

Scale and information-processing thresholds in Holocene social evolution

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Throughout the Holocene, societies developed additional layers of administration and more information-rich instruments for managing and recording transactions and events as they grew in population and territory. Yet, while such increases seem inevitable, they are not. Here we use the Seshat database to investigate the development of hundreds of polities, from multiple continents, over thousands of years. We find that sociopolitical development is dominated first by growth in polity scale, then by improvements in information processing and economic systems, and then by further increases in scale. We thus define a Scale Threshold for societies, beyond which growth in information processing becomes paramount, and an Information Threshold, which once crossed facilitates additional growth in scale. Polities diverge in socio-political features below the Information Threshold, but reconverge beyond it. We suggest an explanation for the evolutionary divergence between Old and New World polities based on phased growth in scale and information processing. We also suggest a mechanism to help explain social collapses with no evident external causes.

Presenter: WOLPERT, David (professor at the Santa Fe Institute)

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