

TOWARDS A SOCIAL HISTORY OF BYZANTIUM

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To a greater or lesser extent we are able to describe some quite important aspects of Byzantine society in some detail, although the coverage is admittedly rather patchy and incomplete in many areas. But if we ask the questions, what makes things work in the way they did? Why did certain changes occur at certain points in time? How did such-and-such a situation, and the ideas and concepts through which the Byzantines themselves could describe or attempt to describe it, come into being? – these are questions about causal and structural relationships which are rarely asked, and still more rarely answered satisfactorily. And these are the sorts of questions to which a social history approach might perhaps be able to offer some useful – descriptively as well as heuristically useful – answers.

That medieval eastern Roman society was hierarchically structured, in respect of access to wealth and resources, is obvious; and that medieval eastern Romans – Byzantines, in shorthand – were fully aware of the stratified nature of their social world, is equally apparent. Society was understood in both functional terms, in respect of the different roles attributed to different social groups, as well as in a more abstract way, as divided by a range of distinguishing features, among which the role of family and birth had varying significance over time. An anonymous (possibly sixth-century, perhaps later) writer remarks that “Just as in the human body you cannot find a part which has absolutely no function, so in a well-ordered commonwealth there should be no group of citizens which, although able to contribute to the public welfare, in fact does nothing.”¹ All these elements were mutually dependent, none could flourish without the other two. As a simile, the human body is in fact not a bad way to think about the structure of most pre-modern social formations, although of course it also embodies the ideological perception of the different roles ascribed to these elements in society. And it naturally enough subsumes a range of values about the cultural worth of the groups and individuals involved. As I have

¹ Dennis 1985: 10.

noted elsewhere,² societies are complex phenomena made up of sets of social practices, and these practices – ways of doing and behaving, determined by context, function and perceived needs – have the effect of both promoting the physical – biological – reproduction of groups and individuals, on the one hand, and creating institutional patterns of behaving through which systems of belief and social organization are maintained and reproduced on the other. Anthropology has shown that most societies quickly evolve hierarchies of access to resources, and that access by one group of individuals to more resources than others brings with it a consolidation of social power over others – regardless of the process through which selection occurred. At the same time, social groups evolve in relation to resources and in proportion to their ability to control and manipulate resources, and they structure their relationships through patterns of behavior which are in turn determined by concepts of person and identity. Hierarchization, the development of complex notions of status, social honor, rights, and privileges depending also on age and sex as well as wealth and access to resources, gendered roles and concepts determined in their turn by notions and theories about identities and the behavior appropriate to them are inevitable facets of all human social systems.

Study of the political, social, economic, and cultural history of the Byzantine world, defined both more broadly in terms of all those societies or social formations influenced by or within the territory of the Byzantine empire and its culture, as well as by the Byzantine imperial state itself, has become increasingly popular both in terms of mass informed readerships in Europe and North America as well as in respect of specialist study at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Most standard textbooks and specialist analyses contain sections on, or make frequent allusion to, the social structure of the Byzantine world at some point, and some deal specifically with topics such as “society” or “social structure” or “social relations between rich and poor,” for example, at some point in their account. But whereas a great deal of attention has recently been devoted to the economic aspects of later Roman and Byzantine history – the most telling examples are Michael Hendy’s *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300–1450* (Cambridge 1985), the recently published three-volume *The Economic History of Byzantium*, edited by Angeliki Laiou (Washington, DC 2002), Jairus Banaji’s *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2001), and several publications in French – very little has been published specifically on the social history of Byzantium, and more particularly, on the theoretical underpinnings of scholarly discussion in this field. The nearest that anyone has come, in fact, has been Peter Brown’s work on late Antiquity, which set the scene not only for a re-examination of the process of cultural transformation of the later Roman world between the third and eighth centuries CE, but which also critically re-evaluated the processes of change in their social and cultural context, with fundamental implications for how we understand what our sources – textual or archaeological – tell us about the first centuries of medieval Byzantium.³

² Haldon 2005b: 1f.

³ Brown 1971; 2003.

Individual studies proliferate – Franz Tinnefeld’s useful *Die frühbyzantinische Gesellschaft* (Munich 1977); the older and largely ignored book by D. Savramis, *Zur Soziologie des byzantinischen Mönchtums* (Leiden-Köln 1962); Evelynne Patlagean’s magisterial *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance, 4e–7e siècles* (Paris 1977); Jean-Claude Cheynet’s *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* (Paris 1990) or Michel Kaplan’s *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance du VI^e au XI^e siècles* (Paris 1992), and, for the later period, Angeliki Laiou’s *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire: A Social and Demographic Study* (Princeton 1977) – but with the exception of part of Patlagean’s structuralist introductory discussion these are strictly empirical works which set out careful and convincing analyses of the sources but draw conclusions based within a largely unstated set of assumptions about the nature and dynamic of medieval social and economic relations and how they should be envisaged. Works in Russian by scholars such as Alexander Kazhdan did attempt a more sociological approach, but this is vitiated both by the political-ideological context in which they were working and the fact that they remain for the most part untranslated (see, for example, *Social’nyj sostav gospodstvujuščego klassa v Vizantii XI–XII vv.* [The social structure of the Byzantine ruling class in the 11th and 12th centuries], Moscow 1974; K. V. Khvostova, ‘K voprosu o strukture pozdnevizantijskogo sel’skogo poselenija’ [Concerning the structure of late Byzantine rural communities] *Vizantijskij Vremennik*, 45 [1984] 3–19; and *Količestvennyj podhod k srednekovovoj social’no-ekonomičeskoj istorii* [The quantitative approach to medieval socio-economic history], Moscow 1980, etc.). Of the older literature, Ostrogorsky’s work, such as *Quelques problèmes de l’histoire de la paysannerie byzantine* (Brussels 1956), or that of H. Köpstein, *Zur Sklaverei im ausgehenden Byzanz* (Berlin 1966), was concerned with specific issues such as how “feudal” Byzantine society was, or the extent to which slavery remained an important element in Byzantine society. By the same token Lemerle’s work on agrarian society, or Kazhdan’s on the élite and on urbanism, deal with specific issues and, while marking important interventions in the discussion about the structure of Byzantine economy and society, remain nonetheless within the confines of a specific set of questions beyond which they rarely attempt to go.⁴ I will come back to some of these broader questions below.

In the 1970s and 1980s some Russian and East German scholars undertook general social-historical discussions of aspects of Byzantine or late Roman history, and while some of these were well-conceived and useful in parts, they all suffered from the constraints of a post-Stalinist political, theoretical, and intellectual strait-jacket which stultified open discussion and radical theory.⁵ The volumes edited by Köpstein and Winkelmann, for example, were among the best of these: H. Köpstein, F. Winkelmann, eds., *Studien zum 7. Jahrhundert in Byzanz: Probleme der Herausbildung des Feudalismus* (BBA, 47. Berlin 1976); H. Köpstein, F. Winkelmann, eds.,

⁴ See, for example, Lemerle 1979; Kazhdan 1974; 1960.

⁵ E.g. Litavrin 1977; Kurbatov and Lebedeva 1984; Udal’cova and Osipova 1985; Lebedeva 1980. For a summary of the Soviet and western discussion over slavery and feudalism, see Haldon 1993: 70ff.

Studien zum 8. und 9. Jahrhundert in Byzanz (BBA 51. Berlin 1983); and F. Winkelmann, *Quellenstudien zur herrschenden Klasse von Byzanz im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert* (BBA 54. Berlin 1987). The much older works which deal with social history – such as those by Rostovtzeff or Tenney Frank – all deal with the Roman period and do not go much beyond the fifth century.

