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The Primitive as Problematic

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## The primitive as problematic

...[B]ut anthropology has ... another role, that is, to bear testimony to future generations of the ingeniousness, diversity, and imagination of our species – qualities of which evidence would otherwise soon be lost forever.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

The anthropological study of societies based on gathering, hunting and fishing has had a long and convoluted history. At times insights on foraging peoples have been central to the discipline, at times peripheral. Part of anthropology's current view of hunter-gatherer studies, however, seems to be based on a misunderstanding. In its 1960s incarnation, these studies were dominated by a concern with human evolution. While evolutionary ecology continues as a component of the field, it is not the major one; by far the greater number of acolytes over the last twenty years would find themselves more in sympathy with Lévi-Strauss's view, put forward at the original Man the Hunter Conference in 1966. To study non-state, non-literate societies as a way of bearing witness to the ingeniousness and diversity of our species has been the core subject-matter, indeed the glory, of the social and cultural anthropology not only of Lévi-Strauss, but of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Boas, Lowie and Kroeber as well. All of them studied hunter-gatherers for part of their careers, yet none was particularly identified with evolution as an organizing principle, in fact quite the contrary.

The issue here is not evolution or anti-evolution, but something quite different: the fate of the non-state societies and the transformation of anthropology's mandate. In the last third of the twentieth century, as one after another of them has been press-ganged into the farms and factories of the New World Order, the discipline constructed around their explication has been profoundly altered. The study of whole cultures on their own turf has slipped quietly but irrevocably into the twilight zone; like Kroeber's peasants, *all* societies are now part-societies with part-cultures. Anthropological representations of the Trobriand, Kwakiutl, Swat Pathans and !Kung San live on in the pages of introductory textbooks, but the cutting edge of ethnographic enquiry has shifted elsewhere: to the complex social formations of the metropole itself, or to colonial discourse fraught with contradictions. If former non-state anthropological subjects are investigated, they are reconstituted as peasants or proletarians, struggling in the coils of merchant capital, faceless bureaucracies or the IMF.

Not that this shift is all a bad thing. Culture and the human condition remain grist for the anthropologist's mill, and anthropology has been able to survive the sea-change and even flourish, by expanding in all directions its field of vision. A favela in Rio, an electronics factory in Malaysia, an AIDS clinic in the Bronx, or a barrio in south-central Los Angeles, all form, in their way, part of the human circle. The complex modalities of culture as hegemony, culture as adaptation and culture as resistance continue to provide rich lodes of material for anthropological investigation. Lévi-Strauss's mission continues to have relevance, though perhaps not in the way he originally intended.

What then is to become of the study of the world's non-hierarchical, non-state societies – and here I include shifting cultivators and pastoralists along with foragers – as the world enters the 21st century? What is to become of the study of whole cultures *in situ* in a world increasingly dominated by the overarching power

The author is professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto, and a leading authority on the ecology and the settlement and subsistence patterns of the !Kung San (Bushman) people of southern Africa's Kalahari desert

of markets, bureaucracies and media?

In the 1980s and 90s two arguments – remarkable in light of the disciplinary history just sketched – have tended to dominate anthropological approaches to these societies. Though each arises out of a different and even mutually antagonistic discourse, the two share a commonality of purpose: in effect, to write autonomous egalitarian societies out of history. The first argument, rooted in political economy and building upon the seminal insights of Wolf's *Europe and the People with History* (1982), challenges the view that prior to this century non-state societies have been autonomous entities at all. It argues that deep historical links of trade and tribute have bound unit-societies to larger polities, creating conditions of dependency. The study of cultural difference in this framework becomes a difference constructed by powerful elites and powerless subalterns within pre-modern 'world systems'. Alternatively, the expansion of merchant capital is seen as so early and so ubiquitous that the cultures of anthropological renown are best understood as products of their marginality rather than their own ethos or internal dynamics. Indigenous culture becomes subaltern culture, which, in turn, becomes a series of lenses through which its complex external relations are refracted.

If political economy is invoked to challenge autonomy, the second argument calls the nature of authenticity into question. It is a commonplace of anthropological post-modernism that the craft of ethnography bears uncanny similarities to the art of the novelist. Under post-modernism's influence, the concept of culture has undergone subtle shifts. By contrast with cultural systems seen as entities handing down traditions from the past, these same cultures are now viewed as socially constructed, reinvented anew in each generation by its own members, or in more radical deconstructions, by powerful outsiders such as colonial states, missionaries, or even ethnographers. Once again, the focus has shifted from internal dynamics to the relations with powerful outsiders, albeit with a greater degree of agency granted the subalterns.

