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Current Issues and Future Directions in Hunter-Gatherer Studies

Mathias Guenther

Abstract. – The field of hunting-gathering studies has been a contentious branch of anthropology since its inception two centuries back. The article reviews the developments of the field through two generations of researchers, from the 1960s to 1980s, when an ecological paradigm prevailed, to the present generation. The latter, largely in reaction to the excessively static and materialist orientation of the previous approach, has turned towards modes of analysis of foraging – or, today, largely “post-foraging” – societies that are either historical or hermeneutical or symbolic, as well as “revisionist” (giving to the field its latest bout of contentiousness). It is suggested that these modern (and postmodern) developments have expanded and reinvigorated the field, whose viability and *raison d’être* has been questioned by some researchers in recent years. While drawing on research on hunter-gatherers globally, the article is focused predominantly on the San, a hunter-gatherer group of paradigmatic significance in hunter-gatherer studies. [*Southern Africa, San, bushman, hunter-gatherers, hunter-gatherer revisionism debate, cultural ecology, behavioural/evolutionary ecology, history of anthropological theory*]

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Even though they are fast disappearing, hunting-gathering societies continue to be a field of vigorous anthropological research and debate. The latter has been especially intense over the past decade-

and-a-half, which has seen some researchers taking new directions and challenging – at times with heated “revisionist” polemics – those who have chosen to stay the course, continuing with the same tried-and-tested, ecological program of research as the previous generation of researchers. The principal theoretical innovations, by the present generation of researchers, have been the injection into the hitherto static and materialist field of hunter-gatherer studies of historical and political, as well as humanistic-interpretive and symbolic-religious dynamics and dimensions. Another development is the deromanticization of the hunter-gatherer, especially iconic ones such as the Bushmen.¹ These developments have reinvigorated the field, whose viability and *raison d’être* has been questioned by some researchers in recent years. I will survey developments of what has been a contentious branch of anthropology over the thirty-five years and offer an appraisal of the future of the field of foraging studies – or postforaging studies, as the field will likely be known as then.

Counting Calories, Defining Categories, Building Models: The 1960s and Early 1980s

Modern hunter-gatherer studies were launched in 1966, at the “Man the Hunter” conference in Chi-

¹ Or San: as neither term is free of the taint of deprecation, and as the search for a vernacular term appears to be futile (Guenther 1999: 10f.), I employ both terms (and use them interchangeably).

cago, one of whose two organizers, Richard Lee, set the theoretical tone for what would become a signal event in this subdiscipline of anthropology and archaeology. The conference, and the volume produced from it (Lee and DeVore [eds.] 1968), charted the theoretical course of the field throughout the following generation of researchers, both anthropologists and archaeologists, who had both been invited to the Chicago conference. It was a course that moved along cultural materialist channels exploring, on the basis of detailed empirical studies, all of the parameters of cultural ecology and adaptation. Studied were such fairly precise and measurable things as caloric inputs and outputs and energy budgets, subsistence patterns and the man-hours, and the division of labour they generate, demography and spatial organization, gender and property relations, and all else that makes up the “foraging mode of production” (Lee 1981; Ingold 1988). In tune with an anthropology-wide interest in gender, and especially women’s issues, this topic received special attention from largely female (and feminist) researchers (Begler 1978; Leacock 1978), in particular the subsistence role of “woman the gatherer,” whose economic, political, and ritual status was assessed relative to “man the hunter” (Dahlberg 1981).

The ethnographic range of hunter-gatherer research became greatly extended throughout the 1970s, as one researcher after another set out to conduct fieldwork among hunter-gatherer enclaves in all regions of the world. In some places this coverage was intensive rather than extensive, as waves of ethnographers worked within the same region, such as the Arctic or the Kalahari, which has been visited by perhaps 150 anthropologists and archaeologists during the second half of the last century (Hudelson 1995; Barnard 2007). This led to the overrepresentation of certain hunter-gatherer groups; most strikingly so the San, in particular the Kalahari Ju/’hoansi (or !Kung), who also happen to be the hunter-gatherer group Richard Lee has been concerned with professionally, along with the Marshall family, whose anthropological articles (some of them in *National Geographic*), films, and popular books expanded the profile of this foraging people beyond the anthropological field of hunter-gatherer studies (Speeter-Blaudszun 2004). They have appeared, and continue to appear, in virtually every North American intro-anthro text, frequently in the form of a glossy photographic essay that dwells on the people’s foraging Otherness.

In addition to being busy field-workers, the hunter-gatherer researchers were also busy conference attendees, meeting every two or three years

at international conferences. Of these the “Conference on Hunting-Gathering Societies,” or CHAGS, have been the ones most widely attended (Lee and Daly 1999: 10f.). Conference delegates exchanged information, compared notes, corroborated or criticized one another’s empirical, analytical, and theoretical material, set theoretical agendas.

