

# From Autonomous Villages to the State: An Irresistible Trend in the Grand Sweep of Human History

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture

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**Introduction by Warren Robbins**, founder of the Robbins Center for Cross Cultural Communication:

The Center for Cross Cultural Communication is just a fancy name for general semantics. But as the predecessor for the museum, it enabled me to put together a board of advisors which included people like Margaret Mead, Joseph Campbell, Leslie White, and Ben Shahn, people from all the various social sciences and the arts. That was the platform from which I was able to launch the Museum of African Art, which I then turned over after fifteen years to the Smithsonian, relieving me of various responsibilities so I could come down here and participate in something like this [lecture] this evening.

It is a pleasure for me to do so because Robert Carneiro and I were classmates at the University of Michigan years and years ago. But we didn't really know each other. We lived in the same residence hall and were peripherally aware of each other's existence, but we didn't chum around together. I wish we had.

Carneiro was certainly a product of the University of Michigan. At this time, Harvard is beginning to be called the Michigan of the east. (*laughter*) I was testing that out because that's a standard joke in Ann Arbor, so I wanted to see what the response would be in New York City.

In any case, Bob has B.A. and M.A. degrees, and a Ph.D., in anthropology. Well, the first one was in political science, but he soon learned better and ended up as a cultural anthropologist in which capacity we know him and know him well, and he's known very well within the institution in which he is speaking tonight. He has had a very broad academic career, which I won't recount. He's had many assignments and field trips overseas.

He has written on a wide variety of subjects—the ones that you might expect from such a scholar, but even one on baseball. He has written many, many monographs on a variety of subjects. Some of that will be reflected, I'm sure, in what he has to say this evening.

When the call went out for recommendations for a speaker for this year's Korzybski lecture, I submitted his name with great pleasure, and now with great gratification

that he was selected to be the speaker this evening. I don't believe in people taking lots of time on introductions of speakers, so I will give him all the time that he deserves. Bob ...

**Robert Carneiro (speaking without notes):**

Thank you very much Warren.

As far as I know, Leslie White never cited Korzybski in print, but the two had a very great interest in the same thing, namely words. White worked on what underlies language, the *symbol*. He wrote an article in 1939 titled "The Symbol: The Origin and Basis of Human Behavior." [See page 65] White was clear in his definition of a symbol: something in which *meaning does not inhere, but is assigned to it arbitrarily by those who use it*. White saw the symbol as the means by which human beings were able to communicate effectively and ultimately erect the structure that we know of as the state. His view of words was thus essentially positive, constructive.

Korzybski, on the other hand, often looked at the negative side of words, pointing to the fact that people often thought of words as *things* in and of themselves and didn't realize they were only symbols. A lot of the mental difficulties that people get themselves into, he said, are the result of this failure to see the symbol for what it is.

If you look in the back at the index of *Science and Sanity*, you will not find the word *evolution*, but you will find the word or the term *time-binding*. In fact, here is how Korzybski defined it: "Human beings differ from animals in the fact that each generation can start where the former generation left off." Translating this into anthropological terminology, *time-binding* is what? It is *cumulation*. Anthropologists are tired of repeating that "culture is cumulative." *Cumulation* is simply the addition of the new along with the retention of the old. This, of course, is one of the major features of evolution; that is, it consists of building larger and more complex structures by taking the elemental pieces of it, building them up, and aggregating them. Evolution can then be seen as consisting largely of this cumulation of

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things. And that is true of political evolution as well as evolution of other aspects of culture.

When I first went into the field among the Kuikuru in central Brazil in 1953, if there was a recognized theory of the origin of state at all, it was what I call the "automatic" theory which had been more or less proposed by Old World archeologists like V. Gordon Childe and Leonard Woolley. According to this theory, once agriculture came on the scene about 10,000 years ago, humans could produce a surplus of food above subsistence needs. Thus individuals were able to be divorced from primary food production and began specializing in ceramics, weaving, metallurgy, the priesthood, and so on. Somehow, *automatically* (the steps were not really spelled out), this gave rise to the state.