Drawing themes from both political economy and post-modernism, some scholars have challenged whether hunter-gatherer studies are indeed a legitimate field of enquiry at all. This 'revisionist' case has won converts in part because no-one would deny the prevalence of these conditions in the contemporary world. The economic and cultural power of expanding capital now reaches into every nook and cranny of the globe. Unequal exchange is the order of the day for everyone.

What is in question, however, is the tendency to project these conditions onto all societies and all periods of history. How legitimate is it to imbue precolonial and even Neolithic societies with the same accumulative drives and will to power that motivate elites in the age of Capital and the Nation State? Long regarded as problematic by historians, chrono-centrism (universalizing the present) is poor scholarship, committing the very errors post-modernism warns against; but worse, proclaiming the ubiquity of power relations and greed has the effect of obviating the necessity for understanding how these conditions came into being. It seems that for a discipline which bases its moral and intellectual authority on understanding the human condition, this represents an abdication of responsibility.

It is clear that the wide acceptance of these assumptions has something to do with the times we live in. The collapse of 'actually existing socialism' and its subordination to the rigours of the 'market' has had a major role in severely narrowing the compass for im-

agining political alternatives.

But closer to home is the late Stanley Diamond's argument, often ignored, that since the Enlightenment, insights from the study of the so-called primitive peoples have provided a small but important source for the political imagination. By offering alternative visions, and by stating unequivocally that there *is* a world 'out there', beyond the reach (until recently) of the world system, social anthropology has maintained a refreshing capacity for questioning current banalities and subverting the established order.

It is on this terrain that the revisionist argument is most devastating. For the revisionists are asking whether these societies are really what they seem, or is their very 'Otherness' an illusion? Are they too, like everything else, simply a refraction of the forces around us? The dominance of powerful and manipulative media and their manufacturing of consent make us rightfully wary of all claims to authenticity. In a world bombarded by images, the idea that things are *not* what they appear to be is the safest assumption.

How are we ever to sort out the conflicting claims of the revisionists and those they criticize? The only possible way is through recourse to a critical and reflexive examination of the empirical evidence. The revisionist banner conceals an uneasy and unexamined tension between the level of theory and the level of fact. On the first level they challenge modernist truth-claims by recourse to Foucauldian discourse analysis, but even while proclaiming the provisionality/relativity of all knowledge they advance truth-claims of their own.

The debate on the historical status of the Kalahari San provides a case in point. The revisionists claim to make manifest modernist ethnographers' ignorance of capitalist penetration by detailing the hitherto unknown history of mercantile trade affecting the Nyae Nyae – Dobe !Kung. But as Guenther and I have recently shown, when the actual historical evidence is examined and evaluated, the revisionist case dissolves into air (see 'Kalahari historical ethnography and the tolerance of error', *History in Africa* 20: 185-235 [1993]).

I continue to be mystified by some scholars' enthusiasm for writing out of human history every instance of authentic and autonomous 'Others'. Why reject *a priori* the very possibility of autonomous, non-exploitative human social arrangements when the archaeological, historical and ethnographic record abundantly attests to their existence? The demonstrable evidence of autonomy thus inscribed constitutes a resource of world-historical significance, the data-bank of images from which will be drawn the germs of reconstruction of the human world after the inevitable collapse of the ecologically destructive market-driven world, order.

While not necessarily endorsing the formula just given, a large number of scholars continue to regard hunter-gatherer studies as, if not a spiritual light onto the nations, at least a legitimate field of enquiry. If recent Conferences on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS) are any guide, accounts of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. Several hundred scholars from two dozen countries have been meeting at biennial intervals through the 1980s and 90s at such venues as London, Darwin, Fairbanks and Moscow, to debate issues of theory and substance.

While the theoretical debates of the Man the Hunter Conference of 1966 revolved around issues of the evolution of human behaviour, the recent series has moved relatively far from classical evolutionary and ecological preoccupations. In their stead, hunter-gatherer special-

ists have developed several major foci of inquiry.

At the Moscow CHAGS in August 1993, a large and active scholarly contingent focused on foragers in relation to the State; papers on land rights, court battles, bureaucratic domination and media representations documented the struggles of foragers and former foragers for viability and cultural identity in the era of Late Capitalism. Many of the research problematics grew out of close consultation with members of the societies in question. Increasingly, it is they – Aleuts and Yupik at Fairbanks, Nenets and Evenks at Moscow – who are setting research agendas and in some cases presenting the actual papers. This branch of hunter-gatherer studies is closely aligned with the emerging world-wide movement for recognition of the significance of 'Indigenous Peoples' and their rights.

