

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST

PRE-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

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1

Introduction: What is a Complex Society?

Industry is a mode of production which first appeared in late eighteenth-century England and which proceeded utterly to transform the world at large. Most human societies today are either industrial or engaged in the process of industrializing; such wholly non-industrial societies as still exist are archaic pockets doomed to disappear in so far as they have not been placed under preservation order. Most people, and certainly all members of Western civilization, are thus born into a world which differs radically from that of their ancestors, with the result that most of human history is a closed book to them. Human history is not very long: the species to which we belong (*Homo sapiens*) has only existed for some 50,000 or, according to some recent finds, 100,000 years. But of those 50,000 or 100,000 years only some 200 years in one part of the world, elsewhere far fewer, have been lived under industrial conditions. We all take the world in which we were born for granted and think of the human condition as ours. This is a mistake. The vast mass of human experience had been made under quite different conditions.

The present work is an attempt to summarize those conditions, or rather some of them. It does not deal with the entire pre-industrial past, partly because there is too much of it and more particularly because primitive (or simple) and civilized (or complex) societies are too different to be treated together. This book is about the latter, and I shall henceforth use the word 'pre-industrial' as a shorthand for 'pre-industrial of the civilized kind'. (Economic historians sometimes distinguish societies on the eve of industrialization from other societies without industry by labelling the former pre-industrial and the latter agrarian; in this book, however, the terms pre-industrial and agrarian will be used synonymously.)

The civilized societies of the past resemble those of modern times, but in some ways the similarity is deceptive. One cannot come to grips with them without thinking away modernity and working out the consequences of its absence. This is precisely what we shall be

doing in the following chapters, but before we start, we need to know what a 'civilized' society is. I should like to answer this question by inviting the reader to participate in a simple thought experiment.

Imagine that you and some friends and relatives of yours are shipwrecked on an uninhabited island with no hope of ever getting back. What would you do? Obviously, you would have to start by finding something to eat. The ecology of the island might be such that you could feed yourselves by gathering fruit, berries and other edible plant material, supplementing your diet by hunting or fishing. But if you could, you would start growing things, for agriculture makes for a more dependable food supply than hunting and gathering: cereals such as grain, rice and millet can be stored; and your sedentary mode of life would enable to you to store both these and other things on a scale impossible to those who have to move to wherever prey and plants happen to be available in a particular season. (You might of course still engage in some hunting or fishing from time to time.)

Having solved the problem of food, what sort of organization would you need? Given that you would be both few (indeed friends and relatives) and devoid of external enemies, you obviously would not need much organization at all. You might have to meet from time to time for decisions on issues affecting all of you (such as whether or not to set up a granary for use in years of shortage) and also for the settlement of disputes threatening to disrupt the general peace (such as your claim that your neighbour had stolen part of your harvest); and no doubt the opinions of some would carry greater weight than those of others: some would be leaders and others would be led. But you would hardly need a *formal* leader. Your society would be stateless, or indeed acephalous, 'headless'. It would also be extremely primitive, that is to say lacking in social, economic, political and other differentiation on the one hand and poor in culture, both material and intellectual, on the other.

But now imagine that a very large number of you are shipwrecked on that island, or that the island is not uninhabited, but on the contrary full of hostile natives. If there were thousands of you, you might split up into several small acephalous societies, but then you might start quarreling over land, boundaries, noise or whatever. If so, you would need more in the way of political organization. You might also find that some societies had access to commodities that others lacked (such as salt, precious stones or metals), in which case

you would start exchanging goods with each other, or in other words trading; some might then get very much richer than others, both within each community and between them, and some people might stop growing food altogether, earning enough by trade to buy it from others. Your internal homogeneity would be lost, meaning that disagreements between you would intensify; and the balance of power between the various communities would also be affected, meaning that some might try to dominate others. Under such circumstances, too, you would need much more in the way of organization. On the other hand, if the island were full of hostile natives, you would not be able to split up: you would have to stick together and coordinate your activities. And this would also force you to become more organized.

Let us assume that you have retained your internal homogeneity, but need a formal leader to coordinate your activities vis-à-vis dangerous outsiders: you elect a chief. Your chief might be able to go on producing his own food. (In fact, one would scarcely call him a chief, as opposed to a king or the like, if he did not.) But if his official duties were too time-consuming for him to engage in food production, how would he be able to live? Obviously, you would have to grow his food for him. But your chief might also need some people to help him on a full-time basis. For example, the natives might be so dangerous that it would be a good idea for some of you to form a standing army. If so, the rest of you would have to grow food for these soldiers too. But how much extra food should each of you produce, how should it be collected, how much should the recipients receive, and who should keep accounts of what is due and what has been handed over? Some of you would have to become administrators, and the rest of you would have to produce food on their behalf on top of everything else. But then you might find that you needed buildings for the quartering of the soldiers, the filing of administrative records, the storage of grain handed over, and so on; and the soldiers would need arms, clothes and cooking pots, while the administrators would need their pens and writing paper. So some of you would start producing buildings, pots, pans, clothes, arms, writing material and so on over and above your own needs, or indeed specialize in such production in return for some of that food which the soldiers and administrators have received from the rest of you; some would start trading in all these goods, and no doubt others would start specializing in the transmission of skills (e.g. teaching the administrators to read and write). The burden of feed-

ing the artisans, traders and teachers would ultimately also fall on those of you who have remained cultivators. By this stage it is unlikely that you would still be thinking in terms of food and goods rather than a symbolic notation for such things, that is money. And since the ruler (the former chief) and his top military and civil servants would ultimately dispose of all the produce and/or money you hand over (that is, your taxes), they would also have acquired the habit of spending a great deal of it on all those goods and services which, though not directly required by their official functions, nonetheless enhance their status as well as sweeten their lives: sumptuous palaces, beautifully crafted furniture, utensils and instruments, pretty pictures, sculpture, music, poetry and other literature, medical attention and so forth. So some of you would have become artists, poets, musicians, dancers, doctors and other kinds of professionals, and the rest of you would indirectly have to pay for their detachment from the food production too. By now few of you would remember what primitive conditions were like. You would have acquired a state, and political organization would have caused your society to change beyond recognition. By now it would indeed be characterized by social, political, economic and institutional differentiation; and both material and intellectual culture would have become highly developed too. In short, your society would now be described as civilized.

You may well ask at precisely what point your society would be described as civilized rather than primitive, but this is a question to which there can be no one answer: different scholars will choose different cut-off points depending on the use to which they wish to put their definitions. As far as this book is concerned, the question can simply be ignored: the analysis will focus on societies so complex that they have passed the cut-off point by any definition. However, even the most complex version of your island society was an agrarian society rather than an industrial one: agriculture was the source of most of its wealth, manufacture supplying only a little and modern industry being completely absent. The end-product of your second shipwreck, in short, was a pre-industrial society of the civilized kind.

I had better emphasize that the thought experiment should *not* be taken as an account of how the first civilizations in history arose. For one thing, we landed on our island fully aware of such things as agriculture, writing, administration and government. We reconstituted them in our new setting, but we did not invent them from scratch, and it is by no means obvious that we *would* have invented

them if we had not known about them. With hindsight it is easy to see what needs they fulfil, but needs can be met in different ways, or left unfulfilled, and it is clear from the historical record that special circumstances had to come together in order for the elements of complex organization to emerge. For another thing, the thought experiment completely fails to account for one element of fundamental importance in all human societies (and in the emergence of complex organization too), that is religion. No story in the style of *Robinson Crusoe* or *Lord of the Flies* can highlight the factors behind the emergence of religion because humans have religion (or at least a disposition for it) regardless of the type of society in which they live. Obviously, they do not have the same *kind* of religion in different societies, but there is no way in which we could have varied the conditions on our island so as to explain why they have religion at all: they had religion even before the present human species had evolved. Why this should be so is a fascinating question which cannot be properly discussed in this book, though I shall revert to the subject in chapter 7.

Whatever the circumstances behind the emergence of the first civilizations, however, all primitive societies develop into complex ones by division of labour, and this is the point which the thought experiment is meant to illustrate. We assumed that you needed someone to co-ordinate your activities for purposes of defence against outsiders, no more and no less: so some of you undertook to go on cultivating and others undertook to become co-ordinators. This was your first division of labour and its consequences were immense; your society continued to change, and all the subsequent changes were further divisions of labour: more and more people went into special occupations.

In historical fact, some measure of internal differentiation has usually preceded the arrival of state structures, not just followed it; and the arrival of state structures has not always sufficed to push a society through the entire evolution from primitivity to civilization: many have stopped at intermediary points. But the fact remains that rulers are the outcome of specialization (they specialize in power) and that this specialization is a crucial ingredient in the development of complex organization. On the one hand, there is a limit to the amount of differentiation a society can undergo without either disintegrating or else arranging for overall co-ordination of its members. The more people differ from one another, the more they come to depend on formal rules for peaceful interaction; and the greater the

importance of such rules, the greater the need for an agency capable of enforcing them. States are thus a precondition for all that social, cultural and institutional complexity that we are in the habit of calling civilization. On the other hand, the very fact that rulers are specialists in power means that they are apt utterly to transform the society in which they emerge: states are not just a precondition for, but also an active element in the evolution of civilization. Let us look a bit more closely, then, at precisely what their emergence entails.

The appearance of rulers or, in impersonal terms, the state, means that hitherto dispersed power is concentrated, be it in one man, several or a set of offices adding up to a ruling institution. There were no concentrations of power in our stateless society: we did not even have a chief. Nobody could coerce anyone else, or rather nobody could do so for long. Some might have more forceful personalities, or more relatives and friends, than others, and some might reap good harvests in years of general crop failure; but such advantages were too transitory to make for permanent accumulations of power.

By the same token, nobody had the ability to impose order on everyone else. Enforcement of the rules thus rested on *self-help*. If you had run away with my water-skin on that island, it would have been up to me to get it back, be it by running after you and beating you up or by persuading friends and relatives to do so. Actually, given that we were so few, it is unlikely that I would have used force: everybody would have tried to persuade the two of us to stop quarrelling, and we would have found it difficult to hold out against everyone else. But if our numbers had multiplied to the point where disputes ceased to be in the nature of family quarrels, I would undoubtedly have had recourse to violence. Naturally, there would have been rules regarding its use: otherwise our society would have collapsed. Primitive societies generally regulate the use of self-help with reference to kinship: who should help whom, under what circumstances and when, turns on how people are related. If we had multiplied on our acephalous island, we would probably have evolved some form of tribal organization too. But primitive societies are never against the use of self-help; on the contrary, they rely on it. They merely try to mitigate the disruptive effects of its use.

By contrast, states necessarily curtail the use of self-help. What we did on our island was essentially to pool our power in a special agency manned by our ruler. In other words, we renounced the use

of self-help and empowered someone else to keep order among us: if we disagreed, or if action was needed against the natives, then he had the right to decide what should be done and to coerce us into doing it. If you run away with my computer now on our modern British island, I am neither expected nor allowed to beat you up, and the only people I may ask to use force against you are the police. In fact, the state has been defined as an agency for the maintenance of internal order and external defence distinguished by its monopoly on the right to use force; and this is a helpful definition even if it is not quite correct: feudal states, for example, did not claim such a monopoly, let alone possess the means to enforce it; and states of other kinds have also tolerated self-help on a considerable scale. Other definitions accordingly single out acceptance of a final authority as the essence of statehood: though self-help may persist, the state has the *ultimate* right to decide what should be done; and though it may not monopolize the use of force, it can mobilize *enough* means of violence to retain its position as ultimate arbiter. Most definitions specify other features too (notably territoriality: states are demarcated in territorial terms even though they may be, and indeed mostly have been, defined with reference to dynastic, personal or religious loyalties). But whatever the best definition of the state may be, rulers would usually prefer their subjects to be disarmed, except by special licence, and forbidden to use force, except in self-defence (narrowly defined).

The division of labour between producers and maintainers of order is thus one conducive to a highly unequal relationship. Specialization does not always have this effect. If I grow cotton and you grow wheat, the chances are that I will be no more dependent on you than you are on me: the relationship between us will be one of complementarity and interdependence, not simply dependence. And in principle, of course, the same is true if I produce food and you keep order: where would you be if I stopped paying taxes? Where would I be if you let the hostile natives in? But in practice I have specialized in the production of wealth and you in the exercise of power, so that if I stop paying taxes you will react by forcibly *extracting* them; and if you decide to let the natives in there is little I can do about it. In practice our relationship is thus one in which you are the boss and I am the dependant.

