

CHAPTER 1

A BRONZE AGE SCRIBAL CULTURE: A SOCIOLOGICAL FABLE WITH AN IMPLICIT MORAL

BRAIN WORK AND STATE FORMATION

Humanists are brain workers, and hence specialists of a particular kind. It is therefore meaningless to look for an environment of a "humanistic" character in so-called *egalitarian societies* as exemplified by Bushmen or Inuit. In such societies as everywhere, of course, individuals differ. But status differences depend on the gender and age and on the personal abilities of individuals, not on inherited position or social class; in principle, everybody belonging to the same gender and the same age group makes a living in the same way. There is little or no room for specialization in the sphere of intellectual work; the closest we come is the possible existence of a shaman or a priestess, but even they will normally not be full-time specialists¹ and in any case not be part of *an environment* or profession.

Chiefdoms, another main category of pre-state society distinguished by political anthropology, are characterized by differentiation along several dimensions: socio-economic division, implying unequal access to basic resources (for instance land for agriculture), and maybe a genuine class division into a ruling class, commoners, and slaves belonging to members of the ruling class; and political division between the chief supported by his associates and retinue on one side, and the general population on the other.² Priestly functions may be the privilege of the chief and his associates;

1. A fitting example is the Ibo priestess Chielo in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1986), who from time to time is possessed by the spirit of her God but on all other occasions fulfils the same social roles as other women.

2. It hardly needs to be said that these descriptions of pre-state societies simplify the variability of real societies in the extreme.

but still one finds no group specializing in intellectual work, neither of religious character nor associated with the chief's political control (cf. Goody 1977: 19–35).

The division between manual and intellectual work, the precondition for the emergence of anything approaching, however vaguely, a stratum of “humanists,” is thus a consequence of the organization of society as a state. As a minimal definition of the early state we may borrow the following, current in one or the other form in contemporary political anthropology and socioarchaeology: a state is a society provided with

1. a structure of control with at least three levels (“vertical” specialization);
2. division of labor, both in the productive and in the controlling sphere (“horizontal” specialization);
3. precedence of social over kinship divisions;
4. reasonable temporal permanency and stability;
5. possession of a reasonably well-defined fixed territory.

Apart perhaps from number 5, all these features are necessary prerequisites for the creation of a social stratum (3) of people specializing in intellectual work (2) yet not belonging to the ruling class (1), and understood (both by its own members and by others) as a coherent group (3 and 4). But they are of course not sufficient. “Control” may be of many sorts, and so may division of labor. Only where *writing* developed together with the state has a stratum of professional intellectuals emerged—and even writing has not always been sufficient.³

Three cases where the step was actually taken are ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, and ancient China. In Mesopotamia and Egypt the stratum of scribes carried literate culture for millennia before eventually collapsing in the Hellenistic era; in China the classical “mandarin culture” has survived continuously until this century, and only future developments will tell whether it has been shattered or only shaken by the double revolution and by the modernization process. China could therefore be chosen to demonstrate the importance of scribal “humanism” even in recent times; but since the early beginnings are poorly documented and I myself am not conversant with the relevant details of Chinese culture, I shall concentrate instead on Mesopotamia, with which I am fairly familiar (familiar enough to discern with some precision what I do not know), and where the permanency of clay has guaranteed the survival of early written sources.

3. This is born out by the Mycenaean society of the second millennium BCE. This early Greek culture was a bureaucratic “Palace economy” administered by scribes. Not the slightest written evidence for intellectual interests can be traced, however, nor is there any indication that the script developed for accounting purposes survived the downfall of the Palaces.