Well, the group that I worked with in central Brazil, the Kuikuru, practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, with manioc as its staple crop. Kuikuru agriculture turned out to be more productive per unit of land or per unit of labor than the agriculture of the Inca. Yet, whereas the Kuikuru lived in a simple village of about 145 people, completely autonomous politically, the Inca comprised a vast empire of some ten million people over a very large area with a very complex culture but with a system of agriculture that was less productive than that of the Kuikuru. Obviously, the automatic theory was wrong, or at least incomplete. Sure, agriculture was necessary for the state to come into being. Until we had agriculture, it was impossible to expect the state to arise. But something more than that had to be involved. What was it?

One of the ingredients I thought was at the base of the formation of states, beginning with simple autonomous villages, was warfare. In those days, anthropologists tended to look askance at warfare as having played a constructive role. War, after all, was nasty and unpalatable. For instance, in those days, it was thought that the Maya had developed completely without warfare, and you frequently found statements about the "peaceful" Maya. This, of course, has since been disproved, first by the discovery of the Bonampak murals in southern Mexico, but since then by a lot more epigraphic and other evidence of warfare. So warfare was involved in state formation. But warfare was prevalent in Amazonia, too, and yet had not given rise to the state, as it had in Peru.

What was the difference between the two areas? Was it something environmental?

Here, I thought, we had something to work with. From the point of view of political development, the outstanding feature of Amazonia is that it consists of an area of extensive, unbounded, agricultural land. Almost any part of the forest can be felled and agricultural crops, especially manioc, can be grown very successfully. That meant that when there was warfare between adjacent villages, the defeated villages need not stay in place and be subjugated by the victor, but could flee to a safer location and establish a new village there just about as well as before.

Population growth, of course, was occurring in both areas, slowly and gradually. It operated by a process whereby individual villages were growing to a certain size and then splitting, growing and splitting, so what was occurring was the *proliferation* of villages. But in Amazonia, villages spaced themselves out, at arm's length, so to speak, because there was plenty of land.

If we look at the coast of Peru, where Andean states first arose, what we see is something quite different. There are several dozen short rivers that come down from the Andes and flow into the Pacific. These rivers flow through probably the world's driest desert. So there were river valleys with very fertile soil close to the river, and then sheer desert on either side. At the headwaters, there were mountains, at the other end of the river, the sea, and on either side, desert. Now, the agricultural villages that existed there autonomously, from an early period, engaged in warfare from time to time, just as Amazonian villages did. The results, however, were strikingly different.

At first, as long as there was enough land, what occurred was a process of fight and flight. But it wasn't long before these villages found themselves with no more room for expansion, and so defeated villages had to stay put and be subjugated by the victorious one. This meant that for the first time, we see the creation of multi-village chiefdoms. The chiefdom was the first supra-village form of political organization ever to occur in the world.

Human culture goes back perhaps two million years, and yet it wasn't until around 5000 B.C. in Mesopotamia that we get, for the first time, multi-village aggregates. In the various valleys along the coast of Peru, the first small chiefdoms were emerging, although somewhat later. They continued to grow. Population pressure on the land continued, but then competition for the land was no longer between autonomous villages. Now it was

between chiefdoms. As the process continued, we find the stronger chiefdoms defeating the weaker ones until eventually valley-wide kingdoms were formed. They did not form in every valley. In some valleys they evolved faster and further than in others.

But basically, small states were able to emerge when chiefdom conquered chiefdom and grew in size and power in several of these valleys. The essential feature fostering state formation, then, was that these valleys were *circumscribed* environmentally. Comparing Amazonia and Peru then, we find in the latter these very sharp environmental gradients that seemed to make all the difference. Simple autonomous villages persisted in Amazonia, whereas chiefdoms or states emerged along the coast of Peru.

When you have a theory, the first thing you want to do is to test it against other cases than the one on which you based it. So I looked further north, looking at the Valley of Mexico, where we know a state had emerged with Teotihuacán as its capital.

Sure enough, the Valley of Mexico is neatly circumscribed, a large bowl with mountains all around. Looking at Oaxaca in southern Mexico, you find the same thing, a circumscribed valley where a state also arose. So far, so good, but what about other parts of the world?