The list of single articles in journals or edited volumes which deal with particular social-historical topics is vast and cannot be adequately presented here – many of them will be cited in the chapters that follow, but they range widely in subject and value. Ch. Gizewski's short legal-sociological analysis of political opposition in the later Roman period, for example, offers useful insights from a neo-Weberian perspective on the role of violence and force in social and political conflicts; Eleonora Kountoura-Galaki's discussion of the role and structure of the clergy in the seventh–ninth centuries is an important contribution, while Telemachos Loungis' sketch of the main lines of Byzantine social development over the same period remains useful.⁶ Many of the contributions to *The Economic History of Byzantium* are by definition also social-historical in their relevance and often in their material and treatment. Some work has been done on notions of gender and the ways in which behavior and social practice both determined and provided the context for attitudes to women, men, and eunuchs, and some work has been done on the differences between the roles ascribed to men and women of varying social situation in the later Roman and Byzantine worlds. But no one has yet attempted any synthetic discussion of either particular aspects of Byzantine social history across the whole period or (and in the context of) any discussion about approaches to social history in a pre-modern society. More importantly, much of the specialist discussion, as is apparent from the examples cited above, is in languages not accessible either to the great majority of American and English students, or even to many in Europe, so that significant debate and historical insights often go ignored by entire cohorts of students at both undergraduate and graduate level, to say nothing of the wider interested public. *The Economic History of Byzantium*, mentioned already, goes some of the way to addressing some of the issues that a social history might want to examine. But it is in a specifically economic history context with a clearly economic history emphasis, and while there are very useful and important discussions by the editor of a number of theoretical issues which pertain to both social and economic historical analysis, there are still many important aspects of both theory and methodology, quite apart from actual analysis, which are relevant to social history and which remain untouched.⁷ It would seem that the time is ripe, therefore, for a preliminary survey discussion of the field which would set out some basic propositions for discussion, raise key theoretical and methodological issues, and attempt to provide answers to some of the more pressing or obvious problems.

What should a social history of Byzantium look like? Clearly, it should address important issues of social structure and ask questions about the ways in which

⁶ Gizewski 1988; and see the review by Haldon 1989; Kountoura-Galaki 1996; Loungis 1985.

⁷ Laiou 2002a–c.

society was articulated at different levels through cultural as well as economic activities; it should also look at the ways in which social relationships between economically as well as culturally distinct groups functioned, and how changes in those relationships generated changes in the overall workings of the society at large. It should as well look at the different levels or layers of society, on the one hand, and how they related to one another, through economic, political, and cultural means; but it should at the same time consider that vertical divisions and solidarities, involving systems of patronage, for example, or religious-ideological identities, could be every bit as important as, and in some contexts more important than economic barriers and solidarities or vested interests. And it should look at attitudes, identities, patterns of behavior, it should challenge assumptions about such identities and examine how they were constructed and under what conditions – particularly in respect of gender, but in respect of other socially and culturally defined roles and modes of social behavior. In addition, it needs to take account of the very considerable local and regional variations across both geographical space and in time which affected the way “society” worked, the way institutions and relationships were understood and perceived, and the way ideas were transmitted and realized in the practical forms of daily life at all levels. And finally, it should at least in some degree offer the possibility of theorizing Byzantine society in such a way as to make its workings accessible to non-specialists and of value to scholars who wish to draw broader connections and suggest higher-level parallels between what was happening within the Byzantine world and how it worked, and what was going on in neighboring or more distant social and cultural systems. In the following pages I will offer some thoughts on key aspects of what a social history might concern itself with, and suggest some avenues of approach which may be of use in thinking about the social history of the Byzantine world.

Let us begin by defining the terms of the debate. What do we mean by “social history”? The first point to make is that this volume will not be a sociology – that is to say, it has neither the sources nor the depth of material evidence from which to construct an account of society in the sort of rigorous and quantifiable detail to which we may be accustomed in reading contemporary sociological writing. Sociologists generally aim to analyze and explain specific social phenomena through the assembling and statistical analysis of various types of data in order to establish an overall picture of the ways in which different forms of social and cultural practice are linked to create what can be understood as a coherent and overarching system. In fact, sociology – the “science of society” – has fragmented into a number of linked specialist sub-disciplines, such as the sociologies of knowledge, of religion, of art; or of particular forms of social life – sociologies of bureaucracy, of education, of the military, as well as rural, urban, industrial, or political sociology; quite apart from the sociologies of language, or criminology, or the law. Individual chapters may well draw on some of these traditions and specialist areas, but the sort of evidence at our disposal renders a really sociological approach both hazardous and difficult. This social history will therefore be an examination of key facets of Byzantine society in an effort to see what role or function they had, how they evolved

and why, and how they were perceived and understood by those involved in them directly or indirectly.

We ought therefore to consider what the term “society” suggests, a common-sense term, but one which hides as much as it reveals. “Society” is one of the vaguest and most general terms in our vocabulary, and can be used to refer to almost anything from a group of hunter gatherers to a modern industrial state. In social anthropology the term tends to refer at the most basic level to a group which reproduces itself physically and culturally, sharing a body of customs and traditions about their social relationships, applying social sanctions of varying sorts to maintain the social order, and having also a relationship to the land across which or from which they derive sustenance, even if seasonally determined. Social system is an alternative that has also been used in order to emphasize the systemic nature of the relationships and the way they function to maintain the group, however extensive, as well as the better to understand what happens when things go wrong and the system breaks down. The term “social formation,” which is frequently used in historical materialist/Marxist discussion, suffers equally from a certain ambiguity in usage. On the one hand, it refers to ideal-typical sets of social-economic relationship dominated by specific modes of production, such as “feudal” or “capitalist” social formations; on the other, it is used to refer to specific historical societies, for example, the Byzantine or late Roman or colonial Indian social formations. Although some have argued that “social formation” is more analytically useful than “society” because it has both a more open-ended significance and because it implies in the word “formation” a complex of constituent elements, in the end the difference is one of semantics and I do not think that one is necessarily inferior to the other – both describe sets of social (and economic and cultural and political) relations together with the cultural and institutional contexts necessary to their material and ideological reproduction, and it seems to me that as long as this is borne in mind, there is little to choose between them. Indeed, as long as we define our terms and ensure that their functional value is made explicit, we can avoid pointless debates over semantics.⁸ In particular, any of these terms *should* imply not only complexity of structure – the *dialectical* or *emergent* nature of human social praxis is clearly central here – but also fluidity and short-term evolution and transformation. Both social formation and society imply socially embedded human activity and therefore process, change, transformation, and so on.

Societies or social systems have been classified under various headings, from those described in the nineteenth century as primitive, as opposed to modern, to those referred to as non-literate or literate. In Durkheim we find a distinction drawn between segmented and organic structures, where the first category describes societies in which the parts are merely a range of loosely connected or juxtaposed replicas of one another, and the second the societies which display complex differentiation, with organic relationships between the different elements. There are others, but the

⁸ Compare Godelier 1973: 62–9, on the “socio-economic formation.”

point is that they are all functional, that is, they serve a heuristic purpose in the terms of whichever debate or discussion generates them, intended to highlight and clarify particular types of relationship or institutional arrangement. In the end, a single universal definition is rather pointless, since each contributor to a given debate about a specific society will have their own particular questions to ask and their own research agenda. In this respect, therefore, we should not expect any contributor to this volume to do more than define the terms of their own set of questions and clarify the grounds on which they found their description and their analysis.

Any of the terms “society,” or “social formation,” conceal as much as they reveal, of course. It is clearly not possible to separate a social system or the individuals who constitute that system from the beliefs and the conceptual world which they inhabit and contribute to reproducing generation by generation, nor from the physical, material and aesthetic world that they inhabit. Yet in writing contributions for a social history of Byzantium, we inevitably engage with an attempt to take particular areas and treat them from the perspective of a specific set of questions, so that some injustice is done to the seamless reality of the cultural system as a whole. This introductory chapter is intended to remind the reader that the often very different approaches adopted by the contributors to the volume, on the one hand, and the artificial division of the subject “Byzantine society” into a number of separate topics, is simply a convenient heuristic: the overlaps and shared social and cultural spaces as well as the multiple functions of much social practice should remind us that we are, in the end, dealing with a whole which is far greater than the sum of the analytical parts, but which also has marginal areas which are as much part of Byzantine society as they may also be parts of, or associated with, a neighboring culture.