All we wanted, back on our primitive island, was to defend ourselves: we set up some of us as rulers to preserve all of us. But in

so doing we have exposed ourselves to what one might call the dilemma of the golden goose: one cannot specialize in the production of wealth (or for that matter children) without becoming both highly desirable *and* defenceless; the very fact that labour is divided up dictates that gold-bearing creatures are weak. Industrialization greatly modifies this dilemma, and there were occasional societies in pre-industrial times in which food producers retained a measure of political power. To this must be added that there are many different types of power in all human societies (military, economic, political, ideological and many more), so that history never reduces to a simple story of food producers versus rulers; the thought experiment is highly simplistic in its disregard of this fact. But even so, the division of labour from which the state ensued almost invariably transformed the free agriculturalists of primitive society into miserable *peasants*, that is to say rural cultivators whose surplus was forcibly transferred to a dominant group of rulers. ('Surplus' should not be envisaged as something left over or going spare: whatever the state and/or landlords could extract from the peasants in the form of taxes and/or rent is defined as surplus as long as the transfer did not kill off the peasants altogether.)

The sheer emergence of rulers thus differentiates society in terms of power and wealth alike: some are forced to pay and others are empowered to receive in return for political services which may or may not be performed. Contrary to what our thought experiment may suggest, rulers have not commonly owed their existence to social contracts whereby some undertook to grow food for others in return for political services, as opposed to a combination of internal developments and external pressures which caused some to come up on top and the rest to have no choice but to pay. Either way, however, the rulers' control of the agricultural surplus was crucial for the institutionalization of their power. It was a regular supply of wealth (be it in cash or kind) which allowed them to buy all those military and administrative services which they needed to make their dominance permanent. And it was precisely because their dominance was permanent that society typically continued to be further differentiated after their emergence. They could force their subjects to render more and more services and payments for investment in the state apparatus (in the form of roads, arms factories, larger bureaucracies, better policing or whatever), as well as for the purchase of pomp, luxury, art and entertainment.

In short, once some have power and others have none, the former

will force the latter to pay for all kinds of goods, institutions and developments which nobody had even thought about before the state emerged, but which the state, or rather those who man it, dream up in the course of mulling over how best to perform their duties and/or how best to hang on to such power as they have. (To those involved, the two desiderata will appear as synonymous.) Differently put, coercion has played a massive role in the development of civilization.

The reader may well wonder, as have some political scientists, why anyone ever consented to the formation of states: who would not rather be his own master on a par with members of primitive societies? The answer, of course, is that people do not normally foresee the long-term effects of their own actions, and that in so far as they do, circumstances limit their choice. The Sumerians, who developed the first state structures on earth some 5000 years ago, evidently did not know what sort of Frankenstein's monster they were creating; and once the state existed, it proved to be so powerful an organization that it was bound gradually to absorb mankind at large, however much mankind at large might deplore it.

The state is a powerful type of organization because it enables human activity to be co-ordinated on a scale impossible to achieve in societies devoid of coercive agencies. A state can co-ordinate the actions of its subjects for warfare, defence, internal policing, the settlement of disputes, the creation of means of communication, the improvement of the means of production, precautionary measures against famine and disease, and many other aims (including ugly ones). It also allows for material and cultural developments that most of us appreciate. In stateless societies, by contrast, nothing much can be done unless everybody agrees, which is rarely the case (attempts at coercion by the stronger parties will simply cause the dissenters to secede); and the undifferentiated nature of society also means that the level of material and intellectual culture remains low: computers are unlikely to be invented in a society in which everybody is a food producer. Naturally, many states have only been able to perform a fraction of the above-mentioned roles, and all pre-industrial states were weak by the standards of their modern counterparts, as we shall see. Nonetheless, stateless societies confronted by states have almost always had to imitate the political organization of their neighbours in order to survive.

But of course state structures are purchased at the cost of problems. How can a complex society be kept together? What ultimate

aim should it pursue? Who should make what decisions, and with what powers of coercion? How should the rest be induced to obey? To these and other questions an immense variety of answers have been given in both theory and practice since the state emerged, but in practice pre-industrial conditions impose certain constraints on what can be done and tried out, so that there are striking uniformities behind the otherwise bewildering variety of organizations attested for pre-modern times. It is to these uniformities that we must now turn.

Part I

The Pre-Industrial Pattern

Socio-economic Organization

To think away modern industry is to think away an enormous amount of wealth. Industry generates immense amounts of wealth because mechanical devices driven by inanimate fuel under human supervision are far more productive than are humans on their own: a machine tended by twenty workers can produce more pots in a single year than can twenty potters in a lifetime, at a fraction of the cost of maintaining twenty potters from youth to death. The pre-industrial world was not of course unfamiliar with mechanical devices, and some of these devices were driven by inanimate energy too (water wheels, windmills, ships); but most of them depended on human or animal energy for their operation, and though they certainly increased the productivity of human labour, the industrial breakthrough freed production from its dependence on animal and human muscle on an unprecedented scale, generating the huge quantity and range of goods which we have come to take for granted. By our standards, the products of the pre-industrial world were both few and very expensive.

Given the absence of modern industry, agriculture was by far the most important source of wealth, sometimes the only one. But the output of agriculture before the arrival of industry was also low: without mechanization, mass produced fertilizer, scientific plant breeding and other know-how, it did not yield very much. In most parts of the world it yielded significantly more in the eighteenth century than it did in the eighth (though there were areas of the Middle East where the reverse was the case); and this growth was a precondition for the industrial revolution in that it enabled more food producers to leave the land in order to become factory workers. But the enormous output characteristic of modern agriculture in the West is the result of this revolution. The average world farmer is still incapable of feeding more than five people, but the average farmer of Western Europe feeds twenty while his counterpart in USA feeds almost sixty. USA is a net food exporter, but without mechanization it would not be able to feed more than a fraction of its own population.

However, it is not merely modern industry that we must think away: modern means of communication and transportation were also absent. The pre-industrial world had no radios, telephones, walkie-talkies, telegrams, telex, fax or other instruments for rapid exchange of information at a distance, no computers for its processing, storage and retrieval, and no cars, trains, or planes for rapid dispatch of people or goods. There were not even any bicycles. People, goods and news alike travelled slowly. They could not travel faster than the fastest animal unless they went by sea, but even wind-driven ships moved slowly by modern standards (60–90 miles per day in medieval Europe), and more slowly still when they had to be propelled by oars. Transport by land tended to be even slower. Since the ship was the only vehicle driven by inanimate energy, maritime transport was not just the fastest, but also the cheapest available: in third-century Rome it was cheaper to ship grain from Alexandria to Rome at a distance of some 1250 miles than to transport it 50 miles by land. But all forms of transportation were slow and expensive by our standards.

The fact that agriculture and manufacture alike produced little meant that all pre-industrial societies were dominated by scarcity. (I must ask the reader to remember that throughout this book the word pre-industrial is used as a shorthand for 'pre-industrial of the civilized kind': hunter-gatherers and primitive agriculturalists were not usually poor in the sense of barely capable of fulfilling their basic needs. Scarcity in this sense is the outcome of complex organization.) At the same time, the inadequate nature of the means of transportation and communication meant that most people lived in very local worlds. These are the two fundamental features to which we shall return time and again. We may start by considering their implications at the level of socio-economic organization.

Populations

Pre-industrial populations were small. The population of England in c.1500 is estimated at 3–5 million, as opposed to some 55 million today, while the population of Egypt, said to be 37 million in 1975, is assumed to have been no more than 2.5 million in 1789. The Roman empire is believed only to have accommodated some 50–60 million people at the beginning of the Christian era, and the population of China is assumed to have been of roughly the same size until

the eleventh century, when it may have reached 140 million; there were still only about 430 million Chinese in the mid-nineteenth century, as against some 1000 million today.

In most parts of the pre-industrial world the birthrate was high, but so was the death rate, and gains made in good years were regularly wiped out by famine, disease, war and other disasters in bad ones. Primitive means of transportation, inadequate roads and deficient marketing systems meant that even local crop failures could be fatal, one locality suffering shortages while neighbouring ones had plenty. Irregular food supplies clearly played a greater role in keeping the numbers down than the absence of modern medicine (though the accidental absence or disappearance of deadly diseases certainly helped), for in most parts of the world the population explosion, or in other words the accelerating population growth which has continued until today, began long before medicine had acquired its modern efficacy: in India it is supposed to have started as early as the sixteenth century, in China in the eighteenth, and it was also in the eighteenth century that it started in Europe.

At all events, the pre-industrial world was one in which human beings were relatively thin on the ground. They shared the ground with numerous animals which they have since eradicated, relegated to marginal areas or confined to zoos. One could still hunt lions and cheetahs in Crusader Syria, and wolves were still a menace in several parts of western Europe in the early nineteenth century.

Peasants

The low output of agriculture meant that the vast majority of people had to be peasants. Peasants were not of course the only food producers: fishermen, hunters and pastoralists (that is rearers of sheep, cattle or other livestock) also contributed their share. But the contribution of the latter was neither stable nor substantial enough to keep a complex society going. It was on agriculture, and above all on cereals such as grain, rice, millet and maize, that civilization rested (whence the fact that the term 'agrarian' is frequently used as a synonym for 'pre-industrial').

In some societies practically everyone was a peasant apart from the ruling elite, typically less than 2 per cent of the population. More commonly, some 10 per cent of the population were able to leave the production of food. But western Europe is believed to have

supported no less than 15 per cent of its population in occupations other than agriculture as early as c. 1300, the proportion having risen to about 20 per cent by c. 1500; and it is also said to have risen to some 20 per cent in sixteenth-century Japan. Statistics such as these are largely guesswork, and most societies have left so little relevant information that it is hazardous even to guess, but the contrast with industrialized societies is glaring. Only 2.2 per cent of the working population are engaged in agriculture in contemporary USA, barely 3 per cent in Britain, and no more than 4–10 per cent in western Europe. Over half the working population are still engaged in agriculture in many other parts of the world, but figures as high as 80 per cent are becoming few and far between. In fully industrial countries, very small numbers of food producers suffice to keep very large numbers in other occupations; indeed, very small numbers produce too much.

Cities

What with some 80–90 per cent of the population being made up of peasants, the pre-industrial world was a very rural one. Cities were either few or small, or both. Urban populations of several millions were unknown (though some believe Hang-chou of thirteenth-century China to have been an exception), and even cities accommodating just one million people were rare. Most of them owed their size to the fact that they were centres of vast empires: thus imperial Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad, Peking and other Chinese capitals are all believed to have reached the million mark, though this, as everything else to do with figures in the pre-modern world, is disputed. But even huge empires could rarely maintain more than one city of that size (China being once more believed to have been an exception). The first medium-sized country to rival empires in respect of urbanization was eighteenth-century Japan, the capital of which (Edo, now Tokyo) accommodated over one million inhabitants, while two provincial towns (Kyoto and Osaka) accommodated about half a million each. But in this respect Japan was unique. Eighteenth-century European capitals, for example, only had about half a million inhabitants at the most (thus London and Paris); provincial towns were much smaller, and only 3 per cent of Europe's population at the time lived in large towns as against 10 per cent of Japan's.

Urban growth was hampered by the fact that inadequate means of

transportation made provisioning difficult. Bulky commodities such as foodstuffs were particularly slow and expensive to move unless they could be sent by sea. Hence cities tended to be located either on rivers or canals (which coped with their water supplies too) or on the coast, as were the above-mentioned Hang-chou, Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad and Peking, as well as most other famous cities of the pre-modern world (London, Paris, Florence, Venice, Athens, Alexandria, Cairo, Edo, Kyoto, Osaka, etc). But even so, the provisioning of a modern megalopolis would have been beyond the capacity of any pre-industrial society. Still, the decisive factor behind the size of the cities was undoubtedly the inefficiency of agriculture: as long as most people had to grow food in order to keep society going, cities had to remain small. In Europe an urban population of 50,000 was regarded as impressive; in other parts of the world, cities half that size counted as big. And many cities were semi-rural in character, with gardens inside the city walls.

Whether they were capitals or provincial towns, large cities commonly owed their size to the presence of members of the ruling elite. Though the elite depended on land for its income, it usually resided in cities rather than on the land. Cities being congregations of many people, they offered greater opportunities for social, commercial, intellectual and other exchanges than did the countryside: city life was exciting. Hence it was only where the economy was too primitive to sustain cities or where cities developed after the elite itself had taken shape that rural residence among the latter prevailed; but even rural elites often spent part of the year at the court, in what was or became the capital (as in western Europe, Sasanid Iran and Tokugawa Japan). Usually, it was thus in the capital, and to a less extent in provincial towns, that the rent collected by landlords and the taxes collected by the state, or in other words the agricultural surplus *tout court*, was spent. Hence it was also here that traders, craftsmen, doctors, lawyers, astrologers, literati, poets, tricksters, beggars, robbers and others congregated for a share of the cake.