Let's look at the Old World. You have the Valley of the Nile—again nicely circumscribed, sharp deserts on either side of the Nile hemming it in. The Tigris and Euphrates reveal much the same thing. The Indus Valley in Northwest India was likewise a river with desert on both sides.

The Yellow River in China seemed at first to be an exception. But as I learned more about it later, I realized that here, too, there was environmental circumscription. The Chinese state first arose in the area around the inverted "T" where the Wei River flows eastward into the big bend of the Yellow River. Some of you who are Chinese scholars may point out that the famous Shang civilization was located not here but at the lower end of the Yellow River. That was true because the factors most conducive to the rise of the state initially aren't necessarily those that are best suited for its further development. The Chinese state first emerged in that inverted "T" of the Wei and Yellow Rivers. Then later, it flourished in the lower part of the Yellow River, where, being larger and more fertile, conditions were more conducive to the growth of civilization.

Let's go a little farther afield to Polynesia. There is nothing more sharply circumscribed than an island. Accordingly, we find, for

example, that on Tahiti and Hawaii states, or something very close to states, had emerged.

The circumscription theory seemed to answer the call pretty well in explaining how states arose. But one is always looking for exceptions to rules; exceptions may suggest modifications which will then allow you to broaden the theory and explain more cases.

Going back to the New World, let us look at the Maya and the Olmec of Guatemala and southern Mexico. Maya states, even though relatively small, emerged here, too. Among the Olmec, even the specialists themselves aren't sure whether they were big chiefdoms or small states. The Maya and Olmec habitats were both areas where political envelopment had proceeded well beyond autonomous villages. Yet they were areas that were not environmentally circumscribed. Can we make some modification of the theory to encompass these cases? What must be added to the environmental circumscription theory to make it work here? I think two additional factors are required. One is *resource concentration* and the other, *social circumscription*.

Resource concentration can be said to apply to an area where food resources are available in much greater quantities than in surrounding areas. So populations are attracted to these areas and help create the population density that stimulates warfare.

To give some examples of this condition, let us take the Amazon River in South America and the Mississippi River in North America. The Amazon particularly is blessed with an abundance of many kinds of fishes, indeed, almost an overabundance of them. It also has turtles and manatees in profusion. It was thus a region that drew people to its banks even before agriculture entered Amazonia.

When agriculture did come in, the Amazon became a doubly favored habitat for human settlement. In addition to all the riverine food resources, there was along its banks what Brazilians call *várzea*. This is the land on either side of a large river that floods annually, depositing on it a layer of silt which replenishes the fertility of the soil. Not only does this soil yield bountifully initially, the naturally increased soil fertility year after year makes it unnecessary to have to fallow it.

It was a result of this combination of factors that drew populations to the Amazon. *Várzea* agriculture served to increase the size and density of riverine populations and

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led to the rise of large and powerful chiefdoms all along the length of the Amazon.

In this case, *resource concentration* led to *social circumscription*. Thus, when warfare occurred, defeated villages could not readily move elsewhere because they were surrounded by other villages further back along the river. The ensuing warfare led to the aggregation of villages into chiefdoms.

A good analogy is provided by boiling water. You can boil water in an open pot, but it boils much faster in a pressure cooker. In the one case nothing really encloses the water; in the other, the water is completely contained—circumscribed—by a pot.

If you look at where the world's states first arose, it was in areas of circumscribed agricultural lands. Among the Mayans in Guatemala, the Olmec in southern Mexico, West Africa, and Europe, where states also arose, they emerged later. Wherever social circumscription occurred, but was not combined with environmental circumscription, the process was similar but simply took longer. Without sharp, natural boundaries, the area "leaked," you might say. Defeated villages had some flexibility in moving out. Therefore, it took longer before social circumscription grew tight enough to give rise to chiefdoms and, in some cases, to states.