In Mesopotamia, the earliest social system fulfilling conditions (1) through (5) (with some reservations for condition 3) arose between c. 3500 and 2800 BCE in Southern Mesopotamia ("Sumer"), which by this time became suited for irrigation agriculture and could thus yield a surplus large enough to allow certain population groups to specialize in activities other than food production. According to all evidence, this is the earliest statal system in the world. Its center was a temple institution, where the body of priests took care of a number of societally important functions: long-range trade; exchange of the produce of different groups of producers specializing in agriculture, herding, fishing, and other trades; presumably organization of handicraft work and in any case of huge temple building projects; perhaps even reparation of the consequences of climatic or other catastrophes. As in other state formation processes, the carriers of central functions took advantage of their positions and made themselves masters of society—to judge from the favorite pictorial motifs of cylinder seals, not by peaceful means alone.

None the less, the fundament for the newly emerging state organization of Mesopotamian society was functional and theocratic-economic, *at least as far as legitimization is concerned*. War and similar organized violence played a much smaller role than in other state formation processes; economic class division, moreover, appears to have been a consequence rather than a cause of the process. This legitimization of the state through purported functionality will probably have been one reason for the systematic development of tools for bureaucratic management—another one being the availability of an age-old system for primitive accounting which easily lent itself to refinement.

One of the newly developed tools was *writing*—at first with a purely ideographic script, that is, a script where each sign stands for a specific word or conceptually related group of words, as "to eat" and "food ration"; the other was *mathematics* used for accounting and in metrology. Together they were used by the priesthood acting collectively as a civil service to keep track of taxation and of the temple economy. They were thus the instruments for the emergence of a class of intellectual workers separate from but controlling manual work.

So far, this seems to have little to do with the humanities. The operation of any specialized tool, however, has to be learned, and in the case of the Mesopotamian scribal tools this was done by institutionalized schooling.⁴ Here the script and the mathematical notations and techniques were taught—the script by means of systematic sign lists. Indeed, these lists and a few mathematical exercises constitute the only evidence left by the school institution. We can therefore not say very much about the organization of the school, but still something about its intellectual impact.

4. In Egypt, on the other hand, scribes were taught as apprentices "on the job" until the end of the third millennium BCE. This may be a main reason for the difference between Egyptian and Mesopotamian scribal culture—another being a different legitimization of the Pharaonic state as the result of conquest and as the upholder of cosmical order and stability.

This follows from a comparison of the organization of the sign lists with the results of an investigation of the “psychology of literacy and modernization” made by the psychologist Alexander Luria in the 1930s in Soviet Central Asia.⁵ He distinguishes “categorical classification” from “situational thinking,” in a way which can be illustrated by this dialogue:

Luria, explaining a psychological test: “Look, here you have three adults and one child. Now clearly the child doesn’t belong in this group” [categorical classification].

Rakmat, an illiterate peasant: “Oh, but the boy must stay with the others! All three of them are working, you see, and if they have to keep running out to fetch things, they’ll never get the job done, but the boy can do the running for them. . . .” [situational thinking].

Luria 1976: 55

Situational thinking was found to be “*the* controlling factor among uneducated, illiterate subjects,” whereas both modes were applied (with situational thinking dominating) among “subjects whose activities were still confined primarily to practical work but who had taken some courses or attended school for a short time.” On the other hand, young people with only a year or two of schooling, but who were actively engaged in building up collective farms, employed the principle of categorical classification “as their chief method of grouping objects.” In other words, people living in a stable world dominated by a restricted number of apparently ever-fixed situations presuppose this stability in their mode of thought, whereas those accustomed to change (and perhaps engaged in planned change) arrange theirs in a more abstract and less directly applicable but precisely therefore more flexible pattern.

Now, the sign lists are arranged according to the categorical principle. One list enumerates professions in a hierarchical scheme; one records wooden objects; one inventories vessels; one is a catalogue of place names; and so on. None of them groups together the ox, the seed plough which it draws, and the grain that is sown. Apart from teaching the pictographic signs, the lists can thus be said to convey in a double way a *world view*: firstly, they teach that the world is to be understood in terms of general categories; secondly, they tell the categories involved. Being an intellectual worker in the early Mesopotamian temple state not only implied social segregation but also existence in a *mental cosmos wholly different* from that of illiterate peasants and workers.