There have been times when it was more profitable to participate in international commerce (that is trade generated by elites in other countries) than to service local rulers, with the result that the political capital might be eclipsed by a trading centre: thus Udong, the inland capital of nineteenth-century Cambodia was less than half the size of coastal Phnom Penh (which had a population of about 25,000). But such a dissociation between political and commercial capital was uncommon, if only because the commercial capital would tend to become the political capital too in the end (as it eventually

did in Cambodia as well). Nineteenth century Thailand (then Siam), exemplifies the normal pattern in that both political and commercial power were concentrated at Bangkok.

It should be noted, however, that cities were not necessarily centres of either production or economic exchange. They might be purely ceremonial centres with little in the way of permanent population, visited once a year by the court (as was Persepolis) or by participants in religious festivals (the pattern once postulated for the cities of pre-Columbian America). More commonly, they were residential associations for the elite as well as political and administrative centres where public decisions were made, taxes assessed, law-courts held and so forth. The countryside would supply them with food, and sometimes also with labour and goods of other kinds, through taxation, rents and sometimes trade as well; but the cities would not necessarily produce anything for the countryside: they might be pure centres of consumption.

Usually, of course, some productive activity would spring up, but not necessarily for the benefit of anyone other than the city-dwellers themselves. The villagers in the immediate neighbourhood of the town might benefit from its presence; and if there were pastoralists in the area, they too were likely to engage in trade with it, for pastoralists cannot be self-sufficient and they have animal products to sell. (They can however do without cities as long as there are villagers with whom to exchange goods.) But even so, the vast majority of rural dwellers generally had little or no economic need for towns. They might benefit from the administrative and military services they offered, though some villagers, notably mountaineers, generally preferred to manage such matters on their own (as indeed they often had to). They might also depend on the city for religious and educational services, though again there were those who could provide the services in question for themselves. In comparison with modern cities, which are sources of vast amounts of industrial goods and a wide range of political, administrative and cultural services to urban and rural inhabitants alike, those of the pre-industrial world often have a parasitical appearance.

Bourgeoisie

Given the rural rather than urban nature of the pre-industrial world, there was rarely much in the way of a bourgeoisie, or what we would

now call 'middle classes', that is to say urban dwellers who made a living out of manufacturing, commercial or professional skills, as opposed to tilling the land or living off landed income. (It should be noted that the European *bourgeois* behind the term bourgeoisie was a townsman entitled to participation in urban government, not any urban dweller. The word has however long been used in the wider sense adopted here.) Admittedly, once a ruling élite had come into existence, a fair number of other cultivators were apt to leave the land (10–20 per cent of the population, as mentioned already); but the vast majority of those who did so ended up at the bottom of society in terms of income and prestige alike, not somewhere in between.

Thus scarcity everywhere made for a huge population of vagrants, beggars, robbers and criminals of other types: no less than 10 per cent of the population of seventeenth-century France (estimated at 20 million or less) is believed to have fallen into this category. Of the rest, the majority were servants (who constituted a further 10 per cent of the population of western Europe in the seventeenth century), and unskilled employees of public institutions: soldiers, runners, town criers, diggers, sweepers, door-keepers and so on.

Workers in the modern sense of the word, that is to say people who sell their labour to productive enterprises, were far less common. It is true that agricultural labourers, sailors, boatmen, weavers and other hirelings (typically paid by the day) sooner or later made their appearance in most societies. But the fact that manufacture depended heavily on animal and human energy meant that productive enterprises rarely exceeded household size (which is not, of course, to say that they never did so); and where the household was the basic unit of production, such additional labour as might be needed could often be found by methods other than simple hire (as will be seen).

All those who had to work with their hands were despised, pre-industrial élites all over the world being united in their contempt for the 'vile and mechanical world of labour'. (One Thalassius was refused entry to the Senate in fourth-century Constantinople on the grounds that he owned a knife factory and was suspected of having worked in it himself: the prejudice had far more intercultural intelligibility than did the institution from which he was excluded.) And those who laboured for others were further stigmatized by their servile position and miserable pay, their status being particularly depressed where they found themselves in competition with slaves.

But even purveyors of more specialized goods and services were not necessarily better off. Village smiths and potters, rural and urban peddlars, cuppers, healers, mimers, jugglers, story-tellers and popular preachers, all these and many others had to subsist on such tiny sums as agrarian society could afford to spend on what we now call consumer goods, medical services and entertainment. Because the sums in any one place were so small, such people were often itinerant, moving from place to place in search of their meagre income and sometimes trying to improve on it by combining several specialities, as did for example the gypsies (who were tinkers, fortune-tellers and purveyors of trinkets and other knick-knacks wherever they went). It was for the same reason that fairs were periodic.

Naturally there were also specialists who catered for the elite, and such people belonged in an altogether different category: highly skilled and extravagantly rewarded (when not extravagantly ill-treated), they supplied exquisite pieces of craftsmanship, exotic luxury goods, and high-powered intellectual, artistic, medical and financial services to the courts of aristocrats and kings. Such specialists tended to belong to the top. There were not however very many of them. The elite for which they catered was very rich indeed and thus capable of commanding goods and services of a quality which makes the products of industrial society look distinctly shabby; but by the same token this elite was very small, and the number of skilled people in its service was accordingly limited too.

In so far as pre-industrial societies had a middle class, in the non-technical sense of people who were neither utterly poor nor enormously rich, neither utterly despised nor immensely respected, it tended to consist in the first instance of middling owners or holders of land (yeomen, squires, kulaks or whatever), rather than traders, artisans, craftsmen and professional men. It is true that those who left the land in order to service the ruling elite required others to service themselves, and that those who serviced the purveyors to the court acquired purchasing power in their turn, a process which could, and sometimes did, snowball. When this happened, modern historians speak of 'the rise of the bourgeoisie'. The bourgeoisie has risen from time to time in a number of places, usually with major effects on the social, political and intellectual order: its position in any one society is invariably a fascinating question. In western Europe it rose to the point of creating modern

civilization, but neither here nor elsewhere should its existence be taken for granted: a great deal of pre-industrial history was enacted without it.

Market

The parasitical relationship between town and country on the one hand and the embryonic nature of the bourgeoisie on the other were functions of a weakly developed market. To understand this point, let us go back for a moment to our island of chapter 1.

When we were shipwrecked in our thought experiment, we took up agriculture in order to eat, not in order to set up a business; we grew food for our own use (and in due course also for the state), just as we made clothes, utensils and other necessities for ourselves (and perhaps the state); and we supplied our own labour, each member of the household contributing his share: we did not hire it. In short, ours was a *subsistence economy*, and this is how all economies must have begun. But in the modern West we have a fully-fledged *market economy*: all foodstuffs, goods and labour are destined to be sold so that others can be bought, or differently put, all pass through that network of exchanges which we call the market. (The distinction between subsistence and market economies is reflected in that between 'peasants' and 'farmers'. Peasants produce for their own needs, whereas farmers produce for the market. Peasants may sell some of their produce, while conversely farmers may consume some of theirs: peasants do not necessarily practise pure subsistence economy, but subsistence is their first concern; conversely, farmers may not practise pure market economy, but profit is their primary aim, the key difference between the two being that the former run households whereas the latter run business enterprises. The reader should however be warned that many scholars use the two terms synonymously.)

Market economy is simply another example of divided labour: if I specialize in growing cotton and you in making pots, we both have to buy our food from others, who will probably specialize in the production of one type of food to the exclusion of others and thus become dependent on the market in their turn. This arrangement increases productivity because the person who limits himself to one activity accumulates specialist knowledge and finds himself able to

concentrate on one set of tools and to standardize the work process. But this type of division of labour developed far more slowly than did state structures because it required efficient means of transportation in order to be viable: the market for cotton or pots in a single village is not large enough to support such specialization on its own. The fully developed market economy that we have today requires both mass production and a mass market, that is to say it is unthinkable without industry.

Most agrarian civilizations had economies intermediate between the primitive subsistence economy characteristic of our island and the fully developed market economy which prevails today: the degree to which market relations prevailed in a particular society is one of the key questions the historian must ask himself. Commonly, however, the market was weakly developed in three major respects.

Agricultural produce

First, there was not necessarily much of a market in agricultural produce; and in so far as there was, it did not necessarily involve the peasants themselves, let alone to their advantage.

Most societies have passed through a stage in which the peasants engaged in subsistence agriculture and paid rent and/or taxes in kind to their landlords and/or state, occasionally bartering some of their produce for commodities which they could not produce themselves (notably salt and iron) at periodic fairs, or in exchanges with itinerant traders. The reader is probably familiar with this stage from early medieval Europe: every village or manor was more or less *autarkic* (self-sufficient); money was rare and trade extremely limited.

But even where money had appeared, cities grown up and trade developed, the countryside might still be dominated by autarkic peasants whose families constituted units of production and consumption alike and who geared their economies to the needs of their working hands rather than to profit.

For one thing, the first trade to develop (apart from that in salt and iron) was rarely an internal one, but rather a long-distance trade generated by the elite, the commodities involved being easily portable or self-propelling luxury goods which commanded sufficiently high prices to make the enterprise worth while: spices, fine fabrics, precious metals, jewels, slaves, horses and the like. ('Merchants who trade across the seas value pearls and jade or else rhinoceros horn or tortoise shell. Merchants who trade overland either value salt and iron or else tea', as an eleventh-century Chinese writer put it.) The

demand for luxury goods might greatly affect the suppliers, as it did in Malaya and Indonesia, but it rarely had much repercussion on the society of the importers because the customers were so few: the majority of people continued to cultivate for subsistence, consuming their own produce instead of marketing it.

For another thing, such trade in agricultural products as developed might likewise bypass the peasants themselves. Regional diversity was apt to generate exchanges; bureaucracies and standing armies might have to be provisioned, and urbanization inevitably created a demand for agricultural produce. In fact, few societies remained so primitive as to develop no trade at all in foodstuffs (such as grain, oil, wine or tea) and fibres (such as wool, cotton or silk), as well as other articles for everyday use (such as clothing, pottery and utensils of various kinds). But a great deal of commodity movement took place by order of, or under the control of, the state, that is it did not amount to a genuine trade at all (as opposed to 'administered trade' or 'redistribution'). Even when it did, both landlords and tax-collectors might collect their dues in kind and convert them into cash in the urban market, thereby stimulating trade, but leaving the subsistence economy of their peasants intact. Landlords might also insist on marketing their peasants' produce on the latter's behalf so as to keep them dependent. Indeed, commercial agriculture might do best if the peasants were eliminated altogether: thus the Romans who ran large wheat, vine and olive plantations used slave labour, as did the planters in the New World, while the landlords of sixteenth-century Poland reduced their serfs to near-slavery for the sake of large-scale export farming of rye.

The peasants were hampered by the fact that they could not profitably carry their goods for sale or exchange for more than 4–5 miles or so because the costs of transport were too high (unless they could send them by sea, or, in some unusual cases, via frozen rivers or snow-packed roads). Hence such trade as they engaged in tended to be extremely local or, as some would term it, cellular; and this enabled it to remain a barter trade too. Even in nineteenth-century France there were autarkic villages in which peasants bought only iron and salt and paid for everything else in kind, hoarding their money for the payment of taxes in so far as they handled it at all.

From time to time peasants were forced into market relations when their governments required them to pay taxes in cash rather than kind. This could indeed stimulate commercialization, at least for those who were well off: thus the shift to rents and taxes in cash

is said to have been behind the appearance, in fifteenth-century Japan, of village markets which eventually grew into market towns. But it could also lead to ruin for the many who lived on the breadline. Given that the poor had no reserves, they all had to sell their harvest as soon as it was in, with the result that the market was glutted; selling their harvest at abnormally low prices, they would fall into debt to money-lenders, grain-merchants or landlords, who would reduce them to tenants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers or vagrants. Most peasants had too little to spare to profit from market relations. In Japan, where their problems were aggravated by shortage of money, payment in rice was eventually restored; and when taxes in cash were reintroduced in 1873, they once more proved disruptive of the rural order.

This is not to say that peasants never marketed agricultural products on a significant scale in the pre-industrial world. On the contrary, in China, for example, the so-called 'medieval economic revolution' (c.900–1200) resulted in a peasantry heavily involved in commercial activities, a development further intensified from the sixteenth century onwards; and here it was typically the *poorest* peasants who profited from market relations (for example by subsisting on millet in order to sell their rice, by engaging in cottage industry, or even by selling their labour). But poverty nowhere makes for a good bargaining position: The peasants always entered the market at a disadvantage, in so far as they had dealings with it at all.