The basic theoretical concern throughout the 60s and 70s was model-building, of the “foraging band,” in various forms and typologies and in terms of a diversity of criteria, for instance, as degree or pattern of mobility, food habits, absence or presence of surplus and food storage, or of herding or cultivating neighbours (Testart 1981, 1982; Barnard 1983: 195f.). They all boiled down to the “simple”-“complex” dual typology that had been part of the anthropologist’s theoretical toolkit for generations, albeit in an evolutionist cast (Kelly 1995: 6–10), something the modern formulation was not (other than, perhaps, implicitly). Instead, the latter treats the simple-complex division as a continuum (Burch and Ellanna 1994b: 3–6), and differentiates between the two hunter-gatherer types in terms of organizational complexity, resulting from such socioeconomic factors as degree of sedentism, types of food, availability of surplus, and storage and rules of ownership and disposition of food and capital goods. James Woodburn’s (1980) formulation of this conceptual pair, in terms of return on energy or labour investment – “immediate”- vs. “delayed” – was and remains the most influential of these formulations.

Of the two, the simple, egalitarian, immediate-return foraging band – such as that of Lee’s !Kung and Woodburn’s Hadza – was the favoured model (Lee 1976), and the one to assume paradigmatic status in the two decades following “Man the Hunter.” The dominance of this model – the “tyranny of the !Kung” – was seen as something of a theoretical straight-jacket by some researchers, especially those working amongst northern foragers who hunt and fish more than they gather (Ember 1978) and may, to varying degrees, be sedentary and complex in their sociopolitical organization. The latter reservations were held especially by archaeologists, who found little fit between the contemporary “generalized foraging band” (Kelly 1995) and the more complex hunter-gatherer populations of the Pleistocene past and a number of them attempted to move the complex band out of the simple band’s shadow (initiatives which gained theoretical resonance only in the subsequent two decades). A case in point is the volume on complex prehistoric societies by the archaeologists Douglas Price and James Brown, with the goal of “revis-

ing the traditional view of foraging societies as small, mobile, and simple, and to indicate that large, fixed, and complex may more frequently characterize hunter-gatherers" (1985: xv, emphasis in the original). For much the same reason Ernest Burch and Linda Ellanna, a decade later, convened a conference and published a volume ([eds.] 1994; 1994b: 5f.) that gave preeminence to contemporary complex northern hunter-gatherers.

The interest in ecological issues persisted throughout the late 80s and through the 90s, especially property relations, which were the subject of one of the two CHAGS 4 volumes (Ingold et al. 1988b; Barnard and Woodburn 1988). Indeed, a number of anthropologists continue to do to this day what they or others did then, unfazed by recent postecological theoretical stirrings, working, solidly – if not stolidly – and steadfastly, on such classic issues as land use, territoriality, the ins and outs of "hunter affluence," division of labour and gender relations, property rights, the "key issues" in a volume on hunter-gatherer research in the early 1990s, on the CHAGS 5 conference in Fairbanks (Burch and Ellanna [eds.] 1994). In the decade – and century – that followed, one of the key researchers working within this paradigm, James Woodburn, was honoured by a conference on the topics of property and equality that was convened by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany in 2001 and attended by over fifty researchers who were inspired in their recent and current work on hunter-gatherer and other egalitarian societies by the conference's guest of honour. A pair of conference volumes on the same topic and with the same title was published four years later (Widlok and Tadesse 2005a, 2005b). Another of the "old guard" researchers, Richard Lee, was recognized by a number of workers in the field, in a conference and the volume it yielded, on the "politics of egalitarianism" (Solway 2006). Some of the later work on ecology has remained framed in the same 1960s-theoretical terms, while other researchers have moved beyond, to sharpen and "scientize," as well as "evolutionize," the processes of adaptation, by means of a new, more rigorous analytical device, namely human behavioural (or evolutionary) ecology² and its seminal theoretical construct of "optimal foraging strategy" (Winterhalder and Smith 1981).³ Both are highly formal, biology-based extensions of the static cultural ecological orientation from earlier times (Kelly 1995).

2 Borgehoff Mulder (1991); Smith (1992); Smith and Winterhalder (1992); Winterhalder and Smith (2000).

3 Bruce Winterhalder has recently expressed some second thoughts about the concept (2004).

Other concerns of researchers of the 70s and early 80s were, on the one hand, the political plight of hunting-gathering peoples of the world, and the researchers' incumbent responsibilities, and, on the other, the expansion of the formal analysis of their societies from material, infrastructural to social and structural levels (for instance, kinship and political organization and processes). An example is Richard Lee's and Irven DeVore's second, Kalahari-based, hunter-gatherer volume (1976), which contains an eclectic array of articles on the San that range from child-rearing and women's issues, through trance dancing and folklore, to processes of change and acculturation. History and change received due notice also in the volume that emerged from the first CHAGS conference in Paris in 1978 (Leacock and Lee 1982).

