State in Society:
Joel Migdal and the limits of state authority

DRAFT – Comments welcome

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1. THE PREDOMINANT STATE?

Today, Joel Migdal sets forth in his seminal work *Strong Societies and Weak States*, "for those of us in the West, the state has been part of our natural landscape. Its presence, its authority, its place behind so many rules that fashion the minutiae of our lives, have all been so pervasive that it is difficult for us to imagine the situation being otherwise."[1] However, while the state might occupy a privileged place in our collective thinking, its empirical reality in large parts of the world is (and will continue to be) much more complex. Therefore, Migdal cautions: "What may seem as much a part of the natural order as the rivers and the mountains around us is, in fact, an artifact of a small segment of human history."[2]

In his work, Migdal looks at a kind of politics that does not take place within the framework of the sovereign state. Instead, the actors involved in this process come from groups in society (e.g, ethnic, cultural, local) as well as from state institutions. It is this kind of state-society interaction that lies at the root of the little understood problem of stateness.

In its extreme form, the stateness problem becomes all too visible in the form of the failed state which is unable to rule its territory and its people in any meaningful way. But this occurs only in a minority of countries. Such highly publicized cases notwithstanding, all of which create enormous amounts of human suffering, there are many more instances where the state only has limited authority over many social institutions. Even though some of these states wield formidable military might, they are frequently unable to collect taxes, conduct a census or implement the most basic of policies at the local level. On the whole, these states are unable to govern their rural areas, border regions and hinterlands to any substantial degree.

For example, during Pakistan's recent military campaign against Taliban and al-Qaeda supporters in the rugged and mountainous Northwest Frontier Province, the armed forces encountered a problem that at first seems hard to grasp for Western observers. The resident tribes of the Province resolutely opposed the campaign, partly due to a certain sympathy for the aims of the Taliban, but in large parts to assert their tribal authority and autonomy. In other words, the tribes simply did not allow the state to conduct its military affairs as it pleased, but forced the state to negotiate the terms of its campaign. In a treaty between the tribes and the Pakistan government, it was agreed that state officials, including the military, have no authority outside a 100 yard-stretch to both sides of the main highway. Beyond this narrow band, the state is powerless.[3]

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[1] Migdal 1988: 15.
[2] Migdal 1988: 16.
[3] Cf. Ross; Rackmill 2004.

This example goes to show the extent to which states can be hemmed in by recalcitrant segments of society even though they are the highest *de jure* authority within their territory. So, Migdal's answer to the question which political concepts existed beyond the nation-state would be to point out that such concepts have always coexisted with (and sometimes existed before) the state, removing large parts of people's lives from the public sphere where they are influenced by the state and sequestering them in a different, parallel kind of order that represents an alternative to the order of the state.

Most of the prominent approaches to state-society relations in postcolonial states neglected this dimension. "Many existing approaches to understanding social and political change in the Third World have either downplayed conflict altogether (for example, much of 'modernization' theory) or missed these particular sorts of conflicts, which only on occasion are class-based (for example, much of the Marxist literature), or skipped the important dynamics within domestic society altogether (for example, dependency and world system theories)."[4]

Migdal and similar authors put forward a 'State in Society' approach to help address this deficit.[5] They rejected Marxist and structuralist claims that the state's actions were nothing more than a reflection of social patterns of power. At they same time they did not subscribe to overly statist claims, which presented the state as dominating society. Migdal sees the state as a distinct part of society, playing a special role that sets him apart from other social groups. Most importantly, neither institution is claimed *a priori* to have precedence over the other: "States may help mold, but they are also continually molded by, the societies within which they are embedded."[6]

This paper aims to show that the state-in-society approach offers a new perspective for understanding the peculiar nature of politics against the backdrop of weak stateness. To this end, Joel Migdal's model of state-society interaction and his theory of Third World politics will be presented. It will be pointed out that Migdal's theories bear a strong resemblance to Max Weber's. Combining his work with Weber's, an understanding of state-society relations as a struggle of competing forms of order shall be put forth.

