

David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, & Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)

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David Sneath's provocative new work is dynamite, blasting away tons of preconceptualizations that have distorted our understanding of not only Inner Asian history, but also the broader theoretical frameworks within which it is studied. Of course, as evidenced by Peter Golden's recent review in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, not everyone will be amused by Sneath's revolutionary intervention. To my mind, however, *The Headless State* is a bravura performance. Sneath's work not only challenges many conventional misconceptualizations in our field, but also moves the study of Inner Asia out of its often marginal status into the center of contemporary scholarly debates. In particular, by exploding common misrepresentations of Inner Asian society Sneath is able to challenge the social evolutionary model that undergirds most theorizing about state formation.

To appreciate his argument one therefore needs to begin with an awareness of the standard view of state formation that draws upon the work of thinkers like Locke, Rousseau, Marx and Weber, all of whom were challenging the *ancien regimes* of Europe in the revolutionary process of

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creating the modern nation-state, i.e. a territorialized entity with a centralized bureaucracy. And since most intellectual projects invariably need an “Other” to function as an antithetical foil, classic social theory therefore posited a divide between territorialized, stratified societies and pre-state kinship societies based on clans and tribes; which is, of course, where the Inner Asian nomad fits into the story. Yet central to Sneath’s argument is that this foil never actually existed; rather it was created in order to legitimate the theory of state formation which was built upon the premise of differentiating the modern centralized state from the backward “Other.” Indeed, Sneath is at his best when dismantling both the discourses and translation practices of nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarship, which more often than not placed the high-minded theoretical cart before the lowly horse of readily observable facts.

In each of his chapters Sneath therefore takes on one of the standard social scientific tropes about Inner Asia and reveals how it is fundamentally flawed. In chapter two, for example, he debunks the anthropological view that premodern states were formed by clans joining into tribes in an egalitarian structure by situating these ideas within the colonial encounter. Namely, by labeling the “primitives” as tribal, colonial scholarship not only demoted their political status, but also made them ripe for the uplifting hand of imperial intervention. Yet more central to Sneath’s argument is that within this discourse all of these subjects—be they African or Inner Asian—they were never identified as feudal, which would invariably have made them too much like Europe. And this is, of course, the nub of Sneath’s argument: on account of such theoretical preconceptualizations the highly stratified and aristocratic order of Inner Asian society has been completely ignored.

Sneath further explores this idea in chapter three wherein he looks at how Inner Asian peoples from the Mongols to the Kazakh and Kirghiz have been misrepresented on account of the tribal lens. Using the Qing period as an example, Sneath shows that the romantic notion of the carefree, egalitarian Mongol living in tribes is completely contradicted by the historical record of the Borjigid aristocracy and the banner system. Similarly, Sneath shows that the view of the Kazakh as being organized in egalitarian tribes was not only untrue, it was also promoted by the Russian imperial state precisely to disenfranchise the old aristocratic order, who incidentally were not only powerful, but also wealthy and therefore hindered the Czarist and Soviet advances. And since these two facts inconveniently contradicted the standard view of the egalitarian tribal nomad, they were more often than not ignored. Yet precisely because they bolster Sneath’s argument of an aristocratic order,

he ends the chapter by looking at not only the stratification of Kirghiz society and the demands placed upon the commoners by the elite, but also revealing how this feudal system in tandem with “mobile pastoralism can be the basis for concentrations of wealth and power without the apparatus of the centralized state” (91).

Building on this observation Sneath continues his critique of state formation theories by turning the tables on the social evolutionary model that claims kinship-based societies were the first form of government. Instead, in chapter four, Sneath draws upon studies of Neo-Confucianism in China and Korea to argue that clans, or elite patrilineal descent groups, were not the primordial building blocks of society, but actually the *ipso facto* creation of the state, which were then in turn maintained by these new elites through the creation of sophisticated genealogies. Even more intriguing, however, is how Sneath builds on this Sinological observation to argue that blood and kinship-based clans and tribes as commonly conceived never actually existed among the Mongols. Yet since scholars continue to mistranslate common terms such as *obog* and *qawm* with “clan,” which, of course, simply perpetuates the tribal model, Sneath suggests that such terms should be entirely avoided. In their place he suggests using Levi-Strauss’ “house society” (*sociétés à maison*) in order to break this cycle of misrepresentation. Moreover, to further challenge the *idée fixe* of the clan and tribe model Sneath ends the chapter by pointing out the importance of the ancient decimal system of Inner Asian social organization, which is unfortunately so often ignored precisely because it, like aristocracy, is “so incompatible with the tribal model of pastoral nomads that they tend to be explained away as phenomena of contact or conquest” (152).