This is an important point, because the concept as well as the term “society” or “social system” is problematic from another point of view. It has been remarked that it can mislead us into thinking that a particular society is somehow entirely distinct from, separated from, the other societies around it.⁹ But this cannot be the case throughout most of history. To start with, even if there are, for example, religious-ideological boundaries, the people of different creeds on either side will inevitably have certain things in common, such as agrarian practices and domestic economic organization, for example, at least in situations where climate and seasonal factors are common to both. Thus Byzantine peasants in the Balkans in the eighth and ninth centuries were hardly very different in these respects from their Bulgar and Slav neighbors, nor can Byzantine peasants in southern or eastern Asia Minor have differed greatly in the seasonal practices which dominated their

⁹ For an eloquent statement of why this cannot be the case, with an alternative approach, see Mann 1986: 1–33. While I do not accept Mann’s four-part model of social power (ideological, economic, military, and political), each bearing equal constitutive value, his analysis and discussion nevertheless throws into high relief some of the problems faced by those who wish to pursue a historical sociology.

agrarian existences from similar communities on the other side of the political divide. Yet at a different level there were real and obvious differences – in habits of worship, in language and perhaps dress, the vocabulary and expression, and the instrumental value attributed to different positions within a set of kinship relations, and so forth. In other words, there are multiple, layered overlaps which cross over the political, religious, or linguistic divisions which we commonly identify as marking the boundaries of a given society, and we need to bear this in mind, especially when discussing, for example, such topics as the changing impact of religion on marriage, on local and customary legal practice, the seasonal patterns of social and economic life, and so forth. Such overlaps can play a role in perceptions, too – the well-known commonalities which are represented in the epic of Digenis Akrites between the Roman and Arab frontier lords, for example, in respect of notions of honor and social status, which set them apart from the more urbane and court-orientated worlds of Constantinople or Aleppo or Damascus or Baghdad.¹⁰

What we refer to as “Byzantine society,” therefore, must necessarily be understood in its widest sense, and as just one of a number of social systems which overlapped and intersected at various points, not just in terms of physical space – around the edges, so to speak – but also in terms of social practice, household organization, and so forth. Eastern Roman or Byzantine society grew up out of the late Roman world just as did the societies around it, in particular the social worlds of Italy and the Balkans and the Near and Middle East, and in consequence had evolved together, shared certain characteristics but diverged in many others, perceived itself as very different yet at the same time functioned in many respects in much the same way, and in which the relationship between human beings and their physical environment represented a constant, determining the patterns and seasonality of life from bottom to top.

The chapters in this volume will examine some of these facets, each selected because of its importance in helping make sense of the whole. Byzantines had an idea, a concept, of their world, although there were differences between different social and cultural groups as to what this entailed and how it was understood, so that a discussion of Byzantine perceptions of their world and how they represented it to themselves and to others is fundamental. Self-image is crucial to understanding how a social system works, because the ideas presented both for internal consumption as well as to the outside world offer invaluable insights into how people thought their world worked. Whether this relates to the attitudes of a particular social group and its values, or the ideas reflected in imperial and state propaganda intended to impress the outside world, they reflect and can to some extent explain how people behaved in their world and in accordance with the “rules” of society, implicit or explicit. Yet breaking through the surface presentation of social relationships to see what lies behind them is a complicated task, since it requires historians to do two things. First, they must be familiar enough with the language of the culture under examination and have some idea of the ways in which terms and vocabulary serve

¹⁰ See, for example, Magdalino 1989 and Pertusi 1971.

to reference a set of cultural codes which relates the writer to their own educational and literary/cultural tradition and the cultural capital in which they are invested, but which also permits them to express ideas about their world using a vocabulary very different from our own. Where we casually throw in terms drawn from day-to-day business or economic language to talk about politics, for example, Byzantines used the language and metaphors of the Fathers of the Church or the Old and New testaments or classical literature, although there were also plenty of “economic” terms that could be employed for specific purposes. Second, and following from this, historians need to be sensitive to the cultural logic of the society in question, to the fact that its understanding of itself and how it works will produce results in terms of social action which may not appear, or even be, either logical or productive to our way of thinking. Contributions dealing with representation and identity, for example, crucial components of the ways in which the literary and artistic culture of the Byzantine world functioned and has made an impression on outsiders, including ourselves, need to take this into account from the start.

This point might in turn lead to a discussion of how we can approach or apprehend the past, how we as historians both construct a version of a past through the generation of narratives built around various categories of evidence, on the one hand, and on the other how we validate different types of knowledge and how we permit ourselves to know something outside our own experiences and our own world. In short, what is the epistemological framework through which we construct knowledge as such, about anything? There is here an enormously complex debate, to which we cannot begin to do justice in this context, but which has occupied historians for generations. And although it rarely impinges on our own empirical practice as scholars of Byzantine society and culture, it is nevertheless relevant and, if our work is to be useful outside the confines of our own subjects, we ignore it at our peril.¹¹

We cannot, of course, get inside the minds of long-dead members of a historical society, no more in fact than we can get into the minds of our contemporaries. But grappling with the thought-world of a past culture is inevitably one of the things we have to try to do if we are to understand why things happened the way and at the time they did. How can we deal with the issue of the relationship between thinking and doing, between belief and praxis, for example? Historical data cannot offer the same types of answer as that available to sociology and psychology, but nevertheless general theories of mind and of cognition derived from these disciplines can be applied to the product of past human consciousness, as preserved in historical documents, for example, whether written sources or other types of artifact. The context may have changed, but the essentially cultural nature of human cognitive activity remains. One useful approach to the thought-world, the *mentalité*, of the Byzantine world, is to conceptualize it as a “symbolic universe” (perhaps equivalent to “Weltanschauung”), meaning the totality of cultural

¹¹ For some orientation, see Haldon 1984–5; 1986; 2002.

knowledge (both implicit knowledge as well as explicit knowledge)¹² and practice in a society or social formation, within which and through which regular everyday life is carried on. While the relationship between consciousness and practice must be understood as a dialectic through which individuals receive their subjective awareness of self and their personal environment, it also provides them with the conceptual apparatus through which they can in turn express what they know about the world, act back upon it, and yet at the same time sets limits to what they can know and how they can know, limits within which what we might call “the culturally possible” can be thought.

But by the same token a symbolic universe is itself the product of social practice, through which it is continuously reproduced. The activities carried on by individuals actively engaged in socially reproducing themselves – a technical way of saying “living out their daily routines” – and hence in reproducing the social relations of production and reproduction of their particular cultural system, along with its roles and social institutions, have the material cultural effect of reproducing the structural forms within which the same individuals are inscribed. This is for me also a useful way of thinking about the ways in which beliefs and ideas contribute to the make-up of individuals, because it retains a stronger emphasis on the individual’s constitutive function in a social-cultural context, and it at the same time permits us to see how shifts in perceptions, and in consequence of the way people act, might engender in turn broader shifts in social relationships, and thus bring about historical change.¹³

One way of getting at how people thought about their world and what they thought made things tick, or not, is to look at what socio-linguists call personal and collective narrative. Narrative in this sense is seen as a crucial element in the construction of social realities – perceived relationships and structures – within which humans socially reproduce themselves. Narrative, indeed, can be said to provide the link between consciousness and practice. By “narrative” is meant simply a series of linked clauses or statements with an evaluative – and therefore structuring – element, arranged in time to create a series of causally sequential events. Both the originating function of the narrative – provided by the context which provides the stimulus to produce the narrative – and the personal nature of its content affect its general coherence, so that an evaluative or interpretative aspect is a fundamental feature.¹⁴ The same basic definition can be extended to group or collective narratives, that is to say, to those narrative forms that express the experiences and perceptions of individuals in their aspect as members of a specific group. Although

¹² For this important distinction, see Sperber 1975.

¹³ I borrow “symbolic universe” from Berger and Luckmann 1967, esp. 110ff. (deriving in turn from Durkheim) and Schütz 1960. The phenomenology of Schütz and Berger and Luckmann, and the symbolic interactionism of G. H. Mead, seem to me to make good partners in the generation of a realist materialist theorization of the relationship between consciousness and practice, as the arguments of Goff 1980 might suggest.