I'll offer one more example of the effect of geographical differences on political evolution. The oldest state in Europe, using "Europe" a little broadly, is Crete, the Minoan civilization of which was in existence by around 2000 B.C. At this time, there were no states on the mainland of Europe. Why not? And why was there on Crete? Crete was a tightly circumscribed island. It was not so large that it could not be readily unified politically, as was the case with Sicily and Sardinia, which were larger and took much longer to unify. At the same time, though, Crete was large enough and had a population of sufficient size to allow a complex type of socio-political organization, characteristic of a state, to develop.

So far, I've cited the occurrence of chiefdoms in Peru as a stage in the development from autonomous villages to the state. But I haven't gone into detail about the process involved in going from a chiefdom to a state. I think it's important to do so now.

At the bottom of the sequence, we have what are generally called *simple* chiefdoms, an example of which would be Futuna in Polynesia, which consisted of only about ten

villages. The island was small enough so that it became unified into a chiefdom rather easily. A *chiefdom* is defined as a political unit in which there is a paramount chief who has permanent control over all the villages. Northern Kiriwina in the Trobiand Islands, where Bronislaw Malinowski did his field work, was a slightly larger simple chiefdom with seventeen villages under the paramount chief.

The area where chiefdoms were first studied intensively was Polynesia, but it soon became recognized that an even better area for the study of chiefdoms was the southeastern U.S. Here there was not only good ethno-historical evidence of chiefdoms, but there was good archeological evidence of them, too. In fact, today more studies of chiefdoms are carried out in the southeastern U.S. than anywhere else in the world.

The archeologists who have worked there tend to divide chiefdoms into two types: *simple* chiefdoms and *complex* chiefdoms. Simple chiefdoms can be described as having just one layer of political organization above that of the village, with a paramount chief at its head.

If the process I described above continues, stronger chiefdoms conquer and incorporate weaker ones, erecting chiefdoms that have an additional layer of political structure above the villages. They may be called *districts*, which then weld together to form larger three-tiered chiefdoms. These larger chiefdoms are called *complex* chiefdoms by Southeastern archeologists, but I prefer to call them *compound* chiefdoms. *Complex* can refer to anything above simple. *Compound* gives a better idea of how this process operates, such as in the case of chemical compounds in which atoms or molecules are compounding into larger, more inclusive, more complex units.

In the Southeast, few simple chiefdoms were left when Europeans arrived because autonomous villages had been absorbed into simple chiefdoms, and simple were absorbed into larger, stronger ones. Simple chiefdoms were thus at the mercy of larger compound chiefdoms. Compound chiefdoms were almost the only ones left in the Southeast, at the time the Spaniards arrived.

However, there was always a problem with compound chiefdoms. That problem is best typified by the compound chiefdom of Coosa, located in northern Georgia, which was one of the largest chiefdoms in the Southeast when DeSoto and his men entered in the early to mid-1500s.

DeSoto had visited the town of Coosa, the capital of this chiefdom, around 1542. Then in 1560, a Spanish commander named Juan Pardo visited Coosa again. Compound chiefdoms are structurally weak since when they are first created, the paramount chief tends to retain in power the lower chieftains he has conquered, because, for the sake of continuity, it is more convenient to keep them in office than to remove them.

But this creates a problem. These lesser chieftains, after all, were conquered by stronger ones, thus they did not submit very willingly. Accordingly, they are always looking for an opportunity to break away from the stronger paramount chieftain.

That is exactly what had happened in Coosa when Juan Pardo arrived. One of the smaller subjugated chiefdoms decided to stop paying the required tribute and broke away instead. Coosa mounted a punitive expedition to bring them back in line. Chief Coosa asked the Spaniards if they would like to help him bring the dissident back into the fold, and the Spaniards were happy to oblige.

This incident points out very neatly the structural weakness in a compound chiefdom. But, how is this weakness to be overcome? The answer may be found in the chiefdom of Powhatan in Tidewater Virginia, which was in existence half a century later when John Smith arrived. Powhatan was a rather extensive chiefdom comprising 163 villages. It was a recently created chiefdom, though, having been begun by Powhatan's father.

