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PATRIMONIALISM

Patrimonialism is a term used to designate a form of political organization. It is more often used in the Latin-based languages (e.g., French, Italian) than in English. The key focus in the model is the extent to which legitimate authority is based primarily on personal power exercised by the ruler, either directly or indirectly. The ruler may act alone or as a member of a powerful elite group or oligarchy. The ruler is not viewed as a tyrant. The structure of the Roman Catholic Church today is still patrimonial. Direct rule involves the ruler and a few key members of the ruler's household or staff maintaining personal control over every aspect of governance. If rule is indirect, there may be an intellectual or moral elite of priests or office holders as well as a military. The priestly group

may invoke deity for the leader. The king, sultan, maharaja or other ruler is able to make independent decisions on an ad hoc basis, with little if any checks and balances. No individual or group is powerful enough to oppose the ruler consistently without, in turn, becoming the new patrimonial ruler. The ruler is recognized as the chief landholder and, in the extreme case, all of the land and its people are his domain. The legal authority of the ruler is largely unchallenged; there is no recognized body of case law or formal law, but there may be notions of etiquette and honor.

The term *patrimonialism* is often used in conjunction with patriarchy, since the earliest form of governance in small groups may have been patriarchal. There is a relationship of personal dependence between an official and the ruler, so that the ideology is one of a large extended family. The idea of an early matriarchal society—as distinguished from matrilineal descent—is largely discredited. A “Big Man” chiefdom system is characteristic of many indigenous peoples and transition from patriarchy to patrimony is probably common historically around the world. As the size of the organizational structure switches from an extended family to a larger geographical area, particularly in agriculturally based civilizations, we move to the kind of patrimonialism that was probably characteristic of many early agrarian civilizations based on irrigation systems.

The relevance of the term *patrimonialism* for the study of governance and domination was popularized by Karl Ludwig von Haller (1768–1854), a Swiss conservative from Berne who was an opponent of the French Revolution. Haller attacked the ancient regime but, like Edmund Burke, was also opposed to Romanticism and violent revolutionary change. Haller argues that the state can and should be viewed as the patrimonium of the ruler. In his *Patrimonialstaat* concept, the prince is responsible only to God and natural law. Max Weber picked up on the term in 1922, modified it significantly, rejected the natural law argument, and uses it as a label for his Ideal Type Model (ITM) of Traditional Authority (*Herrschaft*). No doubt the fact that many European thinkers would have associated the term with a conservative stance may have helped Weber make his argument clear.

Weber describes forms of patrimonialism. Patrimonial-prebendalism is the more traditional form; it involves a ruler who practices indirect rule and uses officials. Those office holders are maintained by their prebends. Prebends are essentially premodern bureaucratic offices characterized by the payment of a tribute or labor to the office holder. The Anglican Church still utilizes the term. A prebend is like a stipend, but it is rarely a cash payment. A prebend is always held simply on the basis of the ruler's whim or grace. It can be revoked at any time and it cannot be inherited. Patrimonial feudalism is the more exceptional type because it involves the existence of an order of fief holders, mostly landed nobles and members of the clergy. They constitute a feudal network that has some power separate from the ruler. The key difference between a prebend and a fief is that a fief can be inherited. With primogeniture, it is the first legitimate son who becomes the lord, although women can hold feudal rights if there are no male heirs. Weber argues that the prebendal and the feudal forms of patrimonialism tend to oscillate, with those rulers who are able to maintain a highly centralized form of rule able to withstand the centrifugal forces of a more feudal system. Centripetal force is exercised by the ruler and the ruler's retinue traveling throughout the domain. In feudal settings, the ruler's domain often becomes more circumscribed, but it may still be considerable. Some writers simply posit a difference between patrimonial and feudal forms, but Weber's theory acknowledges the deep similarity between prebendal and feudal aspects of patrimonialism. Norman Jacobs has interpreted classical Indian society as patrimonial rather than feudal, but has also argued that the Marxist notion of an Asiatic Mode of Production does not fit the Indic case.

Patrimonialism is a Weberian model based on comparative-historical idealization that can help avoid various arguments about uniqueness (*Sonderwegen*) and at the same time avoid transcultural and trans-historical dialectical materialist arguments about inevitable evolutionary paths. As an ITM, it helps avoid some of the errors of Marxist work on a more narrow view of feudalism and the Eurocentric notion of a specifically Asiatic Mode of Production. The

crucial distinction between the use of the term *patrimonialism* and contemporary terms, such as *totalitarianism* (and *authoritarianism*), is that the patrimonial form tends to be associated with traditional, premodern, precapitalist societies. But aspects of both the arbitrary use of power by rulers and also the employment of mercenaries and retainers can be found again in contemporary totalitarian societies. Similarly, contemporary patron-client systems are often remnants of earlier patrimonial clientism. Whether or not it is useful to speak of nation-states in the twenty-first century as having elements of neopatrimonialism is disputed.

—Johannes Iemke Bakker

See also Authoritarianism; Leadership; Power; Sociology of Governance

Further Readings and References

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