¹⁴ See in particular Labov and Waletzky 1967: 12–44.

there is evidently a qualitative shift in the composition and effectivity of such collective narratives, their formal properties remain the same.¹⁵

Narratives are fictions because they are *reconstructions* of experience, they organize experience and memory temporally through language and in the process elaborate a relationship between the narrator and the events narrated.¹⁶ Thus narratives work essentially as a means of identifying the individual self within a social and cultural context, of providing a reality – they answer the question “who am I?”. As such, they also act as patterns for social action – future planning based on past experience. The symbolic universe is therefore the aggregate of social institutions and the beliefs and concepts associated with them, of the scripts and roles and narratives determining how people live out their relationships to the world around them. But narratives are always re-constructions of experience, they involve evaluation, and therefore there inheres within them the potential for change, for shifts in understanding roles and relationships and thus, crucially, for shifts in social practice. A change in the elements making up a narrative will entail a change in evaluation, and consequently a change in perceptions of the relationship between self (or group) and the world. And depending upon the order of magnitude of change in these elements, such changes can take any form, from the re-assessment of a relationship to an individual or an activity – and thus individualized and localized – to a re-assessment by a whole collectivity or group of their position in relation to other groups or individuals, institutions, sets of beliefs, and so forth. The narrative representation of “what has happened” is constructed within a cultural context which relies upon the stability of certain key symbolic elements and metaphors – institutions, situations, assumptions, and so forth. If these are removed or shaken the cohesion of the narrative is interrupted – it can no longer be constructed within the terms previously given, which must now be re-arranged to account for the dissonance or mismatch. And if we want to find the answer to the question “why did people change their way of doing things at this moment?,” then looking at their own narratives of the world and their place in it – assuming that such evidence exists, naturally – is a good place to start.

Narratives exist and function at multiple levels. There are narratives of personal identity which situate an individual in their kin and family context, or professional life, or social life – they intersect in the individual but they are available as a means of identifying and reinforcing identity for each of the roles within the bundle of roles each individual represents. Collective narratives similarly function to provide members of a group, however identified (by social and economic situation, by function, by creed, by race or by language, for example, to name but a few possibilities)

¹⁵ I leave to one side the use of the term “narrative” to refer to the imposition of form on the past, as argued by the “narrativist” tradition, most clearly by White 1978, even though the common element – evaluation through language and the construction of a specific “story” – is apparent. See Topolski 1981; and Mandelbaum 1980.

¹⁶ For narrative as organizing experience and perceptions, see Garfinkel 1967; Sperber 1975: 85–149; Goff 1980: 112–14.

with their own common markers in respect of behavior and expected attitudes.¹⁷ And there are metanarratives, political-ideological systems, for example, which offer larger-scale identities to those involved in them. But each of these can be disrupted by shifts in their conditions of existence, and this brings with it the potential for an imbalance which challenges peoples' assumptions and the predictable roles and patterns of their daily lives.

In such situations, there is generally a search to re-establish equilibrium: in order to maintain a sense of self – a secure identity – based on older narratives, for example, in order to avoid a situation of social *anomie*, to use Durkheim's concept,¹⁸ a re-ordering of the relevant narrative elements may be required, and such a re-ordering may take one of several forms. It might include action aimed at redressing the balance of elements considered affected; a re-evaluation of the self – or the group – in the structure of the narrative as a whole; or a minor re-adjustment of certain elements, intended to preserve the same general order of things. And in historically observable terms, this might be reflected or represented by changes in patterns of behavior of individuals or collectivities, expressed publicly through "political" means or violence, for example, although other possibilities also exist. Social action in this model is thus construed as culturally available re-action, based on personal and group narrative reconstructions of observed or perceived events and on feelings, that is to say, on the socially determined and culturally situated responses of individuals to shifts in any of the elements which make up their perceived or experienced world order. The emphasis on culturally situated is important, since the potential for action is inscribed within a specific set of social relations of production and reproduction.¹⁹ The facility of any individual to evaluate and to re-evaluate, to act and to react, is thus understood as embedded within, and as a consequence limited or circumscribed by, these relationships, which represent at once both the social-economic and the cultural instances of the social formation.

One way of elucidating the causal relationship between perception, reaction, and result, in consequence, is to see historical change – as in part at least the sum of actors' responses to a given set of circumstances – as representing the working out, through the medium of personal and collective narrative reconstruction rooted in the symbolic universe of a particular social and cultural formation, of perceptions and experiences of other changes within society, experiences which could not be understood or accommodated within the established narrative framework, and which demanded the relocation of certain elements. It seems to me that this offers a very specific link between agency and structure, and between structure and change, which is, after all, what the historian seeks to elucidate.

An important part of any social history is to examine the rules and codes that a society or culture generates to regulate relationships within and between groups

¹⁷ Aksu-Koç 1996.

¹⁸ Durkheim 1933.

¹⁹ By "social reproduction" I mean activities and practices which contribute to the constant renewal and regeneration of social relationships and thus the socio-cultural system as a whole.

and individuals, and the contingent roles and identities through which such codes are realized and implemented – or challenged. All social systems generate codes of conduct and systems of rules, however simple they might be, to govern social relationships, and these generally involve the exercise of some form of power, either directly and coercively or abstractly, through inherited patterns of managing certain events or structures. They also usually involve ways of ensuring both continuity and the maintenance of the social and cultural order, but they are as subject to change and modification over time as any other forms of human behavior. Patterns of inheritance, for example, differentiated Byzantine society sharply from medieval western European practice, resulting in a very different configuration of the social élite in the two regions, with important consequences for their cultural, economic, and political roles. Such rules exist both explicitly – in stated moral or legal codes, for example, which were written down and could be consulted, discussed, or amended; and in the form of social institutions such as the family and the kinship structures it embodies, on the one hand, or of codes of conduct for particular types of social relationship, such as those between soldiers and their officers, for example, or between people of different social status. The family is an especially important aspect, since it is primarily through the family and its attendant structures, including patterns for the transmission of property, control of reproduction, i.e. women, and the degrees of consanguinity which are permitted, that the basic building-blocks of social organization and culture are organized. Families are essentially groups of individuals united by the ties of marriage, blood, and/or adoption. The basic family unit, or nuclear family – husband, wife, and immature children – is more usually incorporated within or subordinated to a larger composite familial structure, including more than two generations, for example, which might include the parents of the husband or, less commonly, the wife, and referred to as an extended family. In Byzantine society it is clear that both forms co-existed, and that social and cultural context was an important factor in determining family structure.

But the family is but one element in a network of kinship relationships which played a crucial role in the ways in which Byzantines perceived their society and their role within it. Kinship is a social relationship based on real, putative, or fictive consanguinity, and plays a key role in respect of political, economic, and cultural identities and solidarities, to the extent that it directly impacts on the ways in which the state functioned, wealth was extracted, distributed, and consumed – a good example of this can be seen in Cheynet's exemplary analysis of the tensions and conflicts within and between different elements of the Byzantine social élite in the period from the tenth to the twelfth century, conflicts which directly determined the ways in which the state functioned, but which were at the same time deeply affected by issues of kin and family politics and rivalries.²⁰ In this respect Byzantine society is no different from other pre-industrial social systems, but naturally the specific modalities of kinship relations, family structure and the symbolic universe

²⁰ Cheynet 1990.

of which they were seen as fundamental elements are what concern us here, because it is through these historically and culturally specific forms that Byzantine society is given its particular color and texture. And it is likewise through these forms that Byzantines engaged with their world and acted upon it.

Understanding the family and kinship is, therefore, essential to understanding society as a whole, and this has necessarily to be accompanied by a discussion of the ways in which the law and the legal system, and the establishment of norms for dealing with the transmission of property, conflict situations, the regulation of public and private social relationships, and so forth, affected Byzantine society and were in turn affected by shifts and changes in the moral world, in particular as Byzantine Christianity and the church increased their influence over important elements of Roman law, especially those associated with marriage and inheritance. Yet this immediately brings with it a multiplicity of problems, if only because the generally accepted modern understanding of terms such as “law” and “legislation” tended in a medieval context to have somewhat, and often very, different significance. Imperial legislation aimed at both specific and generalizable decisions arising from particular moments, and at the production of general prescriptions about temporally and geographically specific issues. The *practice* of law, on the other hand – the process through which justice was achieved for the parties involved in litigation, for example – both rested on Roman tradition but was at the same time an intensely moral process, in which the concept of justice was itself determined by the framework of values generated and maintained by the symbolic universe. Indeed, the fact that the emperor was and always remained the final arbiter at all levels of decision-making and legal appeal has been seen as an illustration of the fragility of a normative legal system in the modern sense of the term, and of the fact that Roman law served largely as a palette from which “norms” could be made and unmade entirely in response to the pragmatic demands of either politics or contemporary morality, or both.²¹ In this respect, too, understanding the church as both an economic and a moral political force is an essential part of the story. The church was the formal, public representative of a specifically Byzantine world-view and thus wielded immeasurable influence ideologically as well as politically. But quite apart from the role of canon law in reflecting and moulding Byzantine views of the world and how it was understood (as well as the tension between secular Roman law and canon law), the social origins of the senior as well as lesser clergy also constitute a focal point for our approach, not only because they tell us about the ways in which social mobility worked through particular channels, but also because they can inform us about the ways in which social power was exercised. The church, through its bishops and their agents, was a major landlord, and the organization of its lands and the ways it spent its income can tell us about the economic structure of large estates, landlord–tenant relationships, and the exercise of social power more generally, quite apart from the issues associated with the church’s ideological power and authority.