Land

Secondly, there might not be much of a market in land. Many peasants were tenants or serfs and thus unable to alienate their land, or at any rate to do so without their landlord's consent. But even when they disposed of their own land, they did not normally regard it as a commodity to be bought, sold, given away or otherwise alienated like any other; nor for that matter did their landlords. To both, land meant subsistence for themselves and their kin. Both, in fact, typically regarded land as a family asset under the temporary management, as opposed to outright ownership, of whoever happened to be the family head. Individual members of the household might be denied rights of ownership altogether, all property being held in trust and administered by the head of the household on behalf of all (as in the Roman system of *patria potestas*); but at the same time the patriarch might himself be forbidden to alienate land and other family property without the consent of his kin and/or

neighbours or the headman of the village. At the very least, kinsmen and/or neighbours had to be given first option. In Vedic India even kings could not give away land without the agreement of all neighbours affected; and kinsmen still had the right to intervene in the sale of land between members of their family and third parties in many parts of sixteenth-century Europe. In short, land was typically seen as vested in a larger group, not simply in the individual who happened to possess or cultivate it. This did not prevent it from being alienable, but it did stand in the way of a purely commercial approach to it.

As far as the elite was concerned, land was also too closely associated with noble status and political power to be treated as a mere commodity. In societies characterized by autarkic peasantries, the wielders of public power were necessarily rewarded in grants of land and its produce, there being no other form of wealth. Land ownership thus came to be reserved for the servants of the state, with the result that unconditional ownership of land tended to disappear altogether: property rights were parcelled out in a variety of claims, by different persons and institutions, to land burdened with a variety of different obligations (as in feudal Europe), and/or the ultimate ownership of all land was declared to vest in the ruler (as at various times throughout the world from China to Peru). In principle, land thus ceased to be an object of trade. It was acquired through grant from the state or from nobles (who might themselves have it from the state), and for the rest it was inherited (or usurped), invariably in return for services of one kind or another to the grantor or original owner.

In practice, few rulers had the power to enforce state ownership of all land against the wishes of the political and religious elite; and wherever trade, cities and a monetarized economy developed, land sooner or later came to be bought and sold. (Besides, many assertions of royal ownership were meant metaphorically.) It is estimated that over 80 per cent of the land was commercially alienable in nineteenth-century China: here, as so often, late traditional China represents the highest degree of development possible under pre-industrial conditions. Comparable figures for other societies are difficult to come by; but even where land could in principle be bought and sold, it was often withheld from the market, the peasants continuing to regard it as a source of subsistence and the elite continuing to see it as an emblem of lordship. Landownership was suggestive of authority and prestige long after it had ceased to be directly linked

with political power: in some late medieval European countries it was actually decreed that only nobles could acquire landed estates. Land enabled a gentleman to pursue a lifestyle appropriate to his rank: he would collect rents from his tenants and engage in politics or learned pursuits. And since his honour was vested in the land, he was not likely to treat it as a simple economic asset to be sold off whenever he might need cash to whoever might be able to raise it.

Indeed, his very management of it might be very un-businesslike. Aristocrats being typically warriors by origin, they tended to dislike financial affairs, regarding the penny-pinching attitude of merchants as disgraceful, preferring a lifestyle of ostentatious consumption, more often than not delegating estate management to their stewards, agents or wives and limiting their own contribution to borrowing. (Indebtedness was a universal aristocratic disease.) Thus wives managed the financial affairs of the lords of medieval Japan; and according to a fifteenth-century precursor of *Woman's Own*, wives in Europe ought likewise to be 'wise and sound administrators' on behalf of their husbands, for ever away on battlefields. 'There is absolutely no shame in living within your income, however small it may be', Christine de Pisan declares, adding that 'there is nothing dishonourable [for a woman] about making herself familiar with the accounts', voicing sentiments to which she clearly expected a good deal of resistance: the commercial attitude came no easier to either aristocrats or their wives than it did to their peasants.

Still, the aristocratic lifestyle was expensive, commercial profits were frequently desirable, and landlords often did get involved with trade, if only at arm's length. Even then, however, they were apt to retain a thoroughly aristocratic attitude to the use of the wealth thus made. In tenth-century Baghdad a civilian elite of judges, secretaries and other bureaucrats set the tone; all lived off landed income, consortied with traders (though only immensely wealthy ones), bought and sold land as a matter of course, marketed much of its produce (at the hands of agents) and displayed a considerable interest in profits. But the profits were spent on extravagant self-advertisement in the form of luxurious housing and clothing, reckless hospitality, ostentatious patronage of scholars, and so on; it was not husbanded or ploughed back into business. Indeed, one member of this elite explicitly denounced 'the miserliness which some call "caution" and others "management"'. Seventeenth-century English gentlemen had the same contempt for 'unworthy penurious saving'; and a seventeenth-century Venetian nobleman who went so far as to

pride himself on his thrift only did so because it enabled him to buy a landed estate 'proper to the station and reputation of my future heirs'. Gentlemen all over the world agreed that only traders were interested in money for its own sake.

Labour

Thirdly, there might not be much of a market in labour. Scarcity meant that it was impossible to pay for all the labour required; in so far as work was not to be left undone, people thus had to be coerced into doing it. The carrot being small, the stick had to be large, or in other words, labour was more commonly forced than hired.

Forced labour took a number of forms. One was slavery. Slaves were typically foreigners, either prisoners-of-war or else the victims of slaving expeditions: either way, the fact that they were rootless aliens made it easy to deprive them of all rights. They were mostly used in heavy, dangerous, dreary or demeaning work now taken over or facilitated by machines. Thus they were extremely common in the home, where they did domestic tasks; they were also used in mining, rowing, building and agriculture, particularly on large plantations devoted to a single crop, such as the wheat and olive plantations of Roman Sicily or the sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations of the Americas. (Plantation slavery has not however been common in history.) When, as sometimes happened, people enslaved members of societies more developed than their own, slaves would also provide skilled services as teachers, scribes, managers and the like: Greek and Near Eastern slaves educated the Romans in the last centuries BC; after the Muslim conquest of the Near East in the seventh century AD they educated the Arabs too. From time to time slaves have also been used in public positions normally reserved for free men, most strikingly in the Islamic world where they came to serve as soldiers, governors and generals; but this was a phenomenon of a different nature from the one with which we are concerned.

Slave-using societies might also enslave some of their own members. Thus impoverished people might sell their children, their wives or themselves into slavery; debt-bondage (handing over oneself in lieu of collateral) existed in many societies; enslavement by way of punishment for crimes existed in some. Most slave-owning societies allowed for the manumission of slaves, but the institution of slavery as such was only abolished in the nineteenth century.

Another prominent form of forced labour was serfdom. Many societies placed the entire food-producing population, or a large

proportion of it, in a state of hereditary unfreedom. Peasants were commonly tied to the land, that is forced to remain cultivators wherever they happened to be registered by the state (for purposes of taxation or military service) or, if they were subjected to landlords, on the estate on which they had been born. In some places they were only forbidden to move until they had paid their debts (a variant on the theme of debt-bondage). In others, severe restrictions were placed even on temporary departures (sometimes in conjunction with the use of passports). Peasants might also be forbidden to alienate land without permission or to marry outside their lord's estate; they might be deprived of all legal recourse beyond their landlord's jurisdiction, forced to render endless labour service, sold with the land and practically, or indeed wholly, reduced to slavery: it is not easy to say where serfs give way to slaves, countless degrees of freedom and unfreedom being attested in history. Rural unfreedom was a common response to labour shortage, as in the late Roman empire, eastern Europe and Muscovite Russia from the sixteenth century onwards, and South-East Asia throughout its history. On the other hand, excessive supply of agricultural labour might also depress the status of the peasants in that it enabled landlords to dictate their own terms. (Labour shortage did not enable peasants to dictate theirs unless the internal market in agricultural products and other commodities had developed sufficiently to make forced labour unprofitable.) Like slavery, serfdom was long-lived: in China it had largely disappeared by the seventeenth century; in western Europe it was abolished in the eighteenth century; in eastern Europe and elsewhere it survived into the nineteenth.

Even when the peasantry was free, however, it was often forced to render labour service (*corvée*) to the state. In Europe, *corvée* was associated with tenancy and rendered to landlords: tenants had to work for a specified amount of time on their lord's demesne (i.e. that part of his estate which had not been leased to them). Elsewhere, however, it was the state (or both landlords *and* the state) which extracted labour from the peasants for the building of roads, defensive walls and irrigation systems, the transport of tax grain and comparable tasks. *Corvée* was often part of the regular taxes, or indeed their only or most important form, especially where no currency existed: taxes could be collected in either labour or kind, but collecting them in kind might not be worth the cost of transport, whereas peasants conscripted for labour transported themselves. *Corvée* was however also used in societies with highly monetarized

economies, such as late traditional China. In addition to providing labour as part of their taxes, peasants might be conscripted for major building works on an ad hoc basis. Many of the most astounding monuments of the past, such as the pyramids or Angkor Wat, were built by peasants requisitioned by the state. Today, projects such as the construction, repair or rebuilding of the Great Wall of China would cause flurries in the labour market, with intense competition for the contracts and much boasting, on the part of the government, of the huge number of jobs it had created; instead they caused intense suffering and several revolts, the first of these enterprises giving rise to folk ballads about the cruel emperor which are sung to this day, over 2000 years later. *Corvée* disappeared from Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from the rest of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth. (The British and the French found themselves incapable of doing without it in colonies such as Burma and Vietnam.) One form of it survives, however: in most countries military service is still, or once more, based on conscription.

So much for forced labour. It was not however the only reason why the labour market was weakly developed.

All agrarian civilizations made heavy use of ascribed status, that is to say status attributed to a person on the basis of features over which he has no control, such as sex, colour or ancestry, as opposed to acquired characteristics such as education and skill. Women were usually ascribed a position inferior to men by virtue of their sex. More strikingly, everyone might be allocated his slot in society on the basis of ancestry: in such societies everyone belonged to the social stratum of his father, sometimes very narrowly defined (actual occupation was hereditary) and sometimes rather more broadly (one could move up and down within a certain range). The Indian caste system is an extreme example of a social order based on ascription. But heredity might also be used to govern membership of certain crucial groups while others remained open: thus entry into the ranks of the aristocracy was often closed to everyone except arrivals by birth in order to prevent dispersal of its privileges, while conversely exit from the ranks of serfs was typically closed to prevent dispersal of the labour force. In fact, ancestry usually played a major role even when all social groups were theoretically open.

What this means is that descent rather than market forces determined who should do what: work had been allocated in advance to the social group into which one was born. The advantage of this lay

in the automatic manner in which people were recruited and trained for their jobs. There was no need for elaborate educational systems (people were taught by their parents), or for job centres and other forms of impersonal labour exchange; nor indeed was there any need to advertise for a new occupant of the throne when the ruler died. It solved the problem of job allocation with minimal organization, or in other words it was cheap. (By contrast, consider the costs of a presidential election, or even the fuss and bother of filling a university post: it would be a lot easier simply to appoint the son.) It also worked, after a fashion, because most work was unskilled and because such skills as were required changed very slowly: if anyone can do a job as well as anybody else, elaborate procedures for job allocation are superfluous; and if skills do not change from one generation to the next, parents can train their children as well as anyone else. It did produce inept rulers, though also some very impressive ones; and when even artists came to be recruited by heredity in fifteenth-century Korea, it produced inept painters too.

Despite the prevalence of forced labour and heredity, there was room for something of a labour market in most societies. But even when there was one, it tended to work very differently from today.

Once more, scarcity played a crucial role. If you cannot pay for labour in either cash or land, you can make reciprocal arrangements with relatives, neighbours, allies and friends: they help you with certain things and you help them with others. Such arrangements were common where the need for extra hands was seasonal (peasants unable to afford hired labour commonly made use of them). On the other hand, if you needed labour on a permanent basis, you could offer board, lodging and general care to whoever was willing to become a member of your household: instead of paying wages to a hireling, you could offer to take him in.

This is what a great many people did. Throughout pre-industrial history, from the very beginning until the very end, the labour market was heavily dominated by what amounted to contracts of adoption. Obviously, your hireling would have to submit to your authority on a par with other members of the household: being more than a simple lodger, he would have to behave as if he were your son. Just as you would take in the whole man, not just his labour, so he would switch social allegiance, becoming your follower rather than a neutral labourer. This solution was also dictated by the world outside your household. Given that (for reasons to which I shall

come back in the next chapter), people were either enemies or friends in the political sense, there was little hope of hiring neutral labour anyway: the hireling could not be expected to leave behind his social background, political allegiance and religious persuasion for eight hours a day on a par with modern workers; he was either one of yours or he was not. Hence the concept of labour as a commodity distinct from the person offering it (wage labour) was weakly developed: you could not buy the labour without the man, just as the labourer could not sell it without thereby selling himself.