Hunter-Gatherer Studies and Archaeology

As already noted, archaeologists also were a strong presence at "Man the Hunter," along with a few evolutionary anthropologists. What drew both sets of scholars to this anthropological conference was its cultural ecological, materialist theoretical framework, which sits well with archaeology, along with its penchant for portraying contemporary hunter-gatherers as archaic and pristine (what we might call the "living fossil trope"). The conference contributed to the development of the "New Archaeology" – that American archaeologists saw as one with anthropology (Binford 1962) – and of ethnoarchaeology. The pros and cons of the latter's analytical *modus operandi* were debated, namely ethnographic analogy, or the extrapolation from extant hunter-gatherer populations to extinct ones. That became the approach of a number of ethnoarchaeological studies in the decade following, to hunter-gatherer groups in the Arctic (Binford 1978), Australia (Gould 1980) and the Kalahari (Yellen 1976, 1977).

The reason, the proponents of this controversial analytical approach were drawn to the same, was because it allows for the formulation of a number of precise questions and hypotheses about adaptive, spatial, demographic, techno-economic, and other parameters and their relationship to social organization. These could then be brought to bear on the analysis of the archaeological site (Clark 1968). Those opposed pointed out the many pitfalls of this methodology, prime of them the "pristinism" problem – the lack of historical continuity between the hunter-gatherers aboveground and those below – and the lack of ecological equivalence in the

two sets of environments, which today are almost always inhospitable and marginal and in the past might have been favourable and high-yield. Other problems were noted, many of them by archaeologists in subsequent decades, who continue to debate and challenge the merits of ethnographic analogy. One is the revisionists' point about the virtually universal contact indigenous hunter-gatherers have had with nonforagers, obviating the earlier pre-Holocene scenario of "hunter-gatherers living in a world of hunter-gatherers." Another is the uncritical acceptance of an arbitrarily privileged *ur*-hunter-gatherer, one – as noted above when mentioning Price's and Brown's work on prehistoric hunter-gatherers – that may be altogether inapplicable to certain hunter-gatherers of the Pleistocene past.⁴ Other critics point to the great diversity of hunter-gatherers today and the infinitely greater diversity of those of the past, millennia and millions of years back in time, with its unceasing climatic, floral and faunal variations and oscillations, especially in the Upper Palaeolithic⁵ and the tendency to see only the past hunter-gatherer groups as on a trajectory of change and extant ones as at the end of that trajectory and without change (Parkington 1984: 169f.). Methodological problems pointed to were the invisibility of plants in Pleistocene sites, as of hunter-gatherer camps or bands generally, due to their smallness, fluidity, and ephemerality (Deetz 1968; Smith 1996: 2); the presence or absence from prehistoric sites of specific technological or social items (Parkington 1984: 170); and the gaps and contradictions, as well as other inadequacies in the ethnographic record, especially those aspects of it that are of use to archaeologists (Wobst 1978; Kramer 1996). Because of all of these problems, John Parkington suggested that archaeologists – those working in a southern African context – should "de-!Kung" their efforts and use ethnographic and ethnohistorical evidence "as a challenge, not a model, of the past" (1984: 172).

Archaeology and hunter-gatherer studies remain closely linked theoretical and research enterprises to this day (Bettinger 1991; Barnard 2004), necessarily so as the ecological and cultural horizons probed by prehistoric archaeologists are, now as in the past and the future, those of foragers.⁶ The

utility of ethnographic analogy was recently reappraised by Lewis Binford (2001) in a comprehensive theoretical work that set as its "primary problem the development of a method for productively using ethnographic data to serve archaeological goals." This it does with reference to extant hunter-gatherer societies – 339 of them are analysed in detail – whose ecological and social-structural diversity are compared by Binford, to provide a uniformitarian strategy for extrapolating and reconstructing the same for extinct ones. A recent collaborative ethnoarchaeological project among the Kalahari Ju/'hoansi – one set within the terms of the revisionism debate – was carried out by the archaeologist Andy Smith and the anthropologist Richard Lee (Smith and Lee 1997). Archaeology is an integral component in the latter's – with Richard Daly – recent encyclopaedia project on hunter-gatherers worldwide (Lee and Daly [eds.] 1999). More recent yet is Catherine Panter-Brick et al.'s authoritative anthology on hunter-gatherers (2001). These works, all attest to an ongoing, mutually strengthening partnership between the two disciplines, in their study of foraging societies now and in the past.