When chiefdoms arise, the paramount chief comes to have considerable power and begins to accumulate the good things of life, among which are women. Thus Powhatan's father had a number of wives, which meant he had a substantial number of children. When he came to power, Powhatan thus had a number of brothers and half-brothers. Moreover, since he was far along in life when the English arrived, he himself had a number of wives and a good many children. With all these brothers, half-brothers, and sons as a ready pool, he decided to remove his lesser chieftains and replace them with his own kin, men who could be counted on to be more loyal to him than the ones they succeeded. This move *consolidated* the structure of the chiefdom, and for that reason I decided to introduce the term *consolidated* chiefdom to refer to the stage above the *compound* chiefdom.

How societies went from a consolidated chiefdom to a state is not part of my story so

I'll skip over it lightly. Larger chiefdoms typically had a number of specialists, but no real bureaucracy. In time, specialists became quite numerous. For instance, many African kingdoms took pride in the number of different kinds of specialists they possessed. The kingdom of Buganda went so far as to have a keeper of the royal umbilical cord! Lots of other lesser officials also contributed to the machinery and complexity of the state.

As kingdoms continued to evolve, they became progressively more institutional. Instead of having individual specialists, political bureaus developed. Ancient Egypt had a ministry of agriculture, a ministry of war, a ministry of commerce, and so on. We understand the process of state elaboration better than we do state formation because we have a lot more historical information about it.

Let me also say ... I once estimated that around 1500 B.C., the largest number of autonomous political units that have ever existed were then scattered around the globe. There were probably in the neighborhood of half a million of them. Most of them, of course, consisted of autonomous villages.

From that time on, although the number of autonomous villages kept increasing by growing and splitting, still they were being engulfed by larger political units at a faster rate than they were being created. The net effect was that over the years, from 1500 B.C. to the present, there has been a diminution in the number of autonomous political units, a process that has been taking place almost irresistibly. The number of political units in the world has *decreased*, while their size has *increased*. From half a million in 1500 B.C., the number of autonomous political units is now down to 193.

The question thus arises: what does this portend for the future? What is the ultimate end of this trend? Clearly, it would be the political unification of the world.

How is this result to come about, if it is? Will it be by the same process that has led to the increase in the size of political units in the past, namely, by defeat and conquest of smaller, weaker states by stronger ones? Or, will it come about by some new process in which autonomous political units voluntarily surrender their sovereignty in some higher interest?

That's a subject for the future and not something I'm going to venture onto here. If you're interested, come around tomorrow and you will hear the future being explored.

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*From half a million in 1500 B.C., the number of political units is now down to 193.*

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April 23, 2005 Colloquium:  
*“Envisioning the Emerging Future”*

9:00 Welcome — Steve Stockdale, Executive Director

“Understanding W.I.G.O. to Influence the Future” — Martin H. Levinson, former Director of PROJECT SHARE, NYC Public Schools; Katherine Liepe-Levinson, Muse Educational Resources

“The Future of Consciousness” — Lance Strate, Associate Professor of Communication and Media Studies, Fordham University

“Structures and Rhythms” — Milton Dawes, Ambassador-at-Large, Inst. of General Semantics

11:30 Lunch

1:00 “Integrating Non-verbal with Verbal Processes in Consciousness” — Lloyd Gilden, President, Lifwynn Foundation for Social Research

“The Little Big Blender: How the cell phone integrates the digital and the physical everywhere” — Paul Levinson, Chair, Communication and Media Studies, Fordham University

PANEL: “Where are we going as a species?”

Roben Torosyan – Moderator, Assistant Director, Center for Academic Excellence, Fairfield University

Warren Robbins, Robbins Center for Cross-Cultural Communications

Milton Dawes

Allen Flagg, President, New York Society for General Semantics

Andrea Johnson, President, Institute of General Semantics

“Developing a Sensitivity to Rhythm” — Milton Dawes

4:00 Adjourn

# An Interview with Robert Carneiro

Gregg Hoffmann

*Robert Carneiro sat down with IGS Publications Coordinator Gregg Hoffmann to talk about general semantics, his work in anthropology, and where that field is heading.*

**Hoffmann:** How did you first become aware of general semantics?

**Carneiro:** I read Stuart Chase's *The Tyranny of Words* when I was a sophomore at the University of Michigan, I believe. This was not part of a course assignment at all. It might have been through a book club I was in, or I just came across it.