The hireling might be adopted as a son or daughter in the literal sense of the word on the understanding that he or she would supply the labour which children would have supplied if the adopter had not lost or failed to have them: adoption contracts of this kind are attested as early as the second millennium in Babylonia. Alternatively, he might be admitted into the household, preferably at a tender age, as an apprentice or indentured servant whose sheer powerlessness vis-à-vis the master guaranteed that he would be a pliable instrument. Where slaves existed, people preferred them to freeborn persons because slaves were not persons at all until they were manumitted, in which case they became persons bound to their master by an immense sense of gratitude (provided, of course, that the manumission was not simply a way of turning an aged dependant into the streets). They too might be adopted in the literal sense of the word or simply incorporated into the household. Both options are attested for the ancient Near East and Greece; and in the Muslim Middle East slaves and freedmen were widely used by craftsmen, manufacturers and traders in lieu of free apprentices.

Hirelings were also used in largescale enterprises (including the army), and here too they were typically admitted on condition of total submission, by indenturing themselves on terms which practically robbed them of their freedom. Usually they were people who had lost their social backing, be it because their parents were too poor to maintain them, their kinsfolk too poor, too few or too dispersed to help them, or because they had disgraced themselves: a Chinese iron-smelter of the twelfth or thirteenth century recruited five hundred furnace-workers from among absconded criminals. Whatever the reason, hirelings were people who were forced to sell themselves to others, like prostitutes. They were subject to their master's authority, which was unremarkable as long as they were children, but which rendered them servile as soon as they were adults. Where slaves existed, they were a bad alternative; and where

they were absent, they performed their work. No wonder that hirelings were generally despised. 'A free man does not live under the constraint of another', as Aristotle put it. A tenth-century Muslim who jokingly referred to Muhammad as the hireling of Khadija (the woman who first employed and then married him) was being very *risqué* indeed.

The fact that neutral labour barely existed in the pre-industrial world had the further effect that you were unlikely to get very far without patronage. You had to know somebody who knew your employer and who could recommend you, guarantee your reliability and assure him that you were of the right social, political and religious background: who you were was far more important than what you could do, especially when labour was unskilled. In the modern world people likewise prefer to hire cleaning-ladies on the basis of recommendations from friends rather than unknown employers because the crucial question is not whether she can clean (anyone can), but whether she can be entrusted with your home. In the pre-industrial world, trust was always of overriding importance, with the result that such job market as existed was dominated by personal networks: I would recommend you and you would recommend my son; you would recommend my nephew and I would recommend your friend.

Many placements were made within small communities in which everyone knew everybody anyway; apprenticeships were generally arranged by parents, and even when they were not, the chances were that the employer would know all there was to know about the hireling before he took him in. But for positions in the bureaucracy and other forms of government service an extended network of relatives, friends and allies was highly desirable, if not indispensable. There is a Chinese story, set in the time of the Ming (1368–1644), in which a totally illiterate person passes the civil service examinations and gets promoted from one position to another because he unwittingly behaves in a fashion suggesting that he is the relative or protégé of a highly influential person. This is comic fiction (in reality the examination system was hard to bend), and patronage could not usually make up for utter ineptitude: in a tenth-century Muslim story a high-ranking bureaucrat regrettably finds the only son of a deceased friend to be so stupid that he cannot make him a judge ('the lad is such a fool that he would utterly disgrace my recommendation', as Macauley said of a cousin in 1833). But though a patron would disgrace himself by supporting a complete ignoramus

for a skilled job, there was nothing shameful about patronage as such: it benefitted employer and employee alike. Wherever trust mattered as much as or more than skills, nepotism was a virtue, not a sign of corruption.

Lack of economic integration

The limited development of the market in respect of agricultural produce, land and labour meant that the pre-industrial world was characterized by a low degree of economic integration. Where subsistence economy prevailed, every household was more or less self-sufficient and every village largely or wholly independent of the next. In so far as the peasants traded at all, they would do so within an area infinitely smaller than the state, whereas the elite might be part of an economic network far wider than any political unit, obtaining its luxury goods from far-away and exotic lands: the state embraced no market of its own. Where the growth of cities, higher agricultural output and improvements in the means of transportation stimulated internal commerce, there might be close economic ties between a city and its hinterland, or between one province and another, or between the inhabitants of other kinds of marketing areas; but even so, it is only by way of exception that one can speak of national economies in pre-industrial times. Few commodities reached state-wide circulation; and in so far as they did, they were mostly beyond the purchasing power of the peasants who constituted the vast majority of the population. 'Brocade woven in Szechwan is prized the Empire over', a Chinese scholar of the Mongol period (1280–1368) observed; but though Chinese peasants were by then heavily involved with the market, selling foodstuffs, cash crops, handicraft and even labour, brocade was hardly a common item on their shopping lists. Regional specialities such as sugar and olive oil also travelled far within the tenth and eleventh-century Muslim caliphate, as did numerous equivalents of Szechwan brocade and even fresh fruit (transported in leaden containers packed with ice); but the costs were such that only members of the ruling elite and wealthy townsmen could afford them. Economic integration was usually limited in either geographic al or social terms, and it was often limited in both respects.

By modern standards, pre-industrial economics were underdeveloped. Such surplus as the agricultural sector produced passed into

the hands of a ruling elite given to spending every penny it had on consumption, not on investments in trade or manufacture; conversely, those who made money out of trade or manufacture were apt to convert it into membership of the ruling elite. Loans taken out by the elite were overwhelmingly meant to solve consumption crises, not to provide capital for productive enterprises; and the same was true of loans taken out by peasants because the latter were so impoverished: they borrowed simply in order to eat. Accordingly, lending money was extremely risky, a fact reflected in exorbitant interest rates. Interest rates being impossibly high, the capital for productive enterprises had to come from sources other than money-lenders, be it from the funds of families or guilds or from partnerships in which resources were pooled. Moreover, since the agricultural surplus ended up with the ruling elite, sensible businessmen concentrated their efforts on the production and/or provision of extremely expensive items for the very rich, not on everyday goods for sale to the masses: it was only here and there that catering for the masses, or some of them, paid off. The archetypal businessman traded in pearls. He traded in pearls because extravagant consumption was characteristic of the elite, whereas the masses rarely had much purchasing power. His activities thus reflected and reinforced the underdeveloped and non-integrated character of the economy.

This completes the socio-economic thumb-nail sketch. It goes without saying that there never was any such thing as a 'typical' pre-industrial society. Some were more primitive and many were more sophisticated than indicated here; all had identities of their own not considered, and none was as static as the sketch might seem to indicate. But whether we are aware of doing so or not, we all operate with identikits of one kind or another, and what this sketch is meant to do is simply to replace identikits based on modern conditions with one based on the past. The rest of the book should be read with the same qualification in mind.

3

The State

Where states emerged

In the thought experiment of the first chapter we generated a state on the assumption that our island could support agriculture and that we ourselves were familiar with state structures. Think away either assumption and the result would have been very different: we might have formed warring bands to cope with the hostile natives, or a confederacy. In real life many parts of the pre-industrial world remained stateless until modern times because one or the other feature presupposed by us was absent.

As regards the first presupposition, we have seen that an agricultural surplus was indispensable for the maintenance of states: states were thus incapable of surviving where agriculture was non-existent or marginal. Deserts, steppes, tundras and polar regions could be conquered by external powers, but they could not support complex societies on their own; and external powers generally found them too poor and unimportant to be worth the effort.

Admittedly, when such economically marginal regions were located in the neighbourhood of great powers (as in Central Asia and the Middle East), their inhabitants could supplement their meagre income with wealth coming from outside in the form of subsidies paid by these powers for good behaviour or military services, revenues from participation in international trade, plunder from raids, and the like; and such influx of wealth might suffice for the emergence of embryonic state structures. In the Syrian desert of the sixth century AD, for example, subsidies paid by the Byzantines and the Sasanids for military services resulted in the creation of two tribal states known as those of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids. But whatever the nature of the revenues which stimulated state-building, they had to be invested in agriculture if the states thus formed were to acquire viability, let alone complexity. The Ghassanid and Lakhmid statelets collapsed the moment the imperial subsidies were cut off; and a great many tribal rulers found it simpler to pour their

newfound wealth into attempts at conquest of the very lands which had produced that wealth than to invest it in attempts to make the steppe or desert bloom (thus numerous Central Asian conquerors, most famously the Mongols). If the military enterprise was successful, the state would be transferred to the conquered lands; if it failed, it would disintegrate for lack of funds. Either way, statelessness remained the norm in regions with little or no agriculture.

As regards the second presupposition, the fact that institutions take time to spread and even longer to develop on their own meant that millennia might pass between the advent of agriculture in a certain area and the emergence of complex political organization there. Many parts of the pre-industrial world which were perfectly capable of sustaining state structures thus remained stateless too. In Eurasia the discovery of agriculture began about 10,000 BC in the Near East, but complex political organization only emerged about 3000 BC, and it was only in the first centuries AD that state structures finally struck roots in northern Europe. Outside Eurasia sparse populations made for ever slower rates of diffusion. (Three quarters of the world's population live in Eurasia and apparently did even in pre-historic times.) In the Americas agriculture appeared about 6000 BC followed by complex organization about 1000 BC, but the latter stayed put in its Guatemalan-Mexican homeland until the rise, on the western coast of South America, of the anonymous peoples whose legatees were the Incas of Peru. Agriculture reached tropical Africa during the second millennium BC and states emerged during the first millennium AD, but political developments here were slower than in tropical Asia, which was in direct contact with India and China from early on. And Oceania, though likewise equipped with agriculture, remained entirely untouched by political developments in the Old and the New Worlds alike, with the result that here no state structures emerged at all until the arrival of the Europeans (though the Polynesians came close to developing them on their own).

In short, the pre-industrial world was full of primitive peoples, both hunter-gatherers, cultivators and pastoralists, of whom a tiny fraction survived long enough into modern times to be immortalized by anthropologists. In pre-modern times most of them were as blissfully ignorant of the existence of civilization as were civilized people of theirs, but inevitably there were areas where the two came together. When this happened, the primitive peoples were branded as *barbarians*, a term now used by historians to designate peoples who were perceived to be lacking in all those features which add up

to civilization and who were aware of this fact, having had sufficient dealings with their neighbours to lose their primitive innocence in both cognitive and other respects.

Barbarians were typically dangerous people because they knew enough about civilization to both covet and despise it, the former because it was rich and the latter because its members were effete 'slaves' who could not practise self-help. Many barbarians were simply raiders but, as mentioned above, the flow of wealth and ideas from a great power to a marginal region was liable to transform its inhabitants into conquerors. Time after time states proved to be so weak that even small numbers of ill-equipped barbarians could overrun them. In the ancient Near East the so-called Gutians overran the Akkadians; in pre-Columbian Mexico the so-called Chichimecs overran the Toltecs; in the Mediterranean of late antiquity the barbarians of western Europe destroyed the western Roman empire, while the Arabs conquered its eastern provinces and destroyed Sasanid Iran; and Huns, Mongols and Turks of various kinds overran parts of China, India, the Middle East, Byzantium and eastern Europe from time to time, destroying a host of states in the process. It was not until firearms were invented that civilization acquired a decisive advantage over its barbarian rivals, who could not produce such weapons themselves (though they soon learnt to import them) and whose mobility could not be combined with, or counteract, the use of heavy artillery. In the early fifteenth century the Ming dynasty of China defeated the Mongol Oirats by means of field artillery, proceeded to rebuild the Great Wall with apertures for cannon and, in the early seventeenth century, defeated the founder of the Manchu kingdom too. But their frontier generals defected: the last great barbarian conquest, that by the Manchus of China in 1644, was not really a conquest at all.

However successful the barbarians may have been in the days before firearms, however, the state as such was always the winner in the long run, for the barbarians conquerors always became civilized themselves (or split in so far as some resisted the process). Their homeland might indeed be incapable of supporting states, in which case those who stayed behind continued the tug of war, as in Central Asia until the Manchus, in Arabia until the discovery of oil, and in parts of North Africa until the arrival of modern armies. But more commonly, the homeland turned out to be endowed with a potential for sustained development so that the changes wrought by exposure to civilization proved cumulative. As the barbarian peoples along the

frontiers of great powers began their journey towards civilization, they would trigger comparable developments towards state formation and conquest among their own barbarian neighbours: the Roman empire unwittingly contributed to the Frankish invasion of Roman Gaul, and the Franks in their turn unwittingly contributed to the eruption of the Vikings. In short, destructive though it often was, the encounter between barbarians and civilized peoples was one of the major mechanisms whereby civilization spread. Today, barbarians have ceased to exist altogether, except as a loose term of abuse (in which sense, too, it is amply attested in the past). Every spot on earth today is subject to a state, utterly desolate ones included.