The most recent interdisciplinary initiatives in hunter-gatherer studies, both undertaken in 2002, were another International Hunter-Gatherer Conference (CHAGS 9, in Edinburgh) and the launching of a new journal. The former was on the theme of "Hunter-Gatherer Studies and the Reshaping of Anthropology," to which archaeologists were extended a special invitation. The latter is an online journal *Before Farming. The Archaeology and Anthropology of Hunter-Gatherers* (edited by Larry Barham). A recent issue (2004/3), with the theme of "challenging complacency," is especially invigorating theoretically. On the basis of new archaeological and cross-cultural ethnographic data, the articles in the issue challenge a number of items of received wisdom in the field, such as the exceptionality of tropical forest hunters and, yet again, the !Kung/Hadza model of the egalitarian band, especially for prehistoric hunter-gatherers, some as remote in the past as the Middle Pleistocene. The consistent output of first-rate articles, along with discussions, news, and reviews, attests to the ongoing health of the journal, which the editor attributes, in part to the journal's "hybrid vigour," derived from the two disciplines that contribute to it, offering "a broad church for those with catholic tastes in hunter-gatherer research" (Barham 2002, article 4).

4 On this see also Foley (1988); Bender and Morris (1988: 7); Kelly (1995: 333–335).

5 See Conkey (1984: 253f.); Soffer (1985: 235); Hitchcock (1982: 61f.); Bender and Morris (1988: 5); Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen (2003).

6 Viz. Scheinsohn (2003); Prentiss and Kujit (2004); Fitzhugh (2003).

History and the Revisionist Challenge

The issues raised at CHAGS 1 at the end of the 1970s were picked up in the following decade and defined one of the key issues of the next decade: the move from static model-building to processual concerns, especially with history – “history of, history by, history for” as noted, in exhortatory tones, by Barbara Bender and Brian Morris (1988: 13), in the introduction to one of the two volumes – subtitled “History, Evolution, and Social Change” – emerging from CHAGS 4 in London in 1986 (Ingold et al. 1988a, 1988b). This conference also brought archaeologists – one of them Bender – back to the conference table, as key participants in the hunter-gatherer enterprise.

While ecology continued – and, as noted above, continues – as a vigorous research interest, it is probably fair to say that the interest in history has held the upper hand and has prevailed as the key direction in the field today (Lee and Daly 1999: 6f.). The theoretical impetus behind the historicization of hunter-gatherer studies has been the “Kalahari Debate” which was started by the so-called “revisionists” in the mid-80s, gained momentum at the decade’s end, and peaked in the early 90s. Once again it had been a CHAGS conference that started the debate – CHAGS 3 at Bad Homburg in Germany (Schrire [ed.] 1984). “Revisionism” also spread from the Kalahari to other hunter-gatherer constituencies, especially the tropics, whose rain forests – along with their forager inhabitants – were subjected to “historical ecological” examination which revealed that much of that allegedly “virgin” environment was actually an “anthropogenic” landscape and that the hunting-gathering adaptation was impossible in the rainforest environment without agriculture or trade to supplement it.⁷ Even so unlikely a place as the subarctic (Legros 1997; Renouf 2003) – indeed, the arctic itself (McGhee 2005) – were subjected to the historical-revisionist gaze. Revisionism also crossed disciplinary lines in hunter-gatherer studies, from anthropology to archaeology (Shott 1992), especially in the southern African context,⁸ where the process of dismantling of apartheid, and its “primordialist” racial policies and proclivities, provided an intellectual and ideological climate that generally favoured dynamic historical explanations over static ecological or structural ones. In the Kalahari context, revisionism’s spokesman and woman were and remain

Edwin Wilmsen (1989) and Carmel Schrire ([ed.] 1984) and their targeted opponents, whom they label “isolationists,” are Richard Lee (Solway and Lee 1990; Lee and Guenther 1993), as well as other San researchers, in particular Lorna Marshall, Jiro Tanaka, and George Silberbauer (Wilmsen 1983).

The debate has been remarkably – and, for hunting-gathering circles, uncharacteristically – vitriolic; what became unleashed was a full-flung *Methodenstreit* (with the emphasis on *Streit!*) that divided hunter-gatherer students into two warring camps and elicited a “crisis” – of representation, if not also of confidence (Lee 1992; Guenther 1995). The debate is a significant enough theoretical moment in the discipline to have warranted inclusion in a recent encyclopaedia on anthropology (Guenther 1996b), as well as in a theoretical anthropology text on contemporary issues and debates in anthropology (Welsch and Endicott 2003a).⁹ The reason for the vitriol is that it is about fundamentals: two different, diametrically opposed visions on hunter-gatherers. To some social analysts this amounts to nothing less than a debate on basic humanity; a case in point would be Tim Ingold, who regards hunter-gatherer society as exemplifying the “‘elementary’ foundations of human sociality” (1999: 399), a position that echoes the old debate about the “functional prerequisites of human society” (Aberle et al. 1950; see also Burch 1994: 446–451).

