# HISTORY 140: EARLY CIVILIZATIONS

Topic 5 Seminar

The State and the Sources of Social Power

Seminar Participants:

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**What are wicked problems?**

 "A wicked problem is a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons: incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems. Poverty is linked with education, nutrition with poverty, the economy with nutrition, and so on."[3] Some characteristics of wicked problems include:

1. Wicked problems are difficult to clearly define, have many interdependencies and are often multi-causal.

2. Attempts to address wicked problems often lead to unforeseen consequences.

3. Wicked problems are socially complex and involve changing behavior.

4. Wicked problems hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organization.

**Institutionalized Hierarchies – A Wicked Problem?**

In today's collaborative activity your group will focus on the wicked problem of institutionalized hierarchies (dividing communities by gender, wealth, ethnicity, lineage, and power). Consider the following questions before you begin this activity: What are institutionalized hierarchies? Are institutionalized hierarchies necessary for a civilization to thrive or can they be eliminated with no repercussion? What impact would the abolishment of institutional hierarchies have on other facets of society? Are identities used to order society? Why might this ordering of human relationships be referred to as wicked problem?

**Activity Steps**

1. Review the socioeconomic and political factors gave rise to institutionalized hierarchies in the ancient world and consider examples of how they were manifested and enforced.

2. Identify the four factors and explain their relationship to the facilitation of social power. Next, identify examples of institutionalized hierarchies that exist in your community today. Compare and contrast these examples with those in the ancient world. Why were they created? Why do they still exist?

3. Arrive at outcomes for addressing institutionalized hierarchies in your community. Is it possible to dismantle these institutionalized hierarchies without creating new problems?

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[3] http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/wicked_problems_problems_worth_solving

## The Sources of Social Power

Social power, mastery exercised over other people, was a necessity in agrarian civilizations. Social power became reinforced through social stratification which is the "overall creation and distribution of power in society." Social stratification became a central structure of agrarian civilizations because it made possible for human beings achieve their goals. Explain the relationship of the following characteristics to social power.

| *Characteristics* | *Relationship to Social Power* |
|---|---|
| **Ideological**<br>Meaning – Norms – Rituals | |
| **Economic**<br>Production – Exchange – Class | |
| **Military**<br>Defense – Aggression | |
| **Political**<br>Regulation – Coercion | |

## Contemporary Institutionalized Hierarchies

Take a moment reflect on the community you reside in. Can you identify three institutionalized hierarchies in your community that are motivated by the following three characteristics? If so, how do they impact your community? What would happen to your community if they were dismantled?

| Present Day Hierarchies | Outcomes for Dismantling |
|---|---|
| *Socially Motivated Hierarchy:* | |
| *Economically Motivated Hierarchy:* | |
| *Politically Motivated Hierarchy:* | |