²¹ See Fögen 1987; and Simon 1973; 1976: 102–16.

Conflict is an unavoidable aspect of Byzantine history, perhaps given undue emphasis because conflict is frequently what interested the contemporary historians, chroniclers, and other commentators. Conflict at court, conflict between elite families and clans, disagreements and tensions or conflict between emperors and patriarchs, conflict between individuals before a court, conflict between provincial commanders and their armies, all conflict revolved around a struggle for power and influence, whether at court and over policy, over economic resources in the provinces, or over imperial religious policy and the perceptions ordinary people had about it. Power will, thus, be a crucial element in much of the discussion, and definitions of power, or how the notion might best be conceptualized, are therefore of central importance. Power has two aspects – the ways in which it could be wielded, and the ways in which it was represented and portrayed by those who wielded it or wished to give that impression. In much contemporary social history debate, power is generally understood as social power, as a generalized means to specific ends. Power is thus control over a variety of types of resource (wealth, people, knowledge), these resources then depending upon the areas of social life in which such ends are to be attained. Power can thus be exercised at a variety of levels – from the most personal (the exercise of power by one individual over another based on resources such as knowledge or the possibility of physical coercion) to the most public (political-military power exercised through authority over armies, police forces, food supplies, and so on). But in all these contexts, the exercise of power tends towards an end (even if, in the example of personal physical coercion, bullying, that end is psychological gratification).

From one perspective, then, “power” is the political and psychological expression of economic dominance (since resources are, in the end, an essentially economic category), although this element may not necessarily be obvious either to the modern commentator nor clearly be conceptualized as such by those who wield it – social relationships are generally represented in an ideological form that has no obvious single economic point of reference. Power is a product of the combination and articulation of human psychology, cultural forms, and economic context. And while it may be exercised in a relative autonomy from other structures in respect of its immediate *effects*, it does not spring out of nothing. Power, coercion, and ideology are forms or expressions of *praxis*, that is to say, of the socially determined way people in different contexts in a culture do things. They are modes through which particular sets of relationships can be maintained and reproduced. Power is central to social theory, but the struggle for, attainment, and exercise of power is about resources, and while it must by definition be understood as a reflection of the economics of society, it must also be seen as something that can be realized or implemented at the level of cultural and psychological resources.²²

Power, kinship structures, and the family, beliefs and their relationship to social praxis, systems of representation and identities, these are all fundamental aspects of our approach to the ways in which a society functions, how it regenerates itself

²² See Mann 1986: 6; Foucault 1979: 81ff.

generation after generation, and how it changes. But apart from these specific issues, there are broader social-historical questions which we might wish to ask, in order to situate Byzantium in its wider context. Answers to the question, “what sort of society was Byzantium at such-and-such a period?” (because it clearly changed and evolved over time, so that a single descriptive category may well not suffice), can really only be given once we have carried out the more detailed analysis of all these different facets, and many others. Yet there has been a long debate of a comparativist nature about how to characterize Byzantine society, a debate which in many ways has fallen into abeyance, but which needs perhaps to be revived if “Byzantium” is to be understood in the context of the history of European and Near Eastern societies over the period from 500 CE to 1453. Partly I would argue that this is necessary to avoid compartmentalizing Byzantium and closing it off from fruitful comparison with neighboring social and cultural systems – at one level in particular, that of the gendering of social roles and the unspoken assumptions that such a process reflects, the Roman or Byzantine world cannot be taken on its own, it must, in the end, be part of a larger and broader picture of the ways in which biology, culture, and social praxis interact across many cultural systems.²³ In addition, since we have already noted that no society exists in splendid isolation, looking for features which it has in common with, as well as which differentiate it from, neighboring societies is a useful, indeed essential, exercise in helping us understand “what makes Byzantine society tick.” A few words on earlier more traditional comparativist debates – carried on almost exclusively on the terrain of social wealth, political-ideological power, and political systems – might therefore be interesting and useful in this respect.

Byzantine society and state have received remarkably little attention from either comparative historians or state theorists, certainly when compared with the treatment afforded Rome, out of which Byzantium evolved. This situation seems to me to reflect the fact that historians and specialists of the Byzantine world have themselves been very reluctant to generalize from their work or to draw broader conclusions within a comparative context, so that their subject has remained fairly difficult of access to the non-specialist. The lack of synthesizing works by specialists in the field, which would put Byzantium into a longer-term comparative perspective, means that outsiders have tended, and still tend, to pass it over with little or no comment. Work by scholars such as Peter Brown and Alexander Kazhdan on aspects of the social-cultural history of the late Roman, Byzantine, and western medieval worlds,²⁴ by Chris Wickham on the evolution of society and economy across the European and Mediterranean worlds after the fifth century CE, or Alan Harvey and Michel Kaplan on the agrarian economics of Byzantium in their wider context, have begun to address the issues from a broader, comparative perspective.²⁵ But those working from such a broad standpoint have only recently begun, and mostly fairly superficially, to integrate the Byzantine world into their syntheses. A

²³ See Liz James’ chapter, below.

²⁴ Brown 1971; 1981; Kazhdan 1974.

²⁵ Wickham 2005; Kaplan 1992; Harvey 1989.

recent exception is the attempt to place Byzantine culture in a comparative and “civilizational” context as part of a critique of work on the “Byzantine” background to Balkan and eastern European history (Arnason 2000). But the first volume of Michael Mann’s admirable survey, *The Sources of Social Power* (1986), mentions Byzantium only briefly and problematically; the second volume of Runciman’s *A Treatise on Social Theory* (1989) is just as brief, although better in respect of the conclusions it draws. Most other comparativist surveys – for example, Tainter’s *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1988) – barely pay lip-service to the Byzantine case. Perry Anderson’s *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974) pays serious attention to the East Roman context, but his very able treatment is vitiated for today’s reader in part by the fact that since the time of writing in the early 70s, a number of important advances have been made in understanding how the East Roman state evolved. Anderson was also working within an Anglo-Marxist framework in which he wanted to retain traditional notions of “mode of production,” and demonstrate that whereas western feudalism was the result of a synthesis of slave and primitive-communal (“Germanic”) modes, no such synthesis took place in the East and Balkans because of the conservatism of the Eastern Roman state superstructure. I do not think this conclusion is altogether incorrect, but it needs to be expressed in different terms to be of heuristic value. The main difficulty is that the framework of the discussion, which tends towards an illustration of the uniqueness of western social-economic evolution, does not really contribute towards a discussion of exploitation and power-relationships, the more so since Anderson does not really give adequate space to the internal dynamism of Byzantine culture and political-economic development. In addition, most of these debates are vitiated still by a perspective that tends, even if unintentionally, to present medieval Eastern Roman culture as stagnant and fossilized, thus further inhibiting any possibility of seeing the dynamic structures that underlay the apparently slow rates of change evident in some of the sources. In fact, as soon as one takes the full range of source materials into account, and most particularly the now rapidly increasing volume of archaeological data, such views become manifestly untenable.