The one vision on hunter-gatherers, represented by Lee and Co. sees such people as living in societies that, in their openness and egalitarianism, are distinctively different from all other societies. Moreover they are held to be representative, some more some less, of an archaic lifeway (although not, in most cases, without some historical connections to nonforaging neighbour societies). The revisionist view dismisses as a romanticist and evolutionist fiction the notion of an archaic aboriginal hunter-gatherer societal type. Moreover, its proponents deem that notion is an utopian fancy, an evolutionary or delusionary projection of an imagined ancient past to an experienced and ideologically rejected present. Those doing the imagining and rejecting were Western society-weary members of the 1960s and 70s counterculture, who, as graduate student field-workers in the Kalahari, found their utopian dreams realized, amongst the desert’s

7 Headland and Reid (1989); Headland (1997); Headland and Bailey (1991); Bailey and Headland (1991); Balée (1998); Bahuchet et al. (1991).

8 Mazel (1989); Smith (1996); Sadr (1997).

9 The other hunter-gatherer issue to be featured in the Welsch and Endicott volume is whether or not tropical hunter-gatherers can subsist solely on foraged foods or need supplemental food sources (2003b).

“harmless people.”¹⁰ A generation later, the revisionists set to deconstructing all of these reveries with a vengeance, substituting for hippie love and peace yuppie state and capital.¹¹ The revisionist view regards extant hunter-gatherers not as cultural aboriginals but as social marginals, tied in different forms of dependency relationships to regional agropastoral state societies, or to the colonialist, postcolonialist, or capitalist world system. The first envisions a hunter-gatherer “society against the state” (Clastres 1977), the second a society within, of, or beholden to the state. Some would regard the latter position as yet another form of romanticism – postmodern brooding, deconstructionist doubt, and cynicism (Lee 1992) – while others have assigned to it the epistemological status of a new model or paradigm – the “interdependent model,” as against the opposite “generalized foraging model” and its pre-60s antithesis, the “patrilineal/patrilocal band” (Kelly 1995: 10–28; also see Lee 1976).

After much sound and fury, over the pages of many a 1980s and 90s issue of *Current Anthropology* as well as other anthropological journals,¹² the debate, after one more – its last? – flare-up (Wilmsen 2003), has now abated. Despite its fundamental irreconcilability, the two sets of contestants seem now to have agreed to disagree. Some of the participants in, or observers of, the revisionism dispute have come to acknowledge the appropriateness of one or the other paradigm depending on the specifics of a particular case.¹³ In fact, one might deem the revisionist debate actually to have had a salutary effect on the field of hunter-gatherer studies in that it has identified some of its theoretical shortcomings and, through vigorous, air-clearing polemics, has revitalized and expanded the field, both theoretically and methodologically. Its wider fallout is felt also beyond hunter-gatherer research

circles: the current “indigenous peoples” debate, which has generated much the same heat and degree of polarization as did the more narrowly defined Kalahari debate, over much the same sorts of issues – the essentialism, primordialism, and primitivism that allegedly attach to the term and trope of “indigenous peoples.”¹⁴

The foremost theoretical improvement the revisionism debate has brought to hunter-gatherer studies is that history has now become the vital and indispensable dimension in the analysis of foraging societies that it should always have been. The focus on history highlights a fundamental structural trait of hunter-gatherer societies, one not sufficiently recognized by the previous generation of researchers attempting to develop prototypal, paradigmatic, and prescriptive models for such societies: their high degree of fluidity, flexibility, and resilience. Consequently, they display great diversity, both laterally over space and lineally through time, as different ecological or historical circumstances elicit different cultural adaptations. Placing and tracing a hunter-gatherer group within and through time reveals the range and parameters of structural fluidity of hunter-gatherer social organization – the same way regional comparison of extant groups do, as in the recent work by Alan Barnard (1992a), Susan Kent (1996), Paul Roscoe (2002), and Robert Kelly (1995), on Khoisan, African, New Guinean, and global hunting-gathering populations. My own work on Bushman religion and society (1999) reveals, on the basis of lateral and lineal comparison, how thoroughly flexible and variable, indeed, ambiguous and amorphous, these two institutional domains are, rendering difficult the task of extracting anything like a core or centre. Such comparative work is an important exercise for researchers in the field (Bird-David 1996) as it is only by knowing the range of flexibility, resilience, and diversity of such societies that we can define the category and provide models for hunter-gatherer society that do not arbitrarily privilege one model over another, as did earlier researchers.¹⁵ The arbitrariness of an alleged hunter-gatherer arche-/prototype is shown up if it is revealed that there may be dozens of variants, in all shapes and sizes, often in one region, and over a short period of historical time.¹⁶

10 Konner and Shostak (1986); Wilmsen (1989: 35f.); also see Guenther (1980).

11 A case in point is the late John Marshall, who, embracing the latter view, totally repudiated his previous romantic perspective on the !Kung in the later years of his career as a ethnographic film maker, primarily of these iconic hunter-gatherers (Kapfer et al. 1991; Tomaselli and Homiak 1994). Marshall's latest film series – a five-part retrospective on his and his family's work amongst the Namibian !Kung and the economic and political processes they experienced from between 1951–2000 (Marshall 2003) – documents this shift, especially part 5, titled “Death by Myth.”