Another perspective on the early scribal culture is provided by a scheme proposed by Jürgen Habermas (*Erkenntnis und Interesse*, 1973) in a discussion of the different incentives for the quest for knowledge; since we shall return repeatedly to

5. Similar consequences could be drawn from analysis of the mathematical texts and techniques.

the *motives for knowing*, for which the scheme provides an adequate starting point, it is worthwhile to introduce it already at this point (a more thorough and critical discussion will be found in chapter 10). Habermas distinguishes three distinct *Erkenntnisinteressen* or interests motivating the pursuit of knowledge.⁶ One is the *technical interest*, which looks for means to achieve given ends, and which is identified by Habermas as the incentive motivating the natural sciences. The other is *interpretive* or *legitimizing*, leading to *understanding* of why things (in particular society, culture, and cultural products) are as they are and hence potentially to acceptance that they are thus; Habermas identifies it as the incentive motivating the humanities. The third, finally, is emancipation, which *ought to be* the distinctive motivation of social science; in reality, Habermas observes, the real incentive of much actual social science is technical, which he regards as a philosophical mistake of categories, namely as a treatment of fellow human beings as objects to be manipulated (cf. below, p. 185, n. 7).

Obviously, the primary motive of the priestly managers for their construction of a coherent system of knowledge was *technical*: their aim was to *know how* to manage the temple estate and that society in which they had acquired a pivotal position. This position was not legitimized by their *possession of knowledge*—instead, legitimacy followed from actual or pretended societal functions, to which knowledge was subservient. Nor can we ascribe more than a secondary role to the emancipatory interest; however, the liberation from the bonds of traditional modes of thought suggested by the organization of the lexical lists makes it conceivable to speak precisely of emancipation as a *secondary motivation* for a social stratum ridding itself of the restrictions imposed by functional service to a formerly more egalitarian society while perpetuating the functional ideology.

THE FIRST INTELLECTUALS

During the following millennium, the character of the Mesopotamian state underwent a series of changes. At first, a system of city states in perpetual conflict (mainly, it seems, over basic resources like water) developed. In these states, a secular supreme power (a “king”) came to overshadow the traditional theocracy. The most striking illustration of this is provided by the so-called “royal tombs of Ur” (c. 2600 BCE), where up to eighty servants, maidens, and soldiers were killed in order to follow their royal master to the nether world. Clearly, statal power was now firmly established on its own and no longer to be understood as an expression of social functions alone.

6. Anthony Giddens (1985: 127) translates the untranslatable German phrase as “knowledge-constitutive interests.” At the cost of precision, I shall use the less suffocating expression “cognitive interests” in the following.

Epics originating during the same epoch (though only written down around 2100 BCE) also show us a social structure where the king is protector of the shrine of the city but not subject to the priesthood. King Gilgameš of Uruk is no absolute ruler; but the bodies which he must consult are the council of “men” (able to bear arms, one may presume) and the council of “elders” (powerful citizens, presumably, like the Roman Senate, the highest-ranking members of leading families). The leading priests may well have belonged to the latter body; but the epic is only interested in their role as first-rank citizens.

Yet in spite of its absence from the epic horizon, the literate tradition was conserved and expanded. Royal inscriptions begin to turn up—the very first we know is due to a king known from the Gilgameš story. What is more, the functional ideology originally connected with the beginnings of writing was carried on by the literate environment. Nobody would believe without the evidence provided by city walls and by the originally oral epic tradition that the king was first of all a military leader: the literate environment would for centuries depict him as a builder of temples and of canals, that is, as a representative of functional and theocratic power. Nobody would guess from contemporary written evidence that servants were slaughtered in honour of the king—only the oral tradition as reflected in later written epics gives some ambiguous hints. “Early Dynastic” Mesopotamia was thus a truly *dual* society, a society with Janus face. As seen by epic poetry it was a “military democracy”;⁷ as reflected in written sources—and hence as seen by the literate and by literate culture—it was still a bureaucratic-functional state supposedly providing for communal needs.