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[4] Migdal 1988: 31. Also cf. Kohli; Shue 1994: 295-303.
[5] Cf. Migdal; Kohli; Shue (eds.) 1994 and Rothchild; Chazan (eds.) 1988. Also Migdal 2001.
[6] Introduction to Migdal; Kohli; Shue (eds.) 1994: 2. Or, as Thomas Callaghy put it, "state and society are partly dependent and partly autonomous arenas of sociopolitical life." (Callaghy 1984: 89)

2. JOEL MIGDAL'S THEORY OF THE STATE IN SOCIETY

In the contemporary world, the state is the sole accepted model of political order. However, this dictum represents a normative demand rather then empirical reality. This demand stipulates that the state, as a central political organization within a given territory, should be the agency to set and enforce binding rules among its citizens.

Over the last few centuries, this argument has gained so much force within Western countries as to be almost unchallangeable. It was quickly taken up in the newly decolonized territories of Latin America in the 19th century and Asia and Africa in the 20th century. These countries quickly adopted the state as the means to the achievement of economic development and social modernization.[7] Kwame Nkrumah expressed this attitude in his maxim 'Seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added unto thee'.

This has lead to a situation where the state is widely seen as the solution to all kinds of ills. This, in turn, places huge demands on state institutions and state leaders. Using data from a recent survey in 15 countries from Sub-Saharan Africa, Michael Bratton concluded that "ordinary citizens harbor an overly rosy view of the diminished capabilities of African states. More than half (52 percent) of all adults think that, 'the government can solve … all or most … of the country's problems'"[8]. At the same time, only 32 percent find it easy or very easy to obtain help from the police, compared with 43 percent who find this difficult or very difficult.[9] Obviously, there is a substantial gap between popular expectations of the state and its ability to deliver the goods.

But why does this gap exist? Joel Migdal has developed a theory of weak states that provides a compelling answer: the state is unable to accumulate the necessary authority to close the gap, because social authorities try to stymie its efforts.

Migdal's theory rests upon a model of state-society interaction. He sees society not as a monolithic entity but as "a mélange of social organizations"[10] such as families, clubs, companies or clans. The state is but one organization among this multitude of communities. These associations structure the interaction of their members as well as between members and non-members. They offer incentives (such as security, prosperity or status) or threaten with sanctions (such violence or ostracism) to make members adhere to their particular sets of

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[7] Cf. Migdal 1988: 14.
[8] Bratton 2004: 10.
[9] Cf. Bratton 2004: 13, Table 4.
[10] Migdal 1988: 28. He offers a somewhat different account of society in Migdal 1996, but this weakens the coherence of the overall model. The following argument derives largely from his 1988 monograph.

rules. As can be seen, the rewards are not only material in nature – using symbols, myths, culture and tradition, social organizations can lend meaning to their members' lives as well.

In the end, the individual, considering the incentives and sanctions, has to decide whether to submit to the authority of a social organization. Since each person is generally a member of many social organizations (or has the chance to become one), they are confronted with a large number of rules. In trying to fulfill their psychological and mundane needs, they construct what Migdal terms "strategies of survival – blueprints for action and belief"[11]. In a situation where no organization can establish a clear hegemony of rule-making, constructing such strategies can be problematic: "Here, individuals must choose among competing components in making their strategies of survival; these are difficult choices when people also face the possibility of competing sanctions."[12]

In submitting to an organization's rules, the individual invests this particular association with what Migdal terms "social control"[13] over his behaviour. The amount of social control that an organization has is determined by the number of people that follow its rules as well as by the motivations of the people in doing so. This is a matter of degree: an association can exercise greater power when people do not simply follow the rules (compliance), but when they believe them to be right and good (legitimation).[14]

Since the state is a social organization it plays by the same rules, only on a grander scale. Just like social associations, it seeks social control by having the people incorporate its rules into their strategies of survival, or even by monopolizing individual strategies of survival. "State social control involves the successful subordination of people's own inclinations of social behavior or behavior sought by other social organizations in favor of the behavior prescribed by state rulers."[15]

This is the key point of his model of state-society interaction: the state and social organizations continually compete for social control. The state, by its very nature, lays claim to the authority to regulate all social relations within its borders, thus pitting it against all social organizations that would resist this undertaking. The dominant authority determines who will make the rules pertaining to certain segments of the population. This may lead to a shift in the available strategies of survival for the affected individuals.