12 See Barnard (1992b) for a summary of the voluminous output of articles on the Kalahari Debate. However, the summary is incomplete, as the debate was far from over at the time of Barnard's stocktaking. For an examination of the debate in the context of wider anthropological theory see Kuper (1993).

13 Lee (1992); Kent (1992); Guenther (1996b, 2005: 35f.).

14 Kuper (2003); Kenrick and Lewis (2004); Barnard (2006).

15 Barnard (1983: 204–208); Burch (1994: 452–454); Kelly (1995: 10–35); Kent (1996: 2).

16 As I have shown among the Naro San of western Botswana, on the basis of ethnohistorical research (Guenther 1986, 1996a, 1997; 1999: 14–23).

In addition to directing the field's focus to history and to diversity, the other theoretical development that arose from the revisionist challenge is that it brought about some significant shifts in the theoretical perspective in hunter-gatherer studies. Instead of explaining nomadism, sharing, egalitarianism, "familistic" group life, lack of status differentiation and leadership, group openness in terms of the adaptive and organizational dynamics of the foraging, or communal mode of production, these features are explained, by the interdependent model, in terms of such social conditions or processes as marginality, class, ethnicity, relative deprivation, labeling theory, as well as identity politics and world systems theory (Rao 1993; Grinker 1992: 160). Theoretically and substantively, the field here finds itself in the terrain of the sociologist and the political economist, as the analytical focus shifts from aboriginal tribals to marginalized proletarians. By so widening the theoretical scope of hunter-gatherer studies, other groups can be admitted to the forager fold, from contemporary Japanese inshore whalers (Iwasaki-Goodman and Freeman 1994) and 17th- to 19th-century Newfoundland colonists (Smith 1987), through simple horticulturalists in general,¹⁷ to social marginals in First World (and other) urban regions, such as vagabonds and bag ladies, pan handlers and beggars, street people, "urban nomads," and gypsies. They occupy what the German anthropologist Aparna Rao dubs the "peripatetic niche" (1993: 503–509) – and Alan Barnard (1993: 35) refers to as the *san* in any city. Here Rao points to such structural parallels between hunter-gatherers and urban peripatet-

ics as a nomadic lifestyle, opportunistic foraging, low-level trade or sporadic work, social and economic dependency, low social status, personal autonomy, loose connection of the individual to a collectivity and, as a criterion not often noted by students of tribal hunter-gatherers (although frequently present), deemed by members of the wider society to hold ritual power, for which they are either esteemed and sought out, or demonized, or criminalized (Rao 1993: 503–509). Incidentally, another tribe to be included within the ranks of urban, and occasionally peripatetic, "ersatz neo-foragers," according to one researcher's tongue-in-cheek suggestion (Hansen 1995), are academics: man the hunter is here seen to be engaged in the exciting and exalted, high-status, high-risk, yet low-yield intellectual subsistence task of research, while academic woman, the gatherer's task, is hum-drum, low-status, low-risk, high-yield teaching!

Apart from these theoretical spin-offs from the revisionism debate, there have also been methodological developments in the field. It has triggered a new sweep of fieldwork, as well as previously neglected ethnohistorical and archival work (Burch 1994: 444), in order to check and recheck the empirical record, or to add new information to it. This revisionist-triggered review and recheck of the ethnographic base has doubtless expanded the same, as well as rendered it more accurate. The fieldwork includes collecting oral histories (e.g., Lee 1998), as well as mapping band territories, at times with accurate, high-tech GPS (Geographic Positioning System) instruments and GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping techniques, frequently with the enlisted help of experts.

17 Roy Ellen (1982), in a study of the "small-scale social formation" basically of hunter-gatherers, deals with the elusiveness of the practical and conceptual boundary between foraging and cultivation, both of which may sporadically or cyclically engage in the other subsistence activity. Fowler and Turner (1999: 421) describe the various ways hunter-gatherers have "domesticated" their environment without actually having domesticated specific species of plants or animals. The fact that foragers generally manage their resource base in some fashion (viz. "fire ecology") thus further reduces the forager-cultivator distinction. Having eschewed the "fetish of foraging" (Myers 1988: 266), the subsistence-informed hunter-gatherer/forager category has, in a sense, dissolved into a non-category. To an extent this is evident in Robert Kelly's recent book on hunter-gatherer diversity (1995), which, its title – "The Foraging Spectrum" – notwithstanding, includes within its scope a number of horticultural societies. So does Woodburn's "delayed-return" hunter-gatherer category, as do the two edited volumes that were recently published by researchers inspired by his work (Widlok and Tadesse 2005a, 2005b), which include numerous contributions by researchers on nonforaging egalitarian, small-scale societies.