Fragility of state structures

Once invented, the state had thus come to stay. But it is clear from the sometimes astonishing success of barbarian attackers that states were often fragile structures, and this was a point which members of complex societies demonstrated too from time to time: thus a mere handful of Europeans sufficed to cause the instantaneous collapse of the great pre-Columbian civilizations, which is extraordinary even though the invaders came from cultural outer space; and a mere commercial organization, the East India Company, set up thousands of miles away from its prey, proved capable of establishing control over the entire Indian subcontinent for all that the latter was endowed with a long tradition of political organization of its own. The ability of pre-industrial states to generate action, to co-ordinate and to control was limited. This weakness was a factor of major importance in the relationship between them and their own subjects: it determined the nature of this relationship; and once formed, the relationship itself almost always reinforced it.

The weakness had its roots partly in scarcity and partly in the absence of modern means of transportation and communication. Scarcity meant that rulers rarely disposed of sufficient resources, or even very stable ones. They were chronically short of personnel and other infrastructure, and frequently unable to pay such personnel as they had, with the result that the latter were left to remunerate themselves as best they could at the expense of state and subjects alike. Inadequate resources meant acceptance of behaviour which we now condemn as corrupt, and corruption further reduced the size and regularity of the ruler's income: collecting taxes cost no less than

25 per cent of the total revenues in France under Louis XIV (1643-1715); and in eighteenth-century Egypt it cost some 25 per cent of the land revenues over and *above* the salaries which the tax-collectors were paid.

Being short of personnel, rulers were unable to conduct regular population counts, land-surveys and other forms of inspection required for the regular reassessment of taxes, or to control figures on such matters forwarded by village headmen and other local men; and this too was likely to affect their revenues adversely. They might fix the level of taxation for good, or simply name a certain sum which every province had to meet every year whatever condition might prevail, or farm out the taxes (i.e. sell the rights of the state to the highest bidder, who would then squeeze the population to make a profit). The first two methods had the advantage of ensuring a stable income while the third might even increase it, but all three had a price. If the population fell, the unvaried nature of the taxes might ruin it; and if it grew, the state would fail to benefit from the growth and thus find its resources diminished in relation to the tasks required for the maintenance of the *status quo*, let alone for improvement (as happened in Manchu China). Where taxes were farmed, the state likewise risked the ruin of its agricultural population and moreover renounced direct control (tax-farming was commonly practised before the state had developed its own machinery for the collection of revenues, as in the Roman republic, or after it had begun to collapse, as in the Abbasid caliphate, though by no means under such circumstances alone). The problems of taxation generated a wide variety of solutions, but arbitrariness, oppression and corruption proved to be constant companions of all.

Though we still complain of the tax-burden, the Inland Revenue Service does not normally have to call upon the army to make us pay, nor do we normally engage in prolonged haggling with the tax-collectors, weeping, crying, tearing our clothes or grovelling in the dust to convince them that we have not got a penny left, or calling upon every influential friend we have to ensure that no tax-collector would dare to approach us. Such procedures were however commonplace in most pre-industrial societies. For the peasants, tax-collectors were like swarms of locusts descending to strip them of everything they possessed; for the tax-collectors, peasants were like recalcitrant cattle which had to be milked however much they might protest. The sheer fact that yields were so low accustomed the authorities to take everything they could without

destroying agriculture altogether. 'The tax-payers should keep only as much of their cultivated produce as suffices for their subsistence and the cultivation of their lands', a third-century Persian emperor is supposed to have decreed. 'Every care should be taken that there should not remain with the villagers more food supplies than required for one year's consumption, nor more oxen than wanted for [the tillage of] their fields', an eighth-century king of Kashmir is said to have ruled. 'The peasants are the foundation of the state', a seventeenth-century Japanese document declares, 'each man must have the boundaries of his fields clearly marked, and an estimate must be made of the amount needed for his consumption. The rest must be paid as tax'. No wonder that Jesus' disciples were outraged when their master dined with tax-collectors ('publicans') and other sinners.

Primitive means of transportation and communication were an even greater problem than insufficient funds. For one thing, they were a factor in the low degree of economic integration which we have already noted, and they stood in the way of cultural integration too, as we shall see. Very large areas could be conquered, but not amalgamated, or only at the level of the elite. The vast majority of people continued to live in more or less self-sufficient villages with more or less autonomous cultures of their own, a fact which rendered the political unity of pre-industrial states precarious.

For another thing, primitive means of communication and transportation meant that rulers were chronically short of information and unable to react efficiently to such information as they received. They often paid much attention to the problem of communications, building roads, maintaining postal systems based on horses, pigeons or runners, dispatching people whose sole function was to act as 'the king's eyes and ears', and experimenting with smoke signals and other forms of telegraphic communication. The results varied enormously. In the seventeenth century it took thirty days for a courier to travel the 500 miles from Istanbul to Belgrade (an army taking twice as long), and two weeks for a letter from Madrid to reach Milan; but it only took six to seven weeks for a courier to traverse the whole of inner China (i.e. ethnic China without its non-Chinese appendages). In medieval Japan, mounted messengers could cover the roughly 600 miles between Kamakura and Kyoto in five days at a pinch, and the relay runners of Inca Peru could cover the 420 miles between Lima and Cuzco in as little as three. But whatever the result, distance was always a problem. The eighth-century caliph

al-Mansur is supposed to have had a magic mirror in which he could see all his enemies wherever they might be; but even if he had actually had such a mirror, he would not have been able to transport himself and his troops any faster than the postal horses could run. The ruler could not be everywhere, though many tried their best, incessantly touring their domains.

Forms of government

This does something to explain why pre-industrial government was typically characterized by total exclusion of the masses. Mass participation in public decision-making was common in simple societies such as bands, tribes and villages: the smaller they were and the less socio-economic differentiation they contained, the more egalitarian they tended to be in political terms. In such communities, every male adult would voice his opinion on public issues, be it in formal meetings or otherwise, and everyone's opinion would carry weight, though the actual decision might well be left to elders and/or a chief. But though procedures of this kind often survived at the level of village and tribe even after a state had been superimposed upon them, popular participation in high politics was extremely rare.

Small size was a precondition for mass participation (or some degree thereof) in high politics too, as is clear from the Greek and Roman city states, the republics of northern India which flourished about the same time, the Italian communes and other examples; but it was by no means a sufficient condition, and numerous very small states, including many limited to a single city, were as authoritarian in their political organization as any empire. Wherever wealth took the form of land and a storable surplus, both of which could be physically seized, a small number of specialists in violence tended to eliminate other participants from the political arena, especially where the military participation ratio was low, or in other words where few adult males were called upon to participate in warfare. By contrast, the means of production (as opposed to the products themselves), could not be physically seized where commercial wealth predominated, nor could the masses be excluded from a say in politics where the military participation ratio was high. But it was only in small polities such as city states deprived of land that commerce could generate more wealth than agriculture, just as it was only in small polities that the military participation ratio had to be high:

though small size was not a sufficient condition, it was certainly a necessary one. In large states, mass participation in government invariably came to an end. (The popular institutions of the Roman city state characteristically failed to survive the Roman expansion.) The nature of wealth and military organization apart, it is a general rule that the larger a group becomes, the more thoroughly the actions of its members have to be co-ordinated if it is not to disintegrate; and under pre-industrial conditions, large-scale co-ordination was impossible unless power was concentrated in the hands of a few. Even if it had been regarded as desirable, popular representation would have been difficult to organize without making decision-making excessively slow and cumbersome, and it would mostly have been positively dangerous too: given that the masses consisted of numerous small communities weakly tied together in economic terms, culturally diverse and thus unlikely to have identical political aspirations, power could not be distributed with any evenness throughout the population without thereby enabling the loosely associated communities to split up. Large states were held together by coercion: power had to be concentrated so that conflicting interests could be suppressed.

Typically, then, pre-industrial states were monarchies in which power was exercised through a small ruling elite. They were monarchies as opposed to oligarchies, partly because the elite could not function without an ultimate arbiter (and was bound to produce one through its competition for power where none existed), and partly because one man elevated above all others was a potent symbol of the community over which he presided: its members often regarded him as a common link with the divine. Monarchs were almost everywhere regarded as the hallmark of civilization, stateless societies being dismissed as barbarian and republics abhorred as positively unnatural in so far as they were known at all: the republicanism of Mediterranean antiquity is distinctly unusual. 'Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations', as the elders of Israel said to Samuel: kings were what all self-respecting people had. In medieval Europe, Iceland was felt to be unreasonable in that it 'would not serve a king even as all other countries in the world'. And when a sixteenth-century Burmese king heard Venice described as a free state without a monarch, he laughed uproariously at what he took to be a joke.

Theoretically, monarchy was almost always absolute. The ruler was seen as endowed with unlimited power, both in the sense that he did not share it with anyone else (as opposed to delegate it to

whomsoever he willed) and in that he was not accountable to his subjects for the manner in which he chose to exercise it. Moralists harped on his duty to engage in consultation: kings should take counsel from wise men and ascertain the attitudes of others before taking decisions. Many had formal councils too. But they were free to overrule whatever opinion they received. All kings were expected to uphold 'justice', 'the law', 'ancient custom', 'God's will', 'the natural order' or whatever else the generally accepted way of doing things was called; and this was so however much supernatural sanction they might enjoy: a king who violated the divine order thereby disproved his own claim to divine status, descent or approval. In this sense all kings were all constitutional rulers. But since there were no formal institutions for calling them to account, they could not be made to abide by the constitution except by appeals to their conscience or prudence, or by force. The prospect of having his deeds examined on the Day of Judgement might scare a Christian or Muslim ruler, just as the prospect of a low rebirth might scare a Buddhist one. He would at all events be unwise to antagonize his subjects because, as Machiavelli cautioned, hostile neighbours might take advantage of their discontent, or as Muslim writers put it, God would raise up another king in his stead; indeed, disaffected subjects might prod God into action by actually calling in the hostile neighbours (such as rival rulers or militant tribesmen), or by rebelling on their own. But though there were limits to what the ruler could get sway with in practice, he was not normally subject to formal restraints in respect of the manner in which he arrived at or implemented his decisions.

The fact that he could not easily be held to the constitution does not however mean that his power was absolute in any real sense of the word (if indeed there is such a sense). For one thing, his sphere of competence was usually limited. Rulers rarely enjoyed religious authority, that is the right to settle questions concerning faith or morality. The Chinese emperor did have the authority to regulate aspects of morality (such as the lengths to which filial piety was to go, for example); but those labelled 'caesaropapist' by modern historians, notably the Byzantine emperors, did not actually combine the powers of caesars and popes: they were merely in a position to exercise considerable pressure on the ecclesiastical organization in which religious authority resided. And though early Muslim caliphs did apparently enjoy both political power and religious authority, they were rapidly cut down to size by learned laymen who assumed

religious leadership for themselves. The division of labour between political and religious leaders has commonly been both fuzzy and contentious, but a division of one kind or another has nonetheless been the norm. Moreover, rulers were not necessarily empowered to legislate or (given that the very idea of legislation might be absent) to 'find' the law. They might be entitled to regulate matters to do with the state apparatus, taxes, war, crimes and the like, or in other words to promulgate what we would call public law, though their legislative freedom might be circumscribed even here; but for the rest they were commonly expected simply to uphold the ways to which their subjects were committed, be they embodied in customary law or in formal legal systems created by jurists or priests (such as early Roman, Islamic, Hindu or canon law). Since private law was closely entwined with religion and morality, it was more often regulated by bearers of high culture than by wielders of political power.

For another thing, the ruler's power was rarely effective even within such sphere of competence as he did enjoy. Obviously, he could not exercise absolute power in person. If government was so simple that he could manage it on his own with a minimal staff, his kingdom was highly decentralized, meaning that in practice his control was perfunctory; and if he centralized his kingdom, government became so complex that his staff took over most of the decision making. In the late Roman empire, for example, the emperor was so swamped by paperwork that he had no time to read what he signed: every now and again he had to announce that special grants contrary to the law were invalid even if they bore his own signature.