Two things at that time had dramatic effects on my thinking: Chase's book and an introductory sociology course I took. The fact that words were not the things in themselves, but symbols that represented things, had a profound effect on me. The confusion that can be caused when people do take words as the things really struck me. Words were abstractions of things, not the things in themselves.

**Hoffmann:** You also were greatly affected by anthropologist Leslie White, weren't you?

**Carneiro:** I actually took a course from him as a sophomore, but it didn't affect me that much. My senior year I took his courses on the Evolution of Culture and the Mind of Primitive Man. I had been a political science major, but White's courses had a great impact on me. I also was taking a history of political theory course at the time. The contrast between the approaches taken in that course and White's more empirical approach prompted me to switch to anthropology.

I was supposed to inherit my father's business, a newspaper machinery export business. I worked at it for a while after graduation, but it really was not for me. So I headed back to Michigan for graduate work in anthropology.

**Hoffmann:** Did White refer to Korzybski in his work?

**Carneiro:** I can't recall him ever citing Korzybski, but he did write some things for semantics publications and I believe he knew of it. [See page 65] You sort of absorb the lessons of general semantics into your bloodstream. White was the quintessential scientist. A lot of anthropologists at the time were in the other camp, more humanists than scientists. But, White went about his work in a very scientific manner.

**Hoffmann:** In your lecture, you did a wonderful job of laying out your theory of how states evolved. Do you see your theory still being played out today?

**Carneiro:** In Iraq, you do hear references to tribes, especially when the discussion is about a

representative parliament. Tribal organizations do still exist there. You have three separate states really in Iraq, with the Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites.

Afghanistan might be even a better example. We talk about paramount chieftains. Well, in that country, warlords still rule territories in the rural areas.

When political and ethnic units are taken over, they tend to resent being incorporated into a larger political unit and try to break away.

**Hoffmann:** Where else do you see this theory playing out?

**Carneiro:** In Africa, states were formed by colonial powers that included a variety of tribes, some of which were enemies to each other, and that led to internal conflict. Nigeria is an example.

**Hoffmann:** What about modern technology and the concept of the global village? Can anthropology address that?

**Carneiro:** Yes, it might not be something I want to study, but there are people studying globalization and world systems theory. I think technology creates new cultures. For instance, an intellectual in New York might have more in common with an intellectual in Bombay or Sydney than with one in his own city.

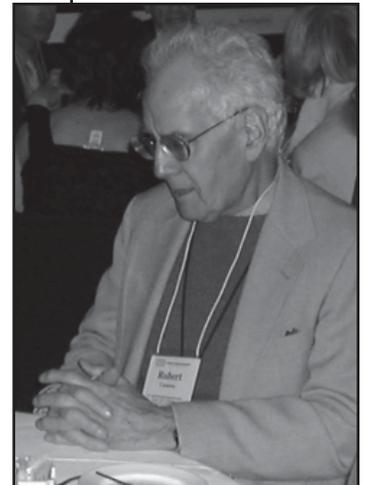
I did recently write a paper on whether we will have a world-state. The trend toward such a state is irresistible. We're down to some 193 states at this point, down from many more so that is a very powerful trend.

**Hoffmann:** Is this happening through warfare?

**Carneiro:** In some part, conquest does play a role. Societies never voluntarily give up their sovereignty. The Neo-Cons' manifesto, of course, is that the U.S. has the greatest military power in the world, so it should exercise it. Of course, they were in favor of the Iraq War. They seemed to fail to understand that it is one thing to invade and overwhelm a country and quite another to pacify it and build a new state, favorable to the United States.

**Hoffmann:** How long would a world-state take to develop?

**Carneiro:** If it happens, it would take hundreds of years, maybe thousands. It's a slow process. But not compared to the 2 million years of cultural evolution; it's a rapid process by comparison. However, we're still talking about a very slow process when you look at it in terms of one lifetime or even two.



Robert Carneiro