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[11] Migdal 1988: 27.
[12] Migdal 1988: 29.
[13] Migdal 1988: 22.
[14] Cf. Migdal 1988: 32-33.
[15] Migdal 1988: 22.

Such conflict is just as likely to break out over seemingly insignificant issues as over important decisions of national relevance. Migdal provides the following example: "Mustafa Kemal of Turkey locked horns with religious organizations over whether men should wear hats with brims or without. As with so many other skirmishes, the issue was not so inconsequential as it may first appear; over 70 people were hanged for wearing the wrong hats. In reality, the conflict was over who had the right and ability to make rules in that society."[16] Generally, the relationship between state and society is not characterized by domination of one over the other, although this might come to pass in certain circumstances (e.g., state dominance in totalitarian regimes). In fact, both entities influence each other, even where one is weak. Even the comparatively powerless postcolonial state in Africa has managed to transform society by altering the calculus of strategies of survival: new economic and social opportunities were created through the work of state agencies and state policies.

A weak state, then, is a state that is unable to insert itself into the strategies of survival of its citizens. "Social control is power or, more precisely, what Michael Mann has called infrastructural power. Increased capabilities of state include and rest upon increased state social control."[17] (Migdal 1988: 22-23) State capabilites "include the capacities to *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways. Strong states are those with high capabilities to complete these tasks, while weak states are on the low end of a spectrum of capabilities."[18] Contemporary weak states are characterized by high capabilities in penetration and extraction while being markedly weaker when it comes to regulation and appropriation. This is a duality inherent in many postcolonial states who are present in all sectors of society but generally powerless to effect social changes.

The reason for the weakness of these states, Migdal then theorizes, lies in the particular structure of their societies. He characterizes most Third World societies as being decentralized collections of social units without an overarching system of symbols or values. Instead of being truly national in scope, these "weblike societies"[19] are mostly made up of local organizations with local constituencies. These organizations are headed by what Migdal terms "strongmen", e.g.: "chiefs, landlords, bosses, rich peasants, clan leaders, *za'im, effendis, aghas, caciques, kulaks"* [20]. The strongman is a holder of local authority in the framwork of a social organization.

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[16] Migdal 1988: 30.
[17] Migdal 1988: 22-23. He refers to Mann 1986.
[18] Migdal 1988: 4-5. Italics in the original.
[19] Migdal 1988: 39.
[20] Migdal 1988: 33. Italics in the original.

The high level of group diversity in weblike societies is the reason for the state's inability to achieve greater social control. "In weblike societies, although social control is fragmented and heterogeneous, this does not mean that people are not being governed; they most certainly are. The allocation of values, however, is not centralized. Numerous systems of justice operate simultaneously."[21] Under these circumstances, a struggle for social control takes place between the state and the strongmen who are usually unwilling to cede their privileged position by abandoning social control to the state. The history of Sierra Leone shows the amount of resistance a weblike society can generate: "In any case, the fragmentation of social control – the heterogeneity of rule making in society – greatly restricted the growth of state capabilities after independence. Even with all the resources at their disposal, even with the ability to eliminate any single strongman, state leaders found themselves severely limited. […] Many state leaders realized that their tenure depended on the social stability the strongmen could offer through their social control; the strongmen had direct access to most of the population, and they could mobilize people for specific purposes."[22]

From the perspective of the state, the struggle for social control takes place at the macro as well as the micro level. At the national level, state leaders generally have an interest in a strong and functioning state, i.e., a state that is able to exert social control and mobilize the population in support of its policies.[23] However, there is a dilemma inherent in this strategy: strengthening state agencies may help create autonomous power centers within the state structure which might end up turning against the state leadership. If there are many such agencies, this problem is less severe. In this case, any centrifugal tendencies can be counterbalanced by the support of the remaining institutions. However, if state power rests on only a few institutions (or even a single one), then these agencies can become vehicles for state leaders' rivals in their drive to unseat the present leadership. In such cases, it becomes rational for the ruling regime to dismantle and weaken state structures, or to ally themselves with social organizations to gain access to their means of mobilization. However, if social control is highly fragmented, such an alliance is not a viable strategy. "Those societies with high fragmentation of social control among a mélange of social organizations and the consequent denial of mobilizational capabilities (centripetal forces) to state leaders have precipitated a particular political and administrative style in their states" which Migdal calls "the politics of survival".[24]