The "Insiders' View," Political and Cultural

The last, mapping of traditional band territories and resource nexuses, may be a task a researcher today may carry out for reasons that are other than academic. Instead, he or she may conduct such research at the behest of a politically organized hunter-gatherer group, or an advocacy organization. Such was the case, for example, among the Dene of northwestern Canada (Asch 1976) and the Ju/'hoansi and /Gwi and G//ana of Nyae Nyae and the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (Boden 1997: 62f.; Smith et al. 2000: 93), respectively. This brings us to a new direction in hunter-gatherer studies: the involvement of the people themselves, in the research, be it "pure" or "applied." Given their status as ethnic minorities, in state societies that frequently oppress, exploit, or expropriate

them and render them “societies in danger,”¹⁸ such research is vitally necessary, as are attitudes and actions of engagement and advocacy on the part of anthropologists. Not only are such attitudes and actions a matter of the researcher’s own conscience, they have also become expectations on the part of the (post)foraging people whom the researcher has come to study and who reject the status as passive research subjects vis-à-vis the visiting anthropologist. Hunter-gatherer people – like other “indigenous” peoples everywhere in the world, especially since the 1990s, the UN-declared “Decade of Indigenous Peoples” – are now becoming active participants in the research of anthropologists and other researchers. That research is now regarded as being no longer *about* them, but is expected to be *for* them, and frequently also *with* them, at their instructions, under their direction, and in line with their agendas. One striking example is the recently published “Voices of the San” project that drew in San individuals from eight language communities from four countries of southern Africa, who were interviewed over a span of several years, to tell the world about their issues and problems, hopes and aspirations, in an internationally published work (Le Roux and White 2004). Richard Lee’s and Richard Daly’s recently published monumental “Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers” has contributions by literate hunter-gatherers, including the Ju’/’hoa leader and education officer Kxao Royal-/o/oo. The San, along with hunter-gatherers and indigenous peoples – especially Amazonian Indians (Turner 1989; Rabben 1998) – elsewhere, are becoming educated, politically alert, and astute and aware of their place in the wider society and nation state. Moreover, they are aware of the anthropological enterprise going on in their midst, its description and inscription either of their culture or heritage, or of their history and political activities. They may, in fact, be critical of that enterprise, especially the latter set of research topics, especially in its modernist or postmodernist modes, of depicting hunter-gatherer people as either history’s or the world’s passive, sinned-against, voiceless “victimized puppets” (Medicine 1999: xiii), or as dupes and pawns within the power plays of the encompassing state and world capital (Burch and Ellanna 1994a: 311 f.; Katz et al. 1997: 153–156).

They may also be participants in ethnographic or archaeological projects, or they may be enlisted to tell their life stories, into the cassette recorder or film camera of the researcher, who will then

produce a book or film on his or her life and people’s lifeways. A recent San example, drawn yet again from the San, is the remarkable study on the politically empowering effects of the trance dance on the /Kae /Kae Ju’/’hoansi, which was written with the close collaboration of the people of /Kae /Kae village, especially the trance dancers (Katz et al. 1997). Such studies may be altogether in the hunter-gatherer person’s own voice, such as the San women N/isa (Shostak 1981), N=ai (Marshall 1982; Volkman 1982), and N/amkwa (Heinz and Lee 1978) or the Athapaskan and Tlingit women Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned (Cruikshank 1990). These absorbing and expansive life story-focused works have underscored just how well-defined, autonomous, and individuated the personality of the individual person is in such societies (Gardner 1991). Other North American examples of such humanistically and “emically” cast works on various domains of hunter-gatherer expressive culture – some of them written by indigenous authors – are an exploration of “the paths to knowledge” of the Beaver Indians (Ridington 1988, 1990) and the “maps and dreams” of the same people (Brody 1998), and a deciphering of the rock “writings” and art of the Stein River Valley (York et al. 1993). These works, and others like them (Lee 1992; Lee and Daly 1999: 9), have sensitised anthropologists to the “native, or subaltern, perspective” and have brought the “humanistic” approach to hunter-gatherer studies, consisting, according to Fred Myers, of studies that emphasize “hermeneutic and meaningful interpretation of insiders’ views, reflexive works, and the advocacy research of political engagement often undertaken on behalf of hunter-gatherers” (1988: 261).

