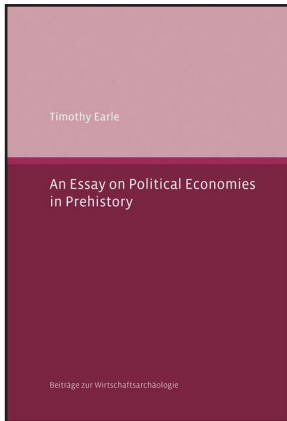


Timothy Earle

An Essay on Political Economies
in Prehistory

Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsarchäologie



An Essay on Political Economies in Prehistory

Timothy Earle. Graduiertenkolleg 1878, Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsarchäologie. Band 2. (available from Eliot Werner Publications Inc., P.O. Box 268, Clinton Corners, NY 12514 or on [Amazon](#)). 56 pp. \$17.95 (Paper)

Reviewed by Jon Muller, Professor Emeritus, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Earle begins, “To understand pre-modern economies is vital to understanding the long-term organization, operation and development of human societies” (p. 4).

Archaeology has a special place in this understanding since the development of complex and large-scale “modern” societies has left few opportunities for first-hand investigations of how such changes come about and what they meant in the context of the pre-industrial world.

There have also been changes in the ways such investigations could have been carried out. For a very long time, efforts to ‘do’ something like political economic research was caught up in the contending world systems, and circumlocutions like “cultural materialism” tended to mask such attempts. Nowadays, a “thousand flowers” may bloom, and direct references to Marx, Engels, and other pioneers of historical materialism are openly, if quietly, made.

That is one of the reasons this short essay is so important. Here, Earle presents a kind of manifesto, or perhaps vade mecum, briefly summarizing his previous work in economic anthropology. It also places the “economic” work of earlier anthropology into a much more fruitful context for further advancement.

I have only minor objections to his apparent restriction of “political” economy to “higher” developments after (personal or state?) property rights are developed. I feel that cases like the American Southeast demonstrate that both politics and economy can exist before the extortion of “surplus value”—indeed the existence of the simpler economy is fundamental to the development of the more complex cases of “channeling the surplus.” His examples (Hawaiian Island States, Highland Peruvian Hillforts, and even his European Early Neolithic) however, are fairly complex and seem to represent conditions of early “power” rather than its antecedents. These are not matters of great import to most people, of course. I am also uncertain that Earle’s dichotomy between “prestige goods” and “staple goods” remains significant. I think this may be a distinction that is a kind of ‘relic’ of the past evolution of this discussion.

As Earle notes

“To some measure, all emergent polities, even those relying on a staple-based political economy used primitive valuables to mark significant events and their leaders. The wealth objects of the Hawaiian Island states, for example, defined a ruling class that controlled the political hierarchy, through which staples were mobilized” (p. 32).

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This is surely true even in less complex social formations. Such examples are not so much an 'emergent polity' as all that. By the time you get to "gods on earth," social stratification is usually pretty well advanced.

All in all, the essay is admirably presented, written so clearly that even the uninitiated will see where he is going. It is an extremely useful presentation, and one that I can recommend very strongly.