In the longer run, of course, the dual society was unstable. Around the middle of the third millennium (the so-called Fara period), the primitive-democratic components of society were increasingly incorporated into an overall structure where written contracts and monetary relations were important. At the same occasion, however, literacy itself stopped being bound up exclusively with its bureaucratic function.

Firstly, the increased use of writing for many socially important functions called for an increase in the number of literate functionaries and hence—given the complex character of writing—for professional specialization. For the first time an organized group of *scribes* distinct from the stratum of priestly managers turns up in the sources. The scribes were *professionally literate and numerate*, not just professional managers who had to be literate and numerate in order to attend to their business.

Secondly, this profession also became aware of itself as a particular group. The scribes started investigating the capacity of their distinctive professional tools: writing

7. A concept originating in nineteenth-century anthropology and mainly known today from Friedrich Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

and computation. They started writing down *literary texts* (hymns, epics, and proverb collections), and they produced the earliest examples of *pure mathematics*, that is, mathematical problems chosen for their inherent interest and in spite of lack of direct relevance for everyday scribal practice.⁸

Thirdly, the students in the Fara scribe school were enthusiastic about the newly invented idea of intellectual work. They do not inform us so directly but they have left more telling evidence: the empty corners of many of the school tablets made by this first generation are filled in by nice and occasionally really artistic decorations, in a way not seen in any other period of Mesopotamian history, where the cane was always the chief teaching aid. In Fara it was apparently great fun to go to school—at least when you were looking back in mature age (as pointed out by the Assyriologist Aage Westenholz (personal communication), the most beautiful “school tablets” look rather like *de luxe* editions).

Novelties do not remain new, nor will a subordinate social group be left in possession of its distinctive subculture if this culture can serve those in power—this was as true in Mesopotamia as in our century. After the twenty-fourth century, when a centralizing tendency replaced the city states by larger “territorial states,” literary texts were no longer made in the scribal school in order to explore the possibilities of professional tools; they had become the product of a “court chancellery” and were made as a vehicle for royal propaganda. Enheduanna, the first poet of world history known by name, was a princess, and her hymns are clearly meant to reshape mythology in a way that would suit the territorial state created by her father.

During the twenty-first century BCE, scribal intellectual autonomy reached a paradoxical low point. In this century, southern Mesopotamia formed a single state (the so-called “Third Dynasty of Ur” or “Ur III”), which presumably constituted one of the most highly bureaucratized systems in history until the advent of the modern corporation. Most land was concentrated in royal estates (some of them formally temple estates, but realities were the same), and most of the rural population worked here as serfs, supervised by scribes who were accountable for the performance of their crew calculated in units of twelve minutes (one sixtieth of a work-day). Textile and other industries as well as foreign trade were organized according to similar principles, and of course *the scribe*, the central pivot of the

8. A modern mathematician, of course, would not easily recognize the problems as “pure mathematics”—a favorite problem type was division of phantasmagorically large round numbers by divisors which were as irregular as possible with respect to the number systems in use. Nor will a modern literary scholar perhaps fathom the historical importance of a collection of proverbs. But on a background where nobody had ever used writing and numbers beyond the purely utilitarian realm, both are important steps towards the formation of a sphere of autonomous intellectual work.

whole machine, stands out as the culture hero of the era, for instance in various royal hymns.

