

## Reading questions on Christian, Chapter 9

“From Power over Nature to Power over People: Cities, States, and ‘Civilizations.’”

Why do you think Christian puts “civilizations” in quotes in the chapter title? (see p. 248)

You might start at the end, where Christian summarizes the relevance of the history of early agricultural states to the history of technologies. Keep in mind these big themes as you read: technological momentum, larger settlements, increasing productivity, coercive modes of power as power over nature becomes power over people (281-282).

What do you think of his initial analogy between the physical and the social universe, i.e. how the force of gravity works in both settings? (245)

What are the general dates of the community-based Paleolithic era and the appearance of the first states in the Middle East, northern India and China, and Mesoamerica?

Look at the maps on pp. 246-7: what modern states occupy these territories?

Christian refers to a social scientist, Marvin Harris, to suggest that a major change in the human condition is not necessarily “progress” (248). You will recall Christian’s earlier reference to Marshall Sahlin’s “stone age economics” (185-87). Is he making a similar point? If so, what is it? If not, what are the differences?

(Harris’s work is mentioned again on p. 272. Does this example support the thesis of Harris as described on p. 248?)

The chart on p. 249 and figure 9.1 (p. 250) are helpful in making distinctions among terms such as “family” and different types of extended groups, many still kinship-based (such as “clan” or “tribe”). Make sure you review them to get a sense of the different types of groups that form basic social organizations in the absence of state structures. Do you think the groups still persist even in state-based political settings?

Make sure you understand Christian’s ecological explanation of the emergence of state power, i.e. human society becomes the niche in which elites forage for resources. Again he is making analogies between human society and the nonhuman world, in transitions to greater social complexity. Are you persuaded that these analogies are valid and useful? (249-252)

Why is the transition to agriculture so important in human history? (252-53) What are some of the critical changes after the introduction of domestication that made it significantly more productive? What are some new sources of energy that were tapped by these changes? (253-258)

Once again “intensification” and “extensification” are contrasted as two ways that humans extend their powers over the rest of the world. Make sure you understand the distinction and can give examples of each process (256, 259)

What are some new materials that began to be worked in agrarian regions? (258-59)

What are the population trends in early agrarian regions? (259)

Explain the causal connections (including feedback loops) of population growth, agricultural surpluses, and social inequalities. Do these inequalities appear to be inevitable? Is there apparently some trade-off between overall wealth and overall equality in human societies? Do these inequalities have a strong gender component? What is patriarchy? (259-264)

One hypothesis, as explained by Christian, is that consent-based power inevitably/necessarily mutates into coercive power. Is this persuasive? Are there other explanations that seem plausible? What forms of leadership seem most common in early agriculture-based societies? (264-67)

Christian defines cities as “wholly humanized environments.” (267) So are cities technologies? Do they have a major role as “technologies in history”? If so, what kind of role (see figure 9.3 for a hint)?

How do the details of geographical positioning and climate affect the development of cities? How does their presence in turn “warp” the surrounding geography? (268-71)

How do cities affect the distribution of social power? (271-72)

What do you think of Tilly’s definition of states on p. 273?

What are some of the inherent weaknesses of these early states? How is violence different from power? (273-74)

Look at the Standard Professions List as described on p. 274. How does it compare with your sense of standard professions in today’s world?

On p. 275 Christian describes the transition from a kinship-based society to a class-based society. Is this the end of prehistory? When does prehistory end?

When, why, and how was writing invented? (275-278)

All through this chapter Christian has mentioned the emergence of organized warfare. Connect these dots to get an idea of when and how armies arose as a standard part of human societies. What is their role in conflict with other groups? What is their role within the state? (248)

Here Christian calls upon another social scientist, Eric Wolf, to make a distinction between kin-ordered and tribute-taking societies. Is the latter the same as a class-divided society? How is the transition from the first to the second connected with technological changes? (278-280, with emphasis on Table 9.3; also p. 282)

How does the model of transition from community-based to state-based agricultural societies fit the sequence of events in Mesoamerica? (280-281)

Christian returns again to an analogy between human societies and nonhuman life (namely social insects), to explain why the “demographic dynamism” associated with agriculture leads inevitably to the social results described in this chapter. Do you find this analogy convincing? Do you find his assertion of historical inevitability—technological determinism, if you will—convincing? (281)

Reread the summary to make sure you understand this long and complicated argument about the reasons for the emergence of cities, states, and civilizations in history.

Look over the bibliography to get a sense of some of the major works and themes in early agrarian-based history.

Does Christian's account remind you of anything else you have read in history? As you get deeper into the book, what do you think of it? How might you write a review of it to post on, for example, Amazon.com?

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