Absolutist rulers had plenty of personal power in the sense of the ability to order whatever they wanted. They might decree that all dogs be killed (as did an eleventh-century caliph in Egypt) or on the contrary that all dogs be protected (as did a seventeenth-century shogun of Japan), and they might indulge in all sorts of other caprices and whims. Their personal power was important in that it gave them *tactical* freedom: they could act as they wished in conducting negotiations and use force whenever they deemed it expedient, be it against individuals or groups; and this put them in a good position to practise divide-and-rule. But though they had much room in which to manoeuvre, they were rarely in a position to exercise much control over either their administrations or their subjects.

The point to note, however, is that even the monarchy as an *impersonal* institution rarely enjoyed power of a kind that could be described as absolute. The fact that news travelled slowly, and

troops even more so, invariably meant that considerable power had to be handed over to people on the spot, be they governors despatched from the centre, provincial magnates allied with it, or others. Only they could know what was going on locally and only they could react fast. By the same token, of course, they had considerable freedom to abuse their position, notably by fleecing the local population for private gain or by building up private power-bases with a view to secession or bids for the throne.

Numerous methods were devised for coping with this problem: governors could be rotated at short intervals and/or forbidden to hold office in their native province; local aristocrats might be forced to send hostages to the capital; extensive networks of spies could be maintained; troops could be dispatched when things got out of hand, and so on. But genuine control over provincial affairs simply could not be achieved. 'The mighty dragon is no match for the local snake which knows the ins and outs of the place', as Chinese folk wisdom had it (the dragon being the emperor). The best the ruler could hope for was to secure the co-operation of the local snake, tie him to the monarchic institution and give him a strong interest in the survival of the state, in short to transform him and his likes into a dependable ruling elite loosely or closely supervised by a central staff.

But though the ruler might successfully acquit himself of this task, the political (or for that matter religious) leaders with which he allied himself were not his abject instruments, having autonomous power in their own right; and there were numerous groups endowed with power of their own below them. In principle the ruler might not share his power with anyone else, as opposed to delegate it to whomsoever he willed, but in practice he coexisted with a wide variety of power-holders whom he was lucky even to win over. Ideology might depict him as an autocrat, but ideology was more often than not designed to compensate for a deficient governmental machinery which left both him and his staff unable to translate their policies into action outside the narrow circles in which they moved or to control the society of which they were in charge. The government might issue decrees, but the implementation of these decrees rested with landed magnates, religious authorities, village councils, urban notables, guilds, tribal leaders, or kin groups of various kinds, or in other words with self-governing institutions and groups which might be in close or in loose alliance with the state or which might defy it altogether. How many dogs were actually killed in eleventh-

century Egypt? How many benefitted from the shogun's protection in seventeenth-century Japan? It stands to reason that there were immense variations in the actual power enjoyed by monarchic institutions (the Japanese shogunate having considerably more than did the Egyptian caliphate). But generally speaking, government was 'self-government at the king's command', as Maitland said with reference to medieval England; and it might be self-government in disregard of the king's command too, not just in medieval Europe, where central government was extremely rudimentary, but also in centralized states such as the early Abbasid caliphate or late imperial China.

The absolutist kings of Europe did enjoy considerable power compared with both their predecessors and many of their non-European counterparts. But they were powerful because they had developed machineries which enabled them to tame their aristocracies, their religious organizations and other self-governing groups, not because of the ideological claims made on their behalf or even because they were exempt from constitutional restraints: the constitutional kings of England were no less powerful. But their power was institutional, not personal, though they still had far too little of the former and far too much of the latter by our standards; and eventually their machineries developed into impersonal states symbolically graced by or wholly devoid of monarchs altogether.

Functions of the state

The deficient nature of the governmental machinery meant that pre-industrial states were unable to take on as many functions as their modern counterparts. Modern states do not just collect taxes, maintain internal security and defend their citizens against outsiders; they also educate their citizens, assign them jobs, hand out money to those unable to earn, regulate economic activities, keep an eye on the environment, both natural and man-made, organize sport and other forms of entertainment, sponsor cultural institutions, maintain a public health service and provide some services for the disabled, the weak and the old. Their activities are countless, and they thoroughly shape the lives of all members of society. By contrast, pre-industrial states engaged in a limited number of activities and lacked the power to shape (or, at times, even to affect) the lives of their subjects. Instead, however, pre-industrial rulers often had religious, moral and symbolic roles which have practically disappeared today.

All rulers endeavoured to defend their territories against outsiders (and usually also to expand them), to maintain internal order, and to promote the 'welfare' of their subjects; by way of payment for these services they collected taxes. Thus far the agenda sounds much the same as it does today, but it was understood in a minimalist rather than a maximalist vein: the state did a little and the subjects did the rest. (Even the *laissez-faire* states of the modern world are maximalist by pre-modern standards.) All rulers had to set up an army for internal and external use as well as an administrative machinery; and some rulers found themselves engaged in organization at grassroot level as a result. (Censuses, registration of land and households, passports, identity-cards and the like are not modern inventions.) All endeavoured to further welfare too, but not after the fashion of their modern successors.

Welfare

As mentioned before, the king was widely regarded as a link between the divine and the human worlds. He might be a god himself, or descended from one, or simply appointed by the deity, but at all events he was expected to use his 'divine effulgence' (as the Persians called it) or his *Heil* (as the Germanic barbarians called it) for the benefit of the community: this was the crucial manner in which he promoted welfare. He was expected to maintain and embody the law in the sense of cosmic, natural and human order, partly by acting as the symbolic head of the community and partly by observing the right ways and setting a good example. If he did so, happiness and prosperity would ensue.

Such ideas are widely attested for primitive societies, but they displayed an amazing tenacity under civilized conditions, being attested for ancient Egypt, China, Japan, South-East Asia (where some kings had no other functions), India, Iran, the Islamic world (in both the concept of the caliphate and that of kingship), as well as the Hellenistic world and Europe. If the king was just, rain would fall; if he was not, famine, flood and other natural calamities would ensue. Natural disasters were thus blamed on the king: they proved that he had misbehaved. Under a good king, 'vices decrease and virtues increase . . . the world becomes prosperous and joyous', as the Zoroastrians explained; but 'when kings are unjust, even sugar and salt lose their flavour', as the Indians put it. If no king existed, both the natural and the human order would dissolve and chaos would prevail: a country without a king enjoyed 'neither rain nor seed, neither wealth nor wife, neither sacrifices nor festivals', accord-

ing to the *Ramayana*; people suffered illness, customs ceased to exist and all was nothingness according to Malay literature. It is for this reason that the sixteenth-century Burmese king laughed at the idea of a kingless Venice; and it is for the same reason that the British abolition of the Burmese monarchy in 1886 was a catastrophic shock to the Burmese which the British had not anticipated.

Ritual kingship (as this role is commonly called) might require no action at all: the Japanese emperors performed it for over a thousand years by simply existing, being kept in such ceremonious inactivity that when one of them made a bid for real power he could scarcely even walk. Most rulers, however, combined their ritual role with co-ordinating and warlike functions which tended to transform or eclipse it, while at the same time the development of specialized religious institutions changed their standing vis-à-vis the divine.

Thus the monarch was often required to protect the religious establishment (church, sangha, brahmins, scholars or whatever) and to promote the divine order, not just in the general sense of righteousness, but also in the specific sense of a religious law and morality elaborated by the establishment in question. Religion and morality being almost invariably public concerns, many states interfered considerably in what we now regard as private matters, persecuting heretics, enforcing rules of filial and marital behaviour, punishing or even executing adulterers, and so forth. The monarch might also be expected to dispense justice in person by adjudicating, hearing petitions and redressing grievances, including grievances against the state itself, a role in which he was invariably seen as a last resort: he coped with disputes that threatened to disrupt the peace where local arbitration, family courts and other judicial institutions had failed, just as he intervened to protect the social order where negligence of prescribed rights and duties threatened to upset it. He was, so to speak, the general repair-man of a society normally expected to run itself. Differently put, he was the ultimate guarantor of righteousness. It was in this vein that the Persian emperor and epitome of justice, Khusraw of the Immortal Soul (531–79), ordered 'that a chain should be set up with bells attached to it, within reach of even a child of seven years, so that any complainants who came to the court would not need to see the chamberlain; they would pull the chain and the bells would ring: the Immortal Soul would hear it and redress their grievances'. In an inscription of 1292 Rama Gamhen, ruler of the Thai kingdom of Sukhotai, likewise boasts that 'he has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there: if any commoner in

the land has a grievance which sickens his belly and gripes his heart, and which he wants to make known to his ruler and lord, it is easy; he goes and strikes the bell which the King has hung there'. Burmese kings, too, made use of grievance bells. Given the number of people with grievances and the distances they had to travel to reach the capital, the practical importance of royal justice must have been limited, but its symbolic significance was clearly considerable. In fact, peasantries all over the world continued to be comforted by the existence of an ultimate guarantor of righteousness long after kings had retired behind impersonal bureaucracies and prosaic courts.

In addition to embodying justice, kings were apt to provide a wide range of welfare services of a more familiar kind in the course of their attempt to display and increase their special qualities. The righteous king would dig canals and irrigation channels, build bridges and rest-houses, found villages and towns, set up schools and other religious buildings, and engage in many other commendable activities, all for the sake of fame in this world and salvation in the next, according to Nizam al-Mulk, an eleventh-century Muslim statesman. In the same vein Indian and Indianized kings would build hospitals and asylums for the poor in conjunction with temples. A great deal of what is now regular state activity was done by the ruler, the elite and whoever else could afford it in display of the merit, glory or piety appropriate to people of high status, not in performance of official duties; or rather, the distinction was likely to be meaningless; the official who engaged in private charity was perceived as discharging public duties too.

In so far as the private and public acts of kings and high officials can be distinguished, institutions of higher education were often maintained by the state, whereas primary schooling was usually left to private initiative or to religious organizations; and the state rarely provided grants and scholarships for such institution of higher learning as it maintained, though there were a few which did. Poor relief, hospitals, the care of orphans and other welfare services in our sense of the word were usually left to private charity and religious institutions too, though most rulers took precautions against famine by maintaining granaries (as did the Pharaoh in response to Joseph's dream), organized relief when it struck, and provided cheap grain at all times to the capital and other major cities by way of averting bread-riots. The Roman state went so far as to provide grain for free to the Roman poor, but this was unusual. The Romans also provided

public entertainment in the form of gladiatorial shows and races, but this was unusual too. Most rulers and other public servants, however, sponsored the arts, both for personal satisfaction and for propaganda purposes, but the state as such was not expected to provide support for artists. Many rulers sponsored economic enterprises for their own gain, but the state was not expected to provide credit for private business (though it might provide loans to impoverished peasants). It would probably be fair to say that all or most functions vested in the state today are attested for pre-industrial states too, but never all of them at the same time, hardly ever in the same spirit, and never (apart from the essential ones) on a regular basis: numerous services without which modern society would collapse were mere frills or wholly lacking.

Economic activities

It should be noted that the economic measures of pre-industrial rulers rarely added up to genuine economic policies. Rulers had political aims which impinged on the economic sphere, not economic aims as such. Thus they might take an interest in agriculture because agriculture was the source of their revenues and also because they had to secure adequate supplies of food for their armies, their civil service and their urban populations. Craftsmanship and trade similarly attracted their attention only, if at all, as a source of revenue and a mechanism for the distribution of vital supplies. In short, their interests were of the so-called 'provisioning' kind.

Such interests might involve them in very few or very many economic activities depending on their understanding of their obligation to promote 'welfare'. In addition to founding new villages and otherwise assisting the expansion of cultivated land, they might experiment with new crops, sponsor the diffusion of agricultural manuals, establish granaries, fix prices, create government monopolies (notably on salt and alcohol, but often on other commodities too), regulate guilds, build ports and roads, create uniform currencies, supervise weights and measures, attract (or even kidnap) skilled artisans, place embargoes on the export of vital commodities such as iron, timber, horses or slaves, impose customs duties, and so on. But however varied their activities might be, the interests of the state were uppermost.

Provisioning policies are generally contrasted with the 'mercantilist' policies of seventeenth-century Europe, which do indeed have a modern ring to them; but the difference does not lie in the mere

amount of economic activities undertaken, still less in the aim: the key objective of mercantilism, too, was to increase the power of the state. The whiff of modernity in mercantilism lies in the conception of *national* economy to be unified, protected, strengthened and exploited by the state, or in other words an economy coterminous with it. Non-European rulers generally perceived their economies as far-flung phenomena on a par with their cultures and their elites: they might be able to exploit this or that local manifestation of it, but not to fence it off and enclose it for systematic profit-making within a given area. Hence they did not establish national banks or otherwise try to assist the process of capital accumulation within their domains, subsidize industry by tax-exemption or outright grants (though craftsmen were exempted from public duties in late imperial Rome), seek to unify the domestic market by eliminating tariffs and tolls, or to protect this market by state-imposed tariff barriers, the very concept of a favourable balance of trade being unknown to most of them. The fact that the mercantilist rulers did all of these things is symptomatic of the growth, in Europe, of the unusual view of the state as a territorial rather than religious, cultural or dynastic entity.