At the same time, however, we possess a number of descriptions of the curriculum of the Ur III scribe school, as well as texts that were used to implant a suitable ideology in the minds of future scribes. It turns out that the education of the ordinary scribe was strictly utilitarian. Most of the Sumerian literature, it is true, was written down precisely during Ur III; according to all evidence, however, the focus for this activity was the royal court, and the purpose was propagandistic (as it can be seen from the way old stories were twisted so as to fit the political conditions of the day). The rank-and-file scribe was to be an *engineer* and an *accountant* in *civilized society*, and he was to be proud of that. He was a *trusted* and *privileged* subject of the state but still a subject and not a member of an autonomous profession with its own values and interests. In this respect his situation was quantitatively but not qualitatively different from that of the enslaved former peasant, once a member of a free clan but now reduced to being a mere subject.

SCRIBAL "HUMANISM"

Ur III was a swing of the pendulum in one direction. It was soon followed by a reverse swing, both as concerns socioeconomic conditions and regarding scribal culture.

In the long run, the costs of the bureaucracy that was needed for running the Ur III system and keeping the workers busy had been too high for the yield of the land. Breakdown followed, and after an intermediate period (the twentieth century BCE) a new, highly individualized socioeconomic structure emerged in the "Old Babylonian" period (which lasted until 1600 BCE).

Firstly, the economy itself was individualized. Much land was still held by the king, by temples, and by the richest citizens. Estates run by enslaved workers, however, had become rare or disappeared, and land was instead cultivated by tenants on contract or by wage-earning workers. Trade had been taken over by private merchants, and so had industry. Banking of a sort developed, and monetary economy flourished.⁹

These changes had a strong impact on culture and ideology, where the emergence of the *individual* can be observed. In earlier times, only official letter writing had existed; now, the private letter turns up (and even in the official correspondence

9. This description may sound almost like modern capitalism. That would be to overstate things, however. Commodities were produced for the market, it is true, and even land could be bought and sold. The exchange of land, however, did not take place on real market terms but depended on the social standing and kinship affiliation of the parties involved. As land was still the all-important economic asset, it is therefore meaningless to speak of a real market economy and hence of capitalism.

of King Hammurapi, the king stands out as an individual character); the *cylinder seal*, until then an attribute of the official, now becomes a token of private identity; and so on. Society no longer consists of mere *subjects*, but of *private human beings*—in a few unique cases (the merchant communities in certain cities), it seems, even of *citizens*, that is, of persons possessing political co-responsibility.

In this new context, the role and self-awareness of the scribe changed, too. Maybe 80 percent of the scribe school candidates still went into traditional scribal occupations (engineering, accounting, surveying, cancellarian functions at court or in the service of wealthy families). But the scribe-school now provided an *education of individuals aware of themselves as such*, and no longer a mere training of officials and overseers. This double situation explains the distinctive character of the Old Babylonian scribal culture.

Firstly, the ideology that legitimized the state in whose service the scribe could expect employment was still the traditional “social-democratic” idea of the functional state securing affluence *and* justice.¹⁰ In so far as this idea was believed (and it was easier to believe in now than during Ur III), the scribe could be proud of his service to the state – for who but the scribe took care of the functions that actually secured affluence and justice by means of accounting, surveying, letter writing for the illiterate King, and so forth?

Secondly, however, the scribe was taught in school to be proud of being *somebody special*. The mathematics of normal accounting and surveying was fairly trivial, and so was writing in the current Babylonian language.¹¹ The abilities *actually required* to procure affluence and justice were thus no adequate basis for professional pride. Pride, however, would be fully justified if the scribe mastered the non-trivial (yet, alas, useless!) levels of scribal cunning: solving second-degree equations (occasionally even third to eighth degree!); reading, writing, and speaking the dead Sumerian language understood by nobody but other scribes; knowing the three different occult meanings of cuneiform signs; and so on.

In contrast to his Ur III colleague, the Old Babylonian scribe was thus no mere technician but a virtuoso—and in contrast to his fellow countrymen he was *culturally polished*. He was very much aware of this and had a name for this specific characteristic of his: nam-lú-ulù, (of course Sumerian for) *humanity*. Like the humanist of more recent times he was aware of being a human being *par excellence*, and he was proud of that.