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[21] Migdal 1988: 39.
[22] Migdal 1988: 141.
[23] For a different account cf. Reno's theory of the 'shadow state' (Reno 1998).
[24] Migdal 1988: 213.

Through the politics of survival, a state leader tries to preempt possible centrifugal forces. Tactics include making nonmerit appointments (e.g., along ethnic, familial or patrimonial lines), a regular reshuffle of top- and middle-level officials as well as blackmail and other 'dirty tricks'. In his attempts to prevent the formation of separate power centers within the state, a state leader will eventually work towards a weakening of the state's institutions. One striking example of this kind of behavior is the tactical shift by the former Egyptian President Nasser who, after employing the state party, the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), to implement many of his policies, began to systematically tear it down after the 1967 war. Previously, the military had been the one state agency still able to counterbalance the growing influence of the ASU but it had lost much of its clout after the defeat in the Six Day War. Nasser was afraid that the ASU would one day become the springboard for a coup which led him to dismantle it outright.[25]

In addition to managing relations between state agencies, the state leadership also engages social organizations. Depending on the intra-state distribution of power, a state leader may try to co-opt strongmen and social authorities or he may continue to challenge their bases of social power. Another possibility is the incorporation of these organizations into the state structure, thus institutionalizing a cooperative relationship.

At the micro level, local state officials (called 'implementors' by Migdal) have the task of implementing state policies. According to Migdal's theory, these officials are caught in a web of pressures and demands from superiors, local politicians, strongmen, their bureaucrat peers and the intended clients of their programs.[26] In weak state institutions hampered by frequent reshuffling of policy elites and little internal oversight, few implementors will put much effort into promoting state policies against local resistance. Instead, they will prefer to avoid open conflict so as not to jeopardize their career prospects.

Regarding local implementation, Migdal summarizes his argument as follows: "In brief, I argue that the structure of society has an important indirect effect on policy implementation. We have seen how a society with fragmented social control leads to the politics of survival. In turn, I hypothesize, the politics of survival lessens backing and threats of sanctions from supervisors, thus making the implementor more attentive to possible career costs involving strongmen and peer officials. The result is a further weakening of the state's ability to make the rules governing people's behavior."[27] In other words, a weblike society influences politics at the national level which in turn inhibits effective policy implementation at the local level.

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[25] Cf. Migdal 1988: 200-205.
[26] Cf. Migdal 1988: 238-247.
[27] Migdal 1988: 241.

Taken together, these arguments combine to create a situation where the struggle for social control becomes a very complex conflict that takes place on many fronts. State leaders may ally themselves with some social organizations against other social forces, or even against the institutions of the state itself. Disparate social organizations may band together to resist the state or they may remain fragmented, battling one another for social control. Under these conditions, a situation may arise where state officials and social authorities might depend on each other's support. Migdal provides an example of this kind of situation from postcolonial Sierra Leone. There, the local chiefs, elevated to their positions of power by the colonial state, were the main obstacles for the state's drive for national hegemony. At the same time, the chiefs were co-opted into state policies, sometimes even working to implement them. In return, they received financial benefits and had their social functions officially sanctioned by the state. They employed these resources to tighten their social control. "The paradox […] is: while the strongmen have become ever more dependent upon state resources to shore up their social control, state leaders have become dependent on strongmen, who employ those resources in a manner inimical to state rules and laws."[28]