Self-help groups

In general, then, pre-industrial government was minimal government. The state was expected to provide a protective shell behind which the subjects could get on with their own lives, but not to regulate their activities or to take over their roles except in so far as enemies of the established order had to be squashed and wrong-doers to be restrained. This objective might entail considerable interference (wrong-doing being an elastic category), but even so it always left room for a profusion of autonomous groups. Such groups were essentially self-help groups, and it was they which performed most of the functions now assumed by the state, not because they had been delegated to them, but rather because the state had never taken them over. By far the most important self-help group was the family. The larger a family, the more it was in the nature of a political, economic and charitable corporation. Its members could pool their resources and thus acquire capital to invest in education, business, land and other enterprises, to provide for the old, sick, crippled and demented, and to reap their rewards in the form of government office (once one member of the family had been appointed, office and other

rewards would flow to the rest), as well as commercial profit, local standing and clients (that is people seeking their help in return for services of one kind or another). In some cultures, notably China, such family corporations were underpinned by ancestor worship. A man's descendants might stay together to the point that one lineage occupied a whole village; elsewhere, extended families occupied one household; but family solidarity was usually of great importance even where the nuclear family prevailed in terms of residence. The importance of family solidarity was public knowledge: if an official fell, all his relatives and protégés fell with him, being executed along with him or (by way of mercy) merely banished or enslaved.

Large kin groups were not however easily maintained by the poor. The more impoverished a family was, the greater were the chances that its members would disperse, destitute parents being forced to sell their children or even themselves, or to evict them as servants or apprentices, or simply to send them off in the 'wide world' (as fairy tales put it) to make a living on their own. Poor families were small families. Members of small, poor or undistinguished families might attach themselves as clients to a lineage of the above-mentioned kind or to an aristocratic house; and usually there were also clubs, guilds, secret societies, sectarian organizations or other kinds of voluntary societies which provided their members with credit, looked after them when they were ill, paid for their funerals when they died, took care of their widows and orphans and acted as mutual insurance groups in other ways. Mutual help might also be supplied on the basis of quarters, villages or other residential divisions: the strongest self-help groups undoubtedly ensued where kinship, residence and religious affiliation coincided. In most societies there was much charitable activity too, of course; but it could only provide occasional help, not a safety net. At all events, it was usually the kinless who sank to the very bottom of society, ending up as vagrants, criminals, prostitutes and beggars.

Law and order

It should be obvious from what has been said so far that no pre-industrial state was in a position to perform as well as its modern counterparts. In particular, their attempts to maintain internal order met with limited success: all pre-industrial societies had to tolerate a much higher level of violence than we do today.

Thus tax-gathering tended to be a violent affair because scarcity

caused the peasants to resist, or more precisely because they *could* resist: unlike modern workers who leave their tools and products behind on clocking off, the peasants were in possession of both their land and their harvest and thus less easy to either tax or evict. At the very least they would hide their assets; at worst they would fight: it was for this reason that tax-collectors were usually accompanied by troops. But everyone was more prone to mutiny and rebellion than we are today, partly because numerous members of society had military power independently of the state and were apt to use it, be it in pursuit of private aims, in protest against the state, to compel it to bargain or to evade it; partly because there were fewer economic ties which had to be protected against disruption; and partly because rulers and subjects long had access to much the same weaponry, though the disparity between their outfits kept increasing.

In addition there were always areas which escaped state control altogether. Densely forested regions, mountainous areas, marshes, moors, deserts and steppes were difficult to negotiate for armies and administrators before the invention of jeeps, aeroplanes and the like, and generally also too sparsely inhabited by people too poor and too warlike to make attempts at direct control worthwhile: most states had barbarians within their boundaries as well as outside them. Depending on where such areas were in relation to the centre they might be left entirely alone or ruled indirectly (i.e. one or more local potentates might be held responsible for the good behaviour of the rest of the population in return for a judicious mixture of subsidies and penal expeditions). 'We do not obey the government in any way other than that we acknowledge it to be the government', as tribesmen of the Kabylian mountains in North Africa told a tenth-century Muslim heretic in search of militant recruits.

In addition to their own fierce inhabitants such areas tended also to accommodate a fair number of outlaws, escaped convicts, runaway slaves and other refugees, who would typically make a living as brigands. Frontier regions between two states, or even between two provinces, also tended to be unruly because there were political or administrative rivalries and confusions over jurisdiction for rebels to exploit, or simply because the central government was very far away.

But even well-governed areas had their share of violence, and policing was always deficient. Every town had its pickpockets, thieves, burglars, swindlers, murderers, assassins and protection racketeers, just as every road had its highwaymen and every sea its pirates. Private war and local feuds, riots and rebellion, marauding

soldiers and brigandage, all these and other forms of disorder were commonplace in most societies most of the time.

The authorities reacted to disorder by meting out the most dreadful punishments to such culprits as they caught. People were quartered, bisected, sliced, boiled, skinned, disembowelled and so on, occasionally just hanged, crucified or decapitated, preferably in public; their remains would certainly be publicly displayed as a gruesome warning to passers-by of what lay in store for those who refused to obey. After the suppression of Spartacus' revolt in the Roman republic of the first century BC, the traveller along the Appian Way had 6000 crucified bodies to contemplate. It was the very impotence of the state which made it set such store by exemplary punishment as a deterrent, but of course the subjects had the same brutal attitude to life. 'Thieves are trampled to Death; and though this be a dreadful punishment, yet the Coresians are much addicted to stealing', as a seventeenth-century Dutchman shipwrecked in Korea observed. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same was true of other societies.

Insecurity greatly enhanced the importance of the self-help groups mentioned earlier. Whether they took the form of families, lineages, tribes, quarters, villages, guilds, religious communities or a combination thereof, they were islands of trust and solidarity in an unstable and dangerous world (which is not to say that there might not be rifts or tensions within them). Typically they would keep up a common front by policing themselves, settling their own disputes, marrying in accordance with joint interests, pursuing joint feuds, or even forming or maintaining armies. It is for this reason that people were either friends or allies, as mentioned in the previous chapter, not an undifferentiated mass of citizens who could supply neutral labour. To the state, the existence of such groups was a mixed blessing. They kept people under control, but they also intervened between the state and its subjects, making it difficult to govern directly; they might be heretical, and they were always in danger of growing obstreperous. Some might be proscribed, others accepted, be it with good or bad grace.

A vicious circle

We have seen that political organization was a response to certain deficiencies. Now is the time to summarize the various ways in which it acted back on and increased these deficiencies.

Clearly, pre-industrial governments generated mistrust, first because they were brutal (notably in their treatment of peasants and dissenters), and secondly because they were arbitrary. They were arbitrary because they vested unlimited power in whimsical rulers, who, though incapable of controlling the political process, could certainly intervene in unexpected ways and above all bring their power to bear on individuals, whom they would raise to power, demote or execute as they saw fit; 'off with his head' is the standard line of kings in popular tales. Indeed, the very fact that seemingly unlimited power proved impotent when brought to bear on processes rather than individuals encouraged arbitrary victimization. There is a story in the *Arabian Nights* in which the caliph and his vizier find the dismembered body of a young woman in a cask. Shocked, the caliph exclaims that the government ought to prevent such things from happening, an eminently modern sentiment, only to order his vizier to find the murderer at once or else be executed. Contrary to what the modern reader might expect, he does not order him to start a war on crime: the problem being beyond solution, the caliph simply lashed out against the nearest target. In precisely the same way, rulers were apt to respond to economic problems by confiscating private property, sometimes that of their officials and often that of merchants, and to cope with political crises by violation of promises, breach of safe-conduct, imprisonment without trial or trials with predetermined outcome, summary executions, and so forth. The scarcity of information made all wielders of public power, and the monarch above all, dependent on informers who had to be trusted but of whose reliability no-one could ever feel sure, a fact which created ample scope for intrigues, whispered suggestions, carefully planted information and dis-information, all of which caused heads to roll from time to time.

Instability at the top made for predatory rule all along the line, everybody being out to hoard as much gold, accumulate as much land and secure as many advantages as possible before royal favour ran out. The entire machinery of government was thus corrupt, not just because funds were short or because the primacy of loyalties to kith and kin was generally accepted, but also because the unstable and unpredictable nature of government positively encouraged extortion and the accumulation of protective networks. Naturally, we have a vicious circle here, government becoming more brutal and unstable at the top in response to corruption underneath. All in all, pre-industrial governments were nasty things best avoided, as peasants everywhere agreed. 'The two worst places to stand in are

behind a horse and in front of an official', as an Indian saying has it; 'happy is he who never has dealings with us', as a pious caliph is supposed to have said. But joining the government might be easier than avoiding it, and those who had the option usually preferred the active pursuit of power, wealth and honour to passive victimization, however great the risks.

In addition to generating mistrust and predatory behaviour where it aimed at co-operation, pre-industrial government was stultifying because it had to suppress rather than mobilize most of the human energy at its disposal. Since the state could neither penetrate nor integrate the society it ruled, it sat on top of a myriad of ethnic, linguistic and religious communities and a myriad of autonomous self-help groups over which it had little control, regulating the surface without getting very far underneath. This being so, it was intensely suspicious of new developments below the surface, especially developments which threatened to endow the masses with a capacity for collective action. This is a point to which I shall revert in the next chapter. Suffice it here to say that since political organization was predicated on the fact that the masses could not be integrated, the masses perforce had to *remain* in a state of non-integration: once you have made a virtue of necessity, you do not want necessity to change. Keeping local communities separate and politically passive was thus a prime objective of pre-industrial government; and as a result, some 90 per cent of human energy in any given polity was written off for all purposes other than taxation and (at times) military service. In the Roman empire of the first century AD, for example, a governor of a province in Asia Minor requested the permission of the emperor Trajan to form a fire-brigade in a town which had been devastated by fire; Trajan refused on the grounds that 'whatever name we give to [such associations], and for whatever purposes they may be founded, they will not fail to form themselves into dangerous assemblies'. Inasmuch as organization amounted to a potential for political action, it was too risky to use the masses even for the extinction of their own fires. But the monarch's fear of losing control over the elite also had the effect of suppressing energy which could have been used to good effect. In nineteenth-century Vietnam, provincial mandarins campaigned for the establishment of granaries in their provinces after the country had been devastated by cholera, but the emperor refused permission because he did not wish provincial officials to acquire more power than they already possessed. Elsewhere, governors were frequently dispatched for tenures so short, and with troops and other personnel

so deficient, that however good or bad their intentions were, they could not get anything organized in their provinces beyond the collection of some taxes.

In short, the political organization had a strong tendency to encourage *power stand-off*, that is a situation in which different kinds of power counteract and nullify each other instead of combining for joint effect. Pre-industrial states had considerable power to *prevent* things from happening, but very little to *make* them happen: they were far better at suppressing than at generating energy. This was so because the state tended to sit like a 'capstone' on top of society, keeping its various components in place, but incapable of stimulating further development. Capstone government was the response to the problem of organizing large numbers of people over large areas with inadequate resources: imperial government was capstone government *par excellence* (though non-imperial states frequently exemplified it too). It made emperors specialists in what has been called *extensive* power, that is the ability to organize large numbers over large distances for minimal co-operation. The Mughal emperors of India, for example, are said to have ruled their enormous empire largely by keeping firm control of the main roads and regional trading centres, maintaining no more than minimal order elsewhere. But it did not make emperors good at *intensive* organization, the ability to organize tightly and in depth: no emperor could have devised or kept up the elaborate institutions of public health which the Italian Renaissance states created in response to the plague. Hence the mistrust, the predatory behaviour, the arbitrariness and the constant need to suppress. This was the vicious circle in which not just empires, but practically all pre-industrial states were caught.

It is thus not surprising that states were brittle structures which easily collapsed under internal stress or external pressure. The low degree of integration on the one hand and the minimal services performed by the state on the other meant that there was little to hold them together. The basic ingredients were easily reshuffled, so that states had a tendency to come and go (though some were conspicuously more durable than others). And their machinery was too cumbersome, too overlaid with private interests, too coercive and too mistrusted to work with any degree of speed, precision or efficiency. Evidently, there are enormous variations here too. But it was for such reasons that, until quite late in history, even the most powerful states on earth could be toppled by a handful of spirited barbarians.