

The State: Crown Jewel of Human Social Organization

Editor's Pick. Written by Robert Higgs.

Since the earliest stage of human history (say, the time of Cain and Abel), human beings have been homicidal maniacs. Yet, for untold ages, something was missing, something with the capacity to raise their murderous mania to truly magnificent heights. Only very late in human history—perhaps 10,000 years ago or thereabouts—did the long-awaited breakthrough take place: men finally devised the state. By employing its powers of organization, command, violence, and plunder, rulers could finally bask in the glories of heretofore undreamed-of atrocities. No longer did men have to rest content with workaday violence and manslaughter. Now they could achieve vastly more monstrous enormities than the vilest village bully had been able to achieve or even to conceive of previously.

Now human beings could attain real glory for the first time. Now the rise of empires lay within the realm of realistic ambition. Killing by the ones, tens, or hundreds no longer defined the limits of human wrath, because now killing by the thousands and tens of thousands became possible, along with enough rape and pillage to satisfy all but the most twisted psychopath. No longer did a man have to settle for murdering his brother, his wife, or his fellows in the nearby village. Now even huge numbers of remote strangers became fair game. Indeed, thanks to the state's amazing capabilities, a ruler might now conceive of utterly annihilating an entire society.

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