Joshua Forrest applied Migdal's theory of the weak Third World state to the history of Guinea-Bissau. There, rural civil society, while highly fragmented, banded together through inter-ethnic social organizations to resist the incursion of the Portuguese colonial state. An anti-statist bias became part of the tradition of social associations as they entrenched their social control against an ineffective state administration. This tradition has seriously hampered the development of the postcolonial state of Guinea-Bissau. State leaders tried to incorporate social groups into the state administration by granting official status to kings and selected strong chieftains. These institutions, however, were quickly marginalized in their constituencies as the people shifted their loyalties to other, local forms of authority, e.g., age groups. The state has remained unable to either break the social control these local associations enjoy or to effectively co-opt them. Forrest's results strongly support Migdal's theory. Pointing to several other examples, Forrest hypothesizes that his conclusions can be applied to more cases than just Guinea-Bissau.[29]

3. MIGDAL AND MAX WEBER

Migdal's model of state-society interaction is close to the one of Max Weber, even though Migdal shows a somewhat ambivalent relationship to Weber's work. Whereas, in his 1988

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[28] Migdal 1988: 141.
[29] Cf. Forrest 2003.

book, he used a Weberian definition of the state, he slowly began to distance himself from Weber in his later work.[30]

According to Max Weber, interpersonal relations within society are relations of power and, upon the institutionalization of power, relations of dominance or authority (*Herrschaft*).[31] Such dominance can take place in the framework of associations (*Verbände*). These organizations construct and enforce a particular order to structure their member's social relations by prescribing or proscribing certain kinds of behavior or forms of interaction among their members or towards outsiders. If said associations are structured through relations of dominance, they are considered *Herrschaftsverbände*. A special case of these associations of dominance is the political association (*politischer Verband*) which relies on the use of force to implement its order within a circumscribed territory. The state, finally, is a special kind of political association, characterized by the legitimicy of its "monopoly of physical violence"[32] and the resulting sovereignty within its territory.

Migdal criticizes Weber's definition of the state (or rather the subsequent reception of it in the social sciences) as transporting the misleading image of the omnipotent state. Migdal certainly is aware that Weber was talking about an ideal type definition of the state, yet he still claims that Weber's definition inhibits critical thinking about "real life states that do not meet this ideal."[33]

For Migdal, the problem is that, "with Weber's definition as the starting point, variation can be conceptualized and measured only as distance from the ideal type."[34] What this ideal type lacks, he continues, is a theory of social interaction that captures the nature of state-society relations. "The assumption that only the state does, or should, create rules and that only it does, or should, maintain the violent means to bend people to obey those rules minimizes and trivializes the rich negotiation, interaction, and resistance that occur in every human society among multiple systems of rules. It posits a human society where one incredibly coherent and complex organization exercises an extraordinary hegemony of thought and action over all other social formations intersecting that territory. It provides no way to theorize about arenas of competing sets of rules, other than to cast these in the negative, as failures or weak states or even as non-states."[35]

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[30] Cf. Migdal 1988: 19. Also Migdal 1994: 11-13 and Migdal 2001: 14-15.
[31] Cf. Weber 1972: 1-30. All quotations and terms have been translated from the original German by the present author.
[32] Weber 1972: 28.
[33] Migdal 2001: 14.
[34] Migdal 2001: 15.
[35] Migdal 2001: 15.

Here, however, Migdal misreads Weber in two respects. Firstly, Weber does not posit the state as the only association able to create rules. For him, similar to Migdal's own position, the state is only a special case of the *Herrschaftsverband*, a social organization structured by relations of dominance and authority. Secondly, Weber does not provide his ideal type definition with the normative bias that the state *ought* to be the predominant authority within society. It might be, as Migdal asserts, that the scholarly reception of Weber's work has developed such a bias, but this cannot be inferred from an orthodox reading of Weber's original work.

In fact, I argue that both authors share a similar theory of the state that is almost constructivist in nature. What Migdal and Weber have in common is the prominent role they ascribe to social organizations. In Migdal's terms, these associations prescribe certain modes of behavior which is then assimilated (or not) into people's strategies of survival. In Weber's model, associations represent different kinds of social order, embodying sets of rules that are enforced among its members through relationships of authority. Just as Migdal's concept of social control, this Weberian kind of authority rests upon attitudes towards rule that range from rational compliance to emotional support and affirmation. So, where society is characterized as a mélange of social organizations by Migdal, it is presented as a set of overlapping and crosscutting orders by Weber. Furthermore, both of them see the state not as a structure that exists somehow outside, or even above, society. Instead, the state is thought of a distinctive entity that is, in principle, only one of a multitude of associations within society, even though it exhibits certain special characteristics that no other associations share.

