ibn Chaldun in the fourteenth century supposed that the state originated in the subjection of peaceful cultivators of land by militant shepherds. And after Hegel, Henry Morgan, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels came along with the idea that the real cause was private property. Karl August Wittfogel came up with an hydraulic theory about the necessity for the centralized organization of common irrigation plants and Gordon Childe with the idea that it was the «demographic pressure» of the urban revolution, that is, the marked increase in population on the basis of a settled agriculture.

The theme has been subject to constant variation and hence it is remarkable that at the moment it almost looks as if agreement can soon be reached on a single opinion, agreement that will last for some considerable time to come. Over the last thirty years, that is to say, people have thought about the problem and conducted research into it in a much more intensive way than before – and this has been done in cooperative work between ethnologists, archeologists and historians, in the United States, England and France. The broad lines of the development are more or less generally agreed.

In such matters in Germany, the tendency still is to think rather in terms of a tradition of ideas (precisely the ideas of Aristotle, Hobbes or Hegel), whereas in these other countries the attempt is made, by reference to a considerable amount of evidence, to understand how it really happened. And if in future here in Germany we begin to relate to this research, despite our aesthetic tendency, then that will be due decisively to Stefan Breuer, the Hamburg political scientist, who has concerned himself for some time with the research and who has now written this book, *The Archaic State*. It is a summary of what has been discovered else-
where about these matters, of what has been called neoevolutionism for short. But the summary is made more precise by the adoption of some of the concepts of Max Weber's sociology of power. Hence the subtitle: »On the Sociology of Charismatic Leadership.«

Neoevolutionism is the revival of a method which set its stamp on the nineteenth century. Its magic word was evolution, development – from Hegel and Darwin to Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim. The systems, however, proved themselves questionable, sociology and history soon went their separate ways, and evolution was then only something positive when formulated in the most general terms as the opposite of revolution. But since the 1960s, for whatever reason, sociology and history have grown together again, not only in Germany.

In the study of early history, this was the moment in which neoevolutionism was born. It was distinguished from its nineteenth century predecessor in that it had more and better material available to it and it did not attempt to fill gaps by recourse to bold logical constructions. The material? It is derived today, as it was in the past, from ethnology, archeology and history – in that order.

For the origins of the state are best observed where power structures arise for the very first time and, for this, ethnologists have presented the best case studies in the societies which they have described. And since the time that archeologists have been concerned not only to excavate and describe, but also to reflect on the social function of whatever they have uncovered, they have become the second most important source of information about the origins of the state. These origins occurred before written historical evidence began, evidence from which historians in their contribution can, at most, draw tentative, backward-looking conclusions about the earlier periods.

The archaic state described by Breuer is the state in its earliest, original condition. It differs from the chiefdoms from which it emerged in that the king no longer acted as the tribal chief did. He was no longer the representative of the community before the gods, but rather the reverse. The king was the representative of the gods within the community. This new definition of the state is persuasive in that it, first, provides an account of the origins of the state no longer as a revolutionary break but instead as a gradual process; second, it provides adequate and appropriate expression of the meaning of the religious legitimation of early government; and hence, third, it takes account of another important phenomenon in the development of early societies.

This phenomenon was discovered by ethnologists. It consists in the fact that the old – egalitarian – order based on kinship was retained in its external form but was changed in its content: the rise of government as a radicalization of kinship structures. They were made hierarchical, just as religion was, the religion with which they were always associated via ancestor worship. The outer forms remained the same. In an egalitarian kinship order, when one bowed down to the eldest in a lineage, one bowed down to one's own ancestors, more or less,