The one area where the question, “What sort of society was Byzantium?” did receive a great deal of attention was that of the debates over the concept “feudalism,” and whether or not Byzantine society can ever be described under this rubric. Feudalism has now, of course, become a highly problematic, indeed contentious, concept, and recent scholarship has tended to avoid the term altogether,²⁶ certainly when discussing the Byzantine state, a tendency with which most Byzantinists, including the present writer, would sympathize. But in the earlier debates, Byzantium came to represent for many the classic example of a social formation which failed conspicuously to develop “full” feudal relations of production in the medieval period. This attitude was in part to be ascribed to the nature of the definition of feudalism employed, which related quite specifically to the political structures and institutional forms of western European society in the High Middle Ages. Most

²⁶ See, for example, Reynolds 1994.

western Byzantinists (the vast majority of them not being Marxists), for example, refused to concede that Byzantine society was ever feudal; or that, if it was, then only at the very end of its long history, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries on, and only as a result of western, that is to say, external, influence. In contrast, and using a political-economic definition of the concept, Soviet and East European historians had traditionally split into two opposing parties or camps: those who saw “feudal” relations already in the later Roman period (from the fifth century, but most clearly from the seventh); and those who found evidence for such relations only after the tenth and eleventh centuries. At a later stage, there was a move towards accepting elements of the “Western” critique, and to push the development of “full” feudal relations forward into the thirteenth century and after. The premises upon which both approaches were based is open to criticism.²⁷

For the Western historian of the Byzantine world, feudalism was defined chiefly in terms not of the economic relationships which underlay the forms of the political structures of surplus distribution and power, but to the types of political/legal structures themselves – structures of vassalage, enfeoffment, and so on, together with the supporting elements of dependent tenant or serf peasantries, and the fragmentation of judicial and political authority and powers. In other words, and logically enough, Byzantium cannot be considered feudal because its institutional and superstructural appearance never approximated to the appearance of western European feudalism in the tenth century and after. Non-Marxist Western Byzantinists who did favor a feudal stage were usually constrained to place its inception in the eleventh century, with the appearance of *pronoia*, whereby the state granted the revenue from certain taxes or dues in particular regions or districts, and for limited periods, to individuals in return for (predominantly) military service.²⁸ But once again, the crucial determining factor for a feudal order was the secondary institution of *pronoia*, one variation of the many forms of the redistribution of surplus wealth by the state (initially), rather than any (economic) relation of production, a point which is now generally recognized.²⁹

Now these two approaches – the “legal/institutional” approach of the non-Marxist tradition and the political-economic approach of historical materialism – were not necessarily mutually exclusive, at least in respect of the fact that they were intended functionally to address different sets of questions (although they certainly represent distinct analytical and descriptive strategies). But in practice each party to the debate tended (often for manifestly political-ideological reasons) to ignore the functional value and analytical point of the definition employed by the other.

²⁷ The classic western statement is Lemerle 1979: 89, 115. For the later Soviet position, see Khvostova 1980.

²⁸ An argument elaborated by Ostrogorsky 1954, and later followed and developed by others. For a brief summary of part of the debate, see Anderson 1974: 279ff. It is important to note, however, that Ostrogorsky’s thesis was the foundation upon which the ideas of a number of Soviet scholars on this theme came to be based.

²⁹ See Cheynet 2006: 28–30.

The result was that the discussion became, on the whole, one in which deliberate obfuscation, misunderstanding, and a plethora of alternative and usually mutually exclusive definitions and usages littered the pages of historical journals. More importantly, and further complicating the issues, Marxists of varying theoretical colors often, and unwittingly, attempted to describe and discuss “feudal” societies by combining both economic (Marxist) and institutional (non-Marxist) criteria, in a way which was generally both confusing and analytically of little value to any discussion which attempts to do more than merely describe medieval and early modern societies in isolation.

Soviet and East European historiography up to the mid-1980s, nominally at least Marxist in its theoretical underpinnings, concentrated largely on the question of when Byzantine social relations became feudalized, for example, and this inevitably involved problematizing the ways in which the state and its institutions intervened at different levels of the social and economic formation. The two traditional positions, which were evident from the late 1950s, were represented most readily in the work of two scholars, Štaermann and Syuzumov. In spite of their differences, both implicitly included in their definition of feudal relations of production also institutional and political organizational forms, which rendered their discussion extremely problematic from the point of view of feudal social relations as representing an economic mode of production.

Štaermann presented in many ways a Soviet precursor of Anderson’s thesis, which it pre-dated by many years: namely, that “feudalism” in the west was the result of a synthesis of the Roman “slave mode of production” with the barbarian tribalism or primitive communalism of the Germanic invaders. In contrast, the Balkans and Anatolia moved directly from the slave mode to the feudal mode, without external stimulus, as the developing relations of landlord–tenant subordination were subsumed within the state’s fiscal apparatus, so that the taxes raised by the state can in effect be seen as a centralized form of feudal rent.³⁰ Syuzumov, in contrast, argued that this position denied the concept of revolutionary change altogether, erecting in its place a notion of mechanical synthesis. At the same time he argued that it broadened the concept of the feudal mode to include virtually all forms of dependency and rent-extraction, and rendered it as a result too general to be of any analytical value. Syuzumov’s view was that synthesis of a sort did occur in the west, but only at a much later date; while in the east the strength of the institutions of the ancient state, its ability to extract taxes, and the destruction of the large landholding elite from the seventh century on, delayed the development of feudal relations of production until, in the tenth century, a new class of landed magnates had arisen to challenge the state’s interests in respect of the surpluses generated by the agricultural population of the empire. But their rise was itself

³⁰ For an analysis and fruitful discussion of the conflicting and alternative definitions of the term “feudalism,” and the tendency of protagonists of both approaches to obfuscate the issue by failing to recognize the different functions of, and criteria underlying, these variations of usage, see Perlin 1985. For Štaermann’s view, see Štaermann 1975.

promoted by the “war economy” of the imperial state, which succumbed to feudalism chiefly because of the debilitating effects of constant warfare and the requirements of defense.³¹ In other words, Syuzyumov considered Byzantine society to have represented a stable combination of forces and relations of production, a combination destabilized by *external forces*.³²

Even from a historical materialist perspective, this seemed a barely defensible view, at least in the stark form in which it was expressed by Syuzyumov, if only because the absence of any analysis (or suggestion) of internal contradiction and class conflict, however defined, deprived the description of any dynamic element. In contrast, indeed, another then-Soviet scholar, Alexander Kazhdan, argued that it was precisely the internal contradictions of Byzantine society that explained its particular characteristics, a result of the impasse which he saw between developing “feudal” relations and the economic and ideological structures of the ancient centralized state.³³ Kazhdan also argued that, while neither “feudal” nor ancient relations of production were able to assert themselves fully until after the eleventh century (when he argued that feudalism finally became dominant), the taxes extracted by the ancient state did constitute already a form of “centralized feudal rent”.³⁴

It is worth noting, finally, that – with the exception of the more recent work of Khvostova referred to already – the majority of Soviet scholars came to agree that the seventh century marked the end of the ancient world and the accompanying slave mode of production; that there followed a long period of pre- or proto-“feudal” development (as outlined by Kazhdan, for example), succeeded from the eleventh or twelfth century by the full development of “feudal” relations of production. Within this schema, the debate then concentrated in the 1970s and 1980s on the question of whether or not tax was the equivalent of “centralized feudal rent”; on the quantitative relationship between independent peasant cultivators and dependent tenants (whether of the church, state, or private landlords); and on the process of erosion of independent peasant holdings and peasant communities subject directly to the fisc, in favor of the expansion of large estates and the gradual “enservment” of this formerly free peasantry.³⁵ All seemed agreed on the crucial role of the state in the development of Byzantine “feudalism,” especially its role in patronizing and promoting what became by the tenth and eleventh century the aristocracy. All were likewise in agreement on the state’s ability to hold back the expansion of aristocratic landholding in the provinces – less through conscious

³¹ Syuzyumov 1973a: 3–18.

³² Syuzyumov 1976.

³³ Kazhdan 1968: 263ff. But for a critique of the “prime mover” theories, which underlies this purely internalized model of change, see McLennan 1986.

³⁴ Kazhdan 1956; and 1960.