Explaining away inconvenient truths is also the major thrust of chapter five, which sets its sights on the idealized view of static and eternal nomads. In so doing Sneath moves from Soviet ethnography, which created the essentialized nomad to fit with Marx’s five-phase theory of history, to western anthropological studies of Central Asian nomads that were driven by theories of segmentary kinship relationships. And in both cases Sneath masterfully skewers these theoretical approaches and nicely summarizes his analysis as follows: “The perfect example of the ideal-typical pastoral nomadic society, composed of egalitarian clans of fierce and free tribesmen, organized by the principles of segmentary opposition, was like any good mythical beast: no one had actually seen it themselves, but everyone seemed to have it on excellent authority that someone else had” (156).

Continuing in this vein of discourse analysis Sneath next turns his attention to the complicit nature between the social sciences and the creation

of the nation-state. In particular, he notes how the work of scholars like Renan and Durkheim were forged in an age of mass mobilization wherein the nation was conceived as a “family writ large.” It is therefore no surprise that within this context the object of study for the social sciences became the homogenous cultural and social entity of the ethnos, which, of course, a mountain of literature has now proven to be a grandiose fiction. Interestingly, however, before turning this argument towards the case of Inner Asia Sneath begins by looking at the Germanic “tribes,” whom he shows were not people forged in blood and soil, but rather contingents of aristocratic elites who brought various people of diverse backgrounds into their orbit of power. The “Germans” were therefore never a “tribe,” much less a nation, but “political entourages, and frequently the conquest projects, of noble families. They displaced, or intermarried with, Roman elites, and the membership of their political formations was recruited from all sorts of sources, often from Roman subjects who preferred the new masters to the old ones” (162). And Sneath’s argument is that it was same in Inner Asia: there never were clans, tribes, or any kind of segmentary kinship grouping; there only were aristocratic appanages. Yet in an age of populist nation states based on ethnically defined territories such realities needed to be downplayed. More to the point, however, once the ethno-national idea was linked to the idea of a charismatic ruler—which handily explains the rise and fall of steppe empires—it also subverts the idea of Inner Asian societies actually having states. Namely, “it helped perpetuate the old notion of timeless, simple society, occasionally rallied by some primitive Napoleon ... This tradition has tended to downplay the political institutions of steppe societies; the concentration on the occasional ‘organizing genius’ helped obscure the powerful indigenous political heritage of Inner Asia” (179).

So what is the indigenous political heritage of Inner Asia? Sneath’s answer is obviously the aristocratic order, which he claims has many of the technologies of power associated with states, i.e. stratification, forms of territorialization, taxation, corvee, and military power. He also argues that the interiorization of power within this system is the same as in the modern state. Following Foucault’s idea of power as being “distributed,” and more importantly Chandrakote’s explication of power as being embedded in social relations, Sneath argues that the “the state is present in the power that any noble exercised over his subjects and in the wider political order that framed and empowered this rule—aristocracy. Indeed, we also find the key characteristics of the state according to classical social theory, since aristocracy entails both political office in the Weberian sense and class

exploitation in the Marxian one... The 'substrata of power' that underpinned each polity involved the construction of legal personhood in the form of rulers and subjects of various ranks, including slaves" (186). Thus in essence the Inner Asian state functioned because within the aristocratic order everyone knew their place. By making this move Sneath therefore argues that by using the "house model" we can not only refine our understanding of Inner Asian history, but also problematize the conventional evolutionary model of state formation. Namely, since the aristocratic model has all the features of the modern state except a central bureaucratic authority, which is what makes it "headless," it is therefore beyond the conventional state/non-state dichotomy.

Whether or not one agrees with all of Sneath's arguments—and there certainly are things to quibble about, such as his tendency to downplay particular historical contingencies in order to drive his argument forward—it is impossible to deny that this is a bold and sophisticated work. Indeed, I implore everyone to read this study, not blindly, but judiciously and critically so that our field as a whole can move forward.