10. One of the most clear expressions of this ideology is found in the prologue and epilogue of “Hammurapi’s Law-Code.”

11. Babylonian could be written adequately by means of some eighty syllabic cuneiform signs, as demonstrated by the members of an Assyrian merchant colony in Cappadocia in the nineteenth century BCE. They wrote their own letters without scribal assistance. The scribes took care that this would never happen again by making the script more complex.

Superficially, this reminds us of the joy of the Fara scribes to be the first intellectuals in history, and some scribe students have certainly experienced the pleasures of Sumerian poetry or of mathematical dexterity. To judge from surviving texts, however, the overall climate of the Old Babylonian scribe school was as repressive as that seventeenth to nineteenth-century Latin school which inculcated “Latinity” or “Graecity” into the sore backs of future priests and officials. Like the humanists produced by the latter institution, the brood of the Old Babylonian school would usually be full of arrogance toward both aristocrats and commoners yet fully uncritical and submissive to the existing social order (cf. also p. 92, n. 18).¹²

Returning to Habermas’s cognitive interests, we may say that the glimpse of emancipatory interest which can be read into the early lexical lists is indubitably present in the Fara emergence of autonomous intellectual activity, though even here only as a by-product. The training of ordinary Ur III scribes, on the other hand, was apparently driven by purely technical interest, whereas that of the contemporary court chancellery was legitimizing. Legitimization and understanding of the proper cultural tradition of the scribal profession was also the driving force behind Old Babylonian “humanism”—no wonder, in fact, since Habermas locates the interpretive-legitimizing interest precisely in that humanist tradition which sprang from the post-Renaissance Latin school, and which impregnated the Wilhelmian German mandarin.

The fall of the Old Babylonian state was the end of the age-old idea of the functional state; of the culture of individualism; and of the scribe school. As one should expect, it was also the end of the scribal culture which had grown out of this well-blended soil. Scribal humanism disappeared; for the next one and a half millennia the scribes, now trained as apprentices inside a “scribal family,” would posture as members of a venerable and patriarchal *tradition* and would mix up as much priestly mysticism as possible into their secular business. This phase of Mesopotamian scribal history is therefore no longer interesting as an elucidating parallel to the professional situation of the humanities in the contemporary world, even though it may throw oblique light on twentieth-century fringe mysticism and occultism.

12. A striking example of this: in 1600 BCE, the Hittites raided Babylon, thereby putting a violent end to the Old Babylonian era. In reaction to the ensuing social chaos, the population of the city rose in rebellion, only to be crushed by the conquering Kassite warrior tribes, who imposed a new military state on the region—a state that was totally devoid of “social-democratic” legitimation. A contemporary scribe has left us a description of this sequence of events, metaphorically transformed into the shape of a myth. The popular rising is compared to a plague, and the foreign conquerors are seen as deliverance sent by benevolent gods (cf. Brentjes 1966: 30–40).

A question close at hand is of course whether the earlier period is a real elucidation, or whether I have just used the opportunity to tell some more or less amusing anecdotes. Is the presentation of the Babylonian scribal culture really "a sociological fable with an implicit moral," as claimed in the title? An answer will be provided by the following chapters, toward which it will repeatedly be possible to hold up the models presented here. For the moment I shall just oppose three counter-questions to my own rhetorical question: firstly, is it fully excluded that the interest of modern humanists in literature and philosophy fulfils the same functions (irrespective of individual pleasure in the endeavour, which is a different matter) as Old Babylonian scribal "humanity" with regard to legitimation of their social identity and position? Secondly, can we trust our conviction that we serve general interests while engaged by the public authority as teachers, librarians, researchers, TV commentators, and so forth, or is this Hammurapian ideology nothing but a convenient veil hiding quite different realities? Thirdly, is the complete technicalization of Ur III intellectual work without parallels in the contemporary age?

Whoever answers "yes" to these three questions without hesitation will see no moral in the fable. Others may well see it.