³⁵ These views are best summarized in the work of Litavrin 1977. See also the survey of Kurbatov and Lebedeva 1984, which emphasizes both the importance of slavery in late ancient production (up to the seventh century) and the dominance of feudal relations of production from the later eleventh century. See also Udal’cova and Osipova 1985.

policy-making, than through the inertia of the state's institutional apparatuses of fiscal and military administration.³⁶ The final position was, in many ways, not too distant from that espoused by Anderson in his own survey.³⁷

There is little point here in reviewing the vast Soviet and East European literature of the years before 1988/9 concerned with these issues, largely because, even if many of the questions it dealt with remain important, the approach espoused, the historical-theoretical base within which they were framed, and much of the vocabulary employed by both Western and Eastern medievalists – in particular, terms such as “feudal” and “feudalism” – have become largely redundant, insofar as an overly rigid and dogmatic interpretational framework inevitably constrained and distorted the ways in which the evidence could be understood and interpreted, and as historians opted to abandon terms associated with particular ways of thinking about the human past.

So is it worth engaging in such broad comparativist discussion at all? Historians – including those who contribute to this volume – will continue to disagree with one another over this issue, and each will have their own reasons for whichever view they espouse. My own answer to the question is positive, for I would argue that the best way to make Byzantium comprehensible and interesting to a broader group of scholars is to situate it in a wider world and try to see what similarities and differences it displays, and at what level. By the same token, placing it in such a context compels us to look at Byzantine society as a whole and to try to make the connections between the various parts which specialist studies, essential though they are, often ignore or miss, necessarily so in many cases in view of their priorities and focus of interest.

Similarities and differences are not to be located merely in the appearances a particular social system presents – rather we need to look below the surface to try to locate both the social functions of particular relationships or institutions (how they contribute to the workings of society) and to see how their structural role fits into a larger whole. Structures are always multifunctional or, better, multi-effectual. Descent, marriage, and inheritance, for example, are regulated in all societies by kinship (whether or not this is represented through a particular set of religious and ideological institutions); and in all societies the relationship between human beings and the supernatural is regulated and explicated by religion of a greater or lesser degree of theoretical sophistication. Yet not all societies are dominated by either kinship or religious systems; and the explicit function of these regulatory systems alone, where they represent the dominant mode of public and private discourse, cannot in itself explain this pre-eminence: another function must also be in play. And this function must be that of a social relation (or set of relations) of production, that is to say, a set of relationships that contributes directly to the maintenance of the economic relationships which determine the way in which different

³⁶ See again Litavrin 1971, for a survey of views, with literature. Note in particular Syuzumov 1973a.

³⁷ Anderson 1974: 273ff.

socio-economic groups are associated. In this light, the forces of production – tools, land, livestock, and labor power – are also a relation of production, since they entail both the means of production and the ways in which production is carried on. These can certainly be described as “economic” relationships, yet in the great majority of pre-industrial societies this process – the labor process – is assured and reproduced precisely through sets of practices and social-institutional arrangements which have no such transparently “economic” appearance: kinship arrangements, family structures and a gendered division of labor, caste and lineage attributions, age-sets, or legal statuses, all representing particular forms of political organization, all functioning as a particular set of social relations of production. In other words, the fundamental point to bear in mind is not what social relations appear to be – politics, kinship, religion – but what their role is; or, if this is too teleological a formulation, what their effect is in the totality of social relationships.

Each individual member of a social formation occupies a range of different positions on the grid of social praxis. In other words, each combination of social practices or roles has a different effect. Such positions all possess two qualities: they contribute causally to the maintenance and reproduction of a number of sets of relationships with other members of the society; and they furnish the actor/bearer with a set of perceptions of self and, therefore, of the world. As discussed above, therefore, they facilitate the construction of narratives through which the world and the individuals within it can be understood and made sense of. But it is the modern analyst who has to decide which combinations of social relations causally contribute towards the breakdown or transformation of certain social and cultural practices, and how new practices (and where possible, why particular practices only) evolve. It seems to me that it is ruptures within the pattern of social reproductive practice – within the social relations of production and distribution of surpluses – rather than in the extension or contraction of power relations or shifts in patterns of belief (which are themselves constrained by, but may determine the phenomenal form of, the relations of production, the degree of surplus appropriation and the nature of its distribution) which are determinant.

Understanding how change occurs and why is a complicated matter. Sociological theory, which is often very descriptive in its implications, is of far less help in this respect than historical approaches to change, of course, or indeed the theories evolved by comparative social theorists. W. G. Runciman has developed a particularly useful way of approaching this issue, primarily from a neo-Darwinian sociological perspective in which societies are conceived of as a series of overlapping and intersecting processes, in which social praxis and institutions and state organizations respond to changing conditions through what he refers to as the “competitive selection” of practices – where certain ways of doing things or organizing relationships fail to respond adequately to changes in their circumstances, to increased pressure from a particular quarter, for example, then they will fail – to be either abandoned completely or to be transformed and transmuted in such a way that they can respond functionally to the changed context. This seems to me a fruitful way of understanding changes we might find reflected in our sources – whether

changes in the way things are described or accounted for or perceived, changes in the ways people respond to certain situations, including changes in such areas as administrative structures and organization, or changes in the way things are made or constructed or represented. More recently, social theorists and social historians, following some literary theorists, have begun to employ a vocabulary and a range of approaches drawn from what has been dubbed “complexity theory” – the science of “non-linear dynamics” – drawn in their turn from mathematics (for example, chaos theory), computer science, and the physical sciences. As applied to social science contexts, those who have deployed elements of complexity theory challenge the principles of linear explanation and causation, and accept that complete knowledge of given phenomena is impossible to achieve. They place emphasis instead on the randomness of causation, in which the interplay of multiple human actors with one another, within behavior-determining social and institutional contexts, and with the physical environment, generates “emergent” social praxis. Societies are thus seen as complex adaptive systems, and emphasis is placed on the unpredictability of possible outcomes (or, in historical terms, of knowing all the causal elements leading to a particular outcome). While there has been some misuse or misconstrual of the original mathematical and computer science notions, this nevertheless does serve to emphasize both the causal pluralism of social interaction and warns against simplistic linearity in historical explanation.³⁸

To return to the big picture, therefore: where does Byzantine society and economy, and the Byzantine state and political system, fit into the broader picture of European and Near Eastern social, economic, and political structures? What features are found in common with which other neighboring systems, and what features distinguish it from them? These are big issues, with wide implications, and in many respects belong to a different sort of social history, a comparative sociology of political systems, perhaps.³⁹ But they are still relevant, even if they cannot be addressed here, and all I can hope to do for the present is hint at some appropriate directions for discussion, and not necessarily within the framework set out by the contributions to this volume. To begin with we should underline the fact that such an exercise is primarily one of orientation, which helps to home in on some important issues and offers an approach to the questions we wish to ask. We can distinguish, for example, at least three temporal frameworks across which the generation of states and social systems may be understood – for the sake of argument they can be referred to as macro-, meso-, and micro-levels – depending on the sort of development we are concerned with. While these are not equivalents for Braudel’s long, medium, and short *durées*, they are similar in concept. The macro-level is well illustrated in recent work by Diamond, who posits very long-term evolutionary

³⁸ See Runciman 1989; and for a helpful appreciation, see Wickham 1991. For some perspectives on aspects of the appropriation of “complexity theory” by literary and social theorists, see Bricmont and Sokal 1998 (a strongly critical appraisal) and Plotnisky 2002 (critical of Bricmont and Sokal). For general introductions, see Lewin 1999 and Byrne 1998.

³⁹ See Bang and Bayly 2003; Trigger 2003; Steinmetz 1999; Doyle 1986.

pathways determined primarily by ecological conditions. Once a particular set of conditions has stimulated a particular set of responses in terms of demography, reproductive patterns, nutritional systems, and technologies, then micro-level shifts and causal relationships are determined in their effects entirely within that set of constraints. In this framework, once the appropriation of surpluses from nature reach a certain level, and this is combined with a certain density of settlement and ability to transmit coercive force, then states and empires become possible. Ecological and evolutionary pathways then lead to further increases in density, surplus, extraction, and concentration of coercive force, or not. On these grounds, the geography, flora, and fauna of the fertile crescent at the end of the last ice age (ca. 11,000 BCE) conferred specific advantages that gave the human societies that evolved there a permanent advantage over other areas which were unable to offer those conditions.⁴⁰ At this level of generality, of course, the value of specific data in terms of historical-political systems is merely that it should not contradict the evolutionary pathways thus sketched out, and it is of little help in determining the causal relationships behind the rise and fall of specific imperial formations within ecological regions.