4. State and Society as Competing Orders

Taking these two approaches together, it is possible to model society as a collection of associations who strive to maximize the reach of their respective orders. The state, as one of these associations, tries to expand its social control over all of society, both geographically and in terms of social structure. To this end, it enters into a struggle of competing orders with social associations who resist the state's attempts to sway their members to join his order. As Migdal points out, it is all about who gets to make the rules (and whose rules are heeded). This model is similar to Thomas Callaghy's theory of state formation: "State formation entails the initiation and protection of a new definition of authority in opposition to those that already exist. It is a *struggle* for dominance with internal social groups and external groups,

organizations, and forces for compliance, resources, and the fulfillment of ideal and material interests; it is a struggle for internal control, political unification, and external security."[36]

This model is borne out by the history of European state-building in the late Middle Ages and early modern times. Here, the old feudal structures were slowly replaced by centralized political authorities. This process of centralization had little in common with 'state of nature' assumptions – there were no voluntary acts of association, no social contract; in fact, the general population did not figure much into the equation. Instead, early modern rulers were confronted with alternative power centers (local lords, the rising city bourgeoisie, the clergy) that resisted their attempts to increase the state's reach. Through conflict and accomodation, the state managed to accumulate the authority necessary to become the dominant structure that it is today. But as Charles Tilly emphasizes, the route it took was to a large extent determined by control over the means of violence: "Legitimacy is the probability that other authorities will act to confirm the decisions of a given authority. Other authorities, I might add, are much more likely to confirm the decisions of a challenged authority that controls substantial force; not only fear of retaliation, but also desire to maintain a stable environment recommend that general rule."[37]

5. CONCLUSION: POLITICS BEYOND THE NATION-STATE?

When one thinks about politics nowadays, the state usually features in a very prominent position. Its predominance in the politics of Western countries and in the daily lives of their citizens is so overwhelming, it is seldom, if ever, questioned at all.

Joel Migdal's approach reminds us that the state is nothing more than a certain form of political organization, an institution of society that is highly specific to the current historical context. It also points to the largely forgotten fact that the state does not exist outside or above society, but that it is a part of society, and that these two institutions constantly influence and reshape one another. Furthermore, it brings home the fact that many states do not conform to the ideal type of the strong state that dominates (and clouds) our thinking: strongmen and social authorities exert a strong influence on the outcome of state policies, to the point where such policies might not be implemented at all. The state must either accommodate these forces or try to break their social control.

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[36] Callaghy 1984: 81.
[37] Tilly 1985: 171. Or, as Arthur Stinchcombe put it, „the person *over whom power is exercised* is not usually as important as *other power-holders*." (Stinchcombe 1968: 150; italics in the original)

Generally, as empirical research on Sub-Saharan Africa has shown, state institutions function more efficiently, "the more they are congruent with informal institutions and norms, the more they are endogenous to their own societies, and the more they are historically embedded in domestic social relations."[38] However, this line of analysis need not be confined to the Third World. It can also be employed when looking at issues of state-society relations and the policy process in developed countries. Corporatist theories of politics, for example, have highlighted the role of interest groups in the policy process, other approaches, such as veto-player models, already incorporate selected non-state actors into their analysis.

It would be wrong to think that 'political concepts beyond the nation state' were a research topic that would have to restrict itself to speculations about the future. The fact of the matter is that in many parts of the world, politics are regularly conducted outside of the realm of the state. This should remind us not to generalize the experience of the Western state when thinking about other regions of the globe. In each country, the state has been moulded through its interaction with local social forces. When analyzing these cases and when trying to locate the true seats of power, one should not restrict one's view to the state, but include society's manifold organizations as well.

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[38] Englebert 1998: 4.

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