Another major focus at the Moscow CHAGS was on symbolic and spiritual aspects of hunter-gatherer life. Here were found richly textured accounts of forms of consciousness, cosmology and ritual, very much in the tradition of the Lévi-Straussian mandate (though not necessarily substantively structuralist), while other papers dealt with the changing world view of foragers under the impact of ideologies of state and marketplace.

Evolutionary issues continue to appear on hunter-gatherer agendas, but in a minor key. While some ecologists approached issues of demography and subsistence from an historically contextualized position, a significant number continued to march under the banner of evolutionary and behavioural ecology. And of these, while some acknowledged the impact of outside forces (developers, missionaries, and land alienation), others focused narrowly on quantitative models of foraging

behaviours as if these existed in isolation. To round out the offerings at the Moscow CHAGS there were excellent though rather eclectic sessions on gender and on aggression and peacemaking.

What struck me as one theme unifying these diverse papers, and distinguishing them from the revisionist position, was that all were able to see in the hunter-gatherer society *some* component of historical autonomy and distinctiveness. The notion of 'pristine' hunter-gatherer was nowhere in sight, but neither did anyone argue that the cultural practices or cosmological beliefs observed were simply refractions of dominant outsiders, Soviet or Western. Refreshingly, the 'other's' reality was not considered to be so alien that the ethnographer was incapable of representing it with some coherence.

Another unifying theme was the recognition that change was accelerating, and that the magnitude of the problems faced by these indigenous peoples was enormous, especially those in the Russian North, for whom ecologically destructive socialist industrialization has been followed directly by the advent of get-rich-quick capitalism. Similar conditions were replicated in most of the world's regions where foragers persist. And yet most of us came away from CHAGS VII strangely buoyed by the knowledge gained of the resilience, spiritual strength and ongoing sense of themselves displayed by the peoples known collectively as hunter-gatherers. This ongoing sense of historically rooted identity provides perhaps the most eloquent repudiation of the claims of the revisionists. □

Richard Lee

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# Whale politics and green legitimacy

## *A critique of the anti-whaling campaign*

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### ARNE KALLAND

*The author is a senior researcher and deputy director at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen. He has worked since the 1970s on Japanese fishing culture, and in recent years on Japanese whaling. He was co-author of Japanese Whaling – End of an Era (Curzon Press, 1992) with Professor Brian Moeran of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is now doing research on whale symbolism and the environmentalist movement.*

Norway resumed commercial catches of minke whales in June 1993, in spite of angry protests and threats of boycott from environmental and animal welfare/rights groups as well as from politicians and governments. In this short paper I will ask why whales and whaling receive this attention, by analysing, first, how whales have been turned into a totem for many people in the western world, and second, why some governments have found anti-whaling campaigns good issues to support. I will undoubtedly provoke some 'whale-lovers', but time is overdue to take a critical approach to the environmentalist movement. It will be argued that anti-whaling campaigns do more harm than good to the environment.

#### From ecology to whale rights

When the International Whaling Commission (IWC) voted in 1982 to halt all commercial whaling, it was claimed that a moratorium was necessary until uncertainties regarding the conditions of whale stocks had been removed and a new management scheme had been adopted.

Since then, research has shown that stocks of minke whale can sustain controlled harvests both in the North Atlantic and in the Antarctic. At the same time, scientists from many countries have worked together in IWC's Scientific Committee in order to develop a 're-

vised management procedure' (RMP), the most sophisticated ever devised for any marine exploitation. There is now consensus in the committee that the RMP can be implemented. Despite the progress made during the last decade, however, IWC is unwilling to adopt the RMP or to lift the moratorium, which prompted the chairman of the committee to resign in protest after the last IWC meeting in Kyoto in May 1993. After having pointed out how IWC had missed a unique opportunity to 'put in place a mechanism for the safe management of commercial whaling', Dr Philip Hammond, of the Sea Mammal Research Unit at Cambridge, continues in his letter of resignation:

... what is the point of having a Scientific Committee if its unanimous recommendations on matters of primary importance are treated with such contempt? ...

I have come to the conclusion that I can no longer justify to myself being the organizer of and spokesman for a Committee whose work is held in such disregard by the body to which it is responsible.

Environmental groups have reacted to higher population estimates and the RMP in various ways. All the main Norwegian environmental organizations have left the anti-whaling bandwagon and turned to what they consider more urgent matters, such as acid rain, global heating and thinning of the ozone layer. The main international organizations, however, continue their anti-