At the meso-level of explanation, however, we can grapple with issues pertaining to specific cultural and social systems, and the way a particular trajectory of development evolved. Here, we are confronted with particular but broadly located cultural systems set within specific geo-political contexts (for example, the fertile crescent, the Indus Valley, the Eurasian steppe, the central and western European zone, the mountain and plateau regions of central and south America), associated with particular types of political structure. Such differences tend to reflect fairly straightforwardly geographical catchment areas – contrast China with its extensive cereal and rice culture, extensive power-relationships, vast manpower resources, and consequent assumptions about use and availability of labor etc., and the micro-cosmic systems of the southern Balkans, Asia Minor, and the Mediterranean basin; or again the Indian sub-continent with its contiguous zones of relatively open plain, semi-arid coastal and plateau regions, mountain, and forest.

Finally, at the micro-level, we need to differentiate within such a broad frame of reference to describe and then analyze local variations (in both time and space) affected by specific divergences in social praxis and fortuitous shifts in social relations instigated by issues of resource-availability, competition, and access to centers of production and distribution, density and rate of reproduction of population groups, and the contingent patterns of kinship, control of resources, and allocation of power and authority which are the products of those highly specific conditions. Yet in order to arrive at an understanding not just of the fact of change, but of its trajectory, we need to locate a dynamic or motor, we need to highlight for functional reasons of explanation and clarification specific relationships, which can then be related back to the actual causal sequences and structures which affect the social formations in question. This is where the detailed and critical analysis of specific

⁴⁰ Diamond 1997.

social institutions such as those included in this volume play a fundamental role, for only through such careful interrogation and description can we hope to assess the workings of the culture we are concerned with. The social historian, in attempting to determine the factors underlying change, however limited in scope, will be drawn back to those elements which constrain, limit, promote, or dissolve economic, political, legal, and cultural forms and practices.

In looking at the elements which unite and which differentiate social and political systems, a good starting point is to try to locate the structural constraints which determined how a particular formation evolved – for example, the ways their state structures worked, and the means through which their social élites maintained control over resources, whether human or material. In the case of the Byzantine state, along with many other pre-industrial or pre-modern state systems, these constraints are generally very clearly to be seen in the relationship between the state centre and the élite(s) upon whom it depends to manage its territories, administer its fiscal systems and armies, and so on. State élites have a powerful vested interest in the maintenance of those institutional relationships to which they owe their position, and conflict or tensions over the distribution of resources both within dominant élites, and between them and other elements in society, provide us with at least one dynamic element through which institutional and organizational change occurs, to the advantage of one group or another. And all pre-modern state formations share one particular characteristic that serves to differentiate them from simpler traditional societies or from modern industrial societies. This characteristic is the *direct* nature of *primary* surplus appropriation by the state and those acting on its behalf (through “tribute,” that is to say, taxation and other means of appropriating resources), and the results for the ways in which resources are then distributed and consumed – the “mode of surplus distribution” – which this brings with it.

First, the relationship between the ruler or ruling élite and those who actually appropriate surplus on their behalf always represents a source of tension or competition, if not conflict – other factors will determine the degree to which conflict actually takes place, if at all. In direct contrast with modern states grounded in capitalist economic relations, tributary state centers – courts, governments, or whatever – function *at the same level* of primary appropriation as their social-political élites, directly appropriating resources or social wealth through their access to various forms of non-economic coercion.⁴¹ Both thereby affect also the rate of exploitation and the conditions of resource creation among the peasant and/or pastoral economies they dominate. Second, in the case of such a state, therefore – a “tributary” state, in the terms of current debates – its power to extract resources in the form of tax/tribute is contingent upon its power to limit the economic and political strength of other competing social-economic groups, but more particularly

⁴¹ That is to say, their access to coercive pressure based ultimately on force or compulsion (whether enshrined in law, tradition, and custom, relationships of patronage, and so forth), as opposed to the economics of the commodified labor market.

other fractions of the dominant élite itself, upon whom it may also have come to depend for the carrying out of just such extractive functions. In pre-modern (i.e. pre-capitalist) economically differentiated societies dominated by such “tributary” production relations, the very existence of states thus means that the relations of surplus distribution are inherently fields for potential conflict, since the contradiction implicit in the institutional arrangements for resource distribution and consumption – essentially, between the state and the agents it must necessarily employ as intermediaries – cannot be avoided. In contrast, modern states only rarely come into direct conflict with the groups and individuals through whom capital is invested and generated, chiefly because these two elements clearly depend upon each other. Shifts in this relationship can be clarified through cyclical changes in the relative strengths of the two in time and space.⁴²

In contrast, tributary rulers and elites compete directly for control over the means of production, and hence the material basis for their autonomy, to the extent that one side may attempt (and even temporarily succeed) in destroying or so weakening the other that no further opposition is forthcoming. But in neither case does this involve a shift in the basic economic structure of society. What does change is the identity of those with the power to coerce. It is the *political structures and relationships through which surplus wealth is redistributed* which change. This has been brought out very clearly in a recent discussion of the evolution of tax in western medieval Europe up to the early thirteenth century.⁴³ In the case of Byzantium, it is also very apparent that the tensions which evolved between the center – or whichever group or faction controlled it – and those elements of the social-economic élite outside it, played an absolutely fundamental role in inflecting the politics and policies of the empire throughout its history; while the conflicts between competing elements of the élite likewise played a determining role. These are not the only key aspects, but they are central enough to provide some essential

⁴² In other words, in modern societies, in which capitalist economic relations dominate, tax is imposed upon, and is secondary to, the actual process of surplus appropriation – tax represents the chief mode of surplus *redistribution* available to states. In pre-capitalist, economically differentiated social formations (by which is meant socio-economic systems in which social groups can be distinguished on the basis of their access to and control over resources in land and people), not dominated by slavery and vestiges of any more communal or kin-based mode of surplus production and appropriation, tax and rent are the main forms of *surplus appropriation* – they represent the direct extraction of resources, whereas the distribution of such resources is achieved through secondary means associated with the method of direct appropriation.

⁴³ The ways in which feudal landlords could intervene directly in the production process, redefining the amount of surplus demanded and consequently affecting both the amount of labor time invested by the producers and the amount remaining to them as subsistence and as marketable or exchangeable surplus, has been well analyzed in Kula 1976. I would contend that tributary states act in just the same way, making the incidence of taxation (whether in kind, cash or labor, or all of these) a fundamental element in the rate of exploitation of the producing population. For a discussion of the relationship between modern states and their elites: Mandel 1968: 310–1, 498ff. On medieval states’ taxation, see Wickham 1997: 25–42.

clues as to how society worked and changed. A discussion of élites and their relationship to the state is, in consequence, an essential aspect of a social history.

Looking at such general traits as the economic relationship between center and élites is just one way of expanding the basis for comparative discussion about – in this case – Byzantium, because it enables us to construct models of state formations or social-economic systems which can then help in asking questions about other cultural and social systems and states. It encourages us to look behind the institutional and political forms that each society presents through its particular symbolic universe, and to locate explanations of change that incorporate both the general, or systemic, and the particular, or culture-specific. But there are other ways of approaching the issues, and while most of the chapters in this volume will take very specific features as the subject for their discussion, we should not forget that each of these elements is but one part of a greater whole, which has structural similarities as well as differences with neighboring or comparable social-political systems, and which can thus be drawn on, depending on the questions asked and the answers desired, to elucidate a wider set of issues about human social evolution and organization.

A social history of Byzantium, then, would appear to have two tasks. It should aim to elucidate specific social institutions – by which I mean social relationships and the practices associated with them, identities and roles and the assumptions determining their status and function, as well as “public” institutions of state and government – both in their structural contexts and diachronically, as they evolve and change. But at the same time it should try to situate such institutions in the whole of which they are part, to fit them together and try to understand the relationships of cause and effect which exist between them, in an effort not just to describe Byzantine society, but also to explain how it functioned and why it changed. This volume will deal chiefly with the first of these tasks, and we will be looking at the very specific institutional arrangements, values, and relationships which our documentary sources allow us a glimpse of. But it is only the first step in a much larger process, intended as much to ask questions as to answer them. If it serves as a starting point for discussion, then the contributors will be well rewarded for their work.

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