

## **The Evolution of Human Societies**

Human societies display a wide range of variability over both space and time. Some are small and flexible, while others are large and highly structured. And many fall somewhere in between. As social scientists, how are we to understand this diversity of social organization and complexity? How do human societies shift from highly mobile and self-sufficient groups into politically and economically cohesive societies (and in some cases, into highly complex, territorially expansive empires)? This course surveys the major theories and evidence for the development of states and complex societies from these smaller, less complex social units. We also examine evidence for the reverse process: the return of state level societies to less complex forms of social organization. Perhaps the most interesting questions we will deal with in this course concern questions of coercive power and social authority: Why do people and societies relinquish personal and economic freedom and submit to some level of social control by others (for example, various sorts of political leaders and other elites)?

Aimed at providing a broad and conceptually unified overview of the cross-cultural development of social complexity in human societies, the course is divided into three sections, each of which corresponds to macro-level features of socio-political integration: the Family-Level Group, the Local Group, and the Regional Polity. Within each section, we will review the primary theoretical explanations for (and debates over) the environmental, social, political, economic, and ideological forces that lead to group formation and maintenance. Case studies from societies around the world will be used to illustrate the processes that bring about growth in the scale and complexity of human societies. We will also discuss recent “dual-inheritance” models of cultural evolution, examining the micro-level social mechanisms of cultural transmission that underlie large-scale social transformations. The course strives to maintain a generative tension between an understanding of each society as a unique historical development, while at the same time, attempting to identify and explain cross-cultural patterns in social development and operation. Through this close examination of human organizational diversity, we will gain a synthetic and unified understanding of social change over time.

### **Required Readings**

Johnson, Allen & Timothy Earle (2000). [The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State \(Second Edition\)](#). Stanford University Press.

Richerson, Peter J. and Robert Boyd (2005). [Not by Genes Alone](#). University of Chicago Press

Selections from Jared Diamond’s [Guns, Germs and Steel](#). (Announced in class)

## COURSE OUTLINE

- 0.0      **Introduction to the Course:**  
*Basic overview of the course; What is sociocultural evolution? Classic models of economic motivation; A Brief History of Evolutionary Typologies; The Nature of Social Power*  
Introduction (JE Ch. 1)
- WEEK 1: Family Level Societies**
- 1.1      *In Search of Undomesticated Humans; Theorizing the Family Level Society; The Primary Dynamic of Family-Level Economy and Society*  
The Family Level (JE Ch. 2)
- 1.2      *Foragers I: The Shoshone of the Great Basin*  
Family-Level Foragers (JE Ch. 3, 54-65)
- WEEK 2:**
- 2.1      *Foragers II: The !Kung of the Kalahari*  
Family-Level Foragers (JE Ch. 3, 65-89)
- 2.2      *Families with Domestication I: The Matsigenka of the Peruvian Amazon*  
Family-Level Foragers (JE Ch. 4, 90-112)
- WEEK 3:**
- 3.1      *Families with Domestication II: The Nganasan of Northern Siberia*  
Family-Level Foragers (JE Ch. 4, 112-120)
- 3.2      **MIDTERM I**
- WEEK 4: Local Group Level Societies**
- 4.1      *The Local Group Defined (The Domestication of the Human Species; Theorizing the Local Group; The Primary Dynamics of Local Group Economy and Society)*  
The Local Group (JE Ch. 5)
- 4.2      *Family Life in the Village: The Yanomamo of the Venezuelan Highlands*  
The Family and the Village (JE Ch. 6, 140-157)
- WEEK 5:**
- 5.1      *Family Life and the Village: The Yanomamo of the Venezuelan Highlands*  
The Family and the Village (JE Ch. 6, 157-170)

- 5.2 *Village and Clan Organization: Eskimos of the North Slope of Alaska, Tsembaga Maring of New Guinea, Turkana of Kenya*  
The Village and the Clan (JE Ch. 7, 157-170)

**WEEK 6:**

- 6.1 *Big Man and Corporate-Level Groups: Northwest Coast Fishermen*  
The Corporate Group and the Big Man Collectivity (Johnson, Ch. 8)
- 6.2 *Big Man and Corporate-Level Groups: Central Enga of Highland New Guinea; Kirghiz of Northeastern Afghanistan*  
The Corporate Group and the Big Man Collectivity (Johnson, Ch. 8)

**WEEK 7: Regional Polity Level Societies**

- 7.1 **MIDTERM II**
- 7.2 *The Regional Polity Defined: Origins of Civilizations, Theorizing the Regional Polity, Primary Dynamics*  
The Regional Polity (JE, Ch. 9, 245-264)

**WEEK 8:**

- 8.1 *Simple Chiefdoms: Trobriand Islanders*  
The Simple Chiefdoms (JE, Ch. 10)
- 8.2 *Complex Chiefdoms: Hawaiian Islanders, The Chumash of California, The Basseri of Iran*  
The Complex Chiefdoms (JE, Ch. 11)

**WEEK 9:**

- 9.1 *Archaic State Formation: France and Japan in the Middle Ages; Tiwanaku: The First South American State; the Inka Empire.*  
The Archaic State (JE, Ch. 12)
- 9.2 *The Role of Peasant Economies in Agrarian States: Brazilian Sharecroppers of Boa Ventura; Chinese Villagers of Taitou; Javanese Villagers of Kali Loro.*  
The Peasant Economy in the Agrarian State (JE, Ch. 13)

**WEEK 10:**

- 10.1 *Global Society in the Twentieth Century: Globalization, Free Markets, and a World Interconnected*  
The Evolution of Global Society (JE, Ch. 14)
- 10.2 FINAL EXAM (100 Points)