Closing the Symbolic Gap

The developments just discussed bring us to another recent development – and corrective – in hunter-gatherer studies, the “beyond-ecology” move. It is a move away from materialism and the requisite “bottom-up” analysis of hunter-gatherer society and culture, which has dominated and confined the theoretical agenda of so many researchers, to ideology and a “top-down” mode of analysis.¹⁹

¹⁹ My own recent (1999) study of Bushman religion and its articulation with Bushman society and the foraging ethos is an example. When dealing with social and cosmological structure in his comparative study of Khoisan society and culture, Alan Barnard, too, advances a similar approach: to reverse the materialist emphasis on “base” over “superstructure” and regard the latter as “a *deep* cultural structure” (Barnard 1992a: 298, his emphasis).

¹⁸ Miller (1993); see also Dyck (1985); Hitchcock (1999a); Lee (2000); Bodley (2000).

We should note that this characterization of hunter-gatherer research, as excessively materialistic, does not apply equally to the entire research field. It is prominent in many of the studies on North American hunter-gatherers – the legacy of such researchers as Speck, Steward, and Service – and it applies especially to the Bushmen (Guenther 1999: 1–3), along with other African groups. It is much less of a problem in the field of Australian Aboriginal studies, as amongst these hunter-gatherers the mythological and mystical sphere is such a palpable presence, within not just the ritual cultural domain, but also the ecological and social one, that it could not be missed by even the most hard-nosed scientist-ethnographer. Another hunter-gatherer-*cum* horticulturalist contingent amongst whom there exists a rich record on myth and cosmology is Amazonia, thanks to the mytho-logical labours of Claude Lévi-Strauss and those – on Achuar cosmology and ontology – of his student Philippe Descola (1998).²⁰ The latter, in his latest intellectual *tour de force* (2005), has expanded and refined his hermeneutical probings of Achuar cosmology by developing an encompassing four-fold taxonomy of ontologies – “totemism,” “animism,” “analogism,” “naturalism” – that moves beyond Amazonia and hunter-gatherer cultures to human culture in general. Moreover, North American researchers, notwithstanding this field’s ecological legacy, have more recently offered a few studies that probe the mythological and expressive, as well as ritual (Tanner 1979) realms of their region’s hunter-gatherer peoples. The former were referred to in the paragraph above. Yet, the ethnographic record on hunter-gatherers generally has, until recently, revealed a noticeable “symbolic gap” (Guenther 1999: 1–3). It is now fast being filled, by study upon study on ritual, myth, cosmology, folklore, music, and art.²¹ Archaeologists, too, es-

pecially those under the “post-processual” influence of cognitive archaeologists like Ian Hodder, have expanded and intensified their examination of the symbolic and expressive domains of past cultures. As noted above (footnote 21) this applies especially to cave and rock art, the study of which has expanded greatly, as well as having becoming ever more probing analytically, with respect to the symbolic, phenomenological, and hermeneutical parameters that are considered in its analysis.²²

Apart from studies that deal directly with one or several of the domains of religious or expressive culture, there is a basic conceptual way in which hunter-gatherer studies have moved beyond ecology. This is the “de-materialization” of the concepts of foraging and hunting and gathering, beyond factors of subsistence and modes of production. While Woodburn’s dual category “immediate/delayed-return” hunter-gatherers still is defined primarily in terms of relations of production and significance of property, his broader category, “egalitarian societies” (1982), greatly expands the social and ideological parameters of hunter-gatherer social formations. So does Roy Ellen’s (1982) “small-scale social formation” and Richard Lee’s “communal mode of production.” This he developed in the 1980s, replacing his previously cherished “foraging mode of production” (1981) and even earlier “nomadic style” (Lee and DeVore 1968). The concept became yet more removed from subsistence in its fourth and final conceptual incarnation, as “primitive communism.”²³

To one researcher, Tim Ingold, hunting and gathering are not so much instrumental techniques or actions of subsistence procurement as they are intentional acts that are “socially directed ... in which human beings purposively ‘take hold’ of the resources of their environments” (Ingold 1988: 276). Among foragers, according to Ingold, “the social relations themselves both constitute and characterize the practical activities of hunting and

20 To some extent these are neutralized by the current spate of behavioural-ecological research of South American foragers – especially the Aché (Hill and Hurtado 1996) – that give short shrift to the superstructural domain.

21 With respect to the San, examples of such works are Katz (1982); Katz et al. (1997); Biesele (1993); England (1995); Hewitt (1986); Schmidt (1989); Deacon and Dowson (1996); Guenther (1989, 1999). A focus of expanded research on San expressive culture is on rock art, especially by Lewis-Williams (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004) and his associates and successors at The Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Australian researchers, too, have expanded their research in this field, under the auspices of the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA). The papers from its 2000 conference in Alice Springs were published in *Before Farming* (2003). The popular writer Ian Wilson’s recently pub-

lished (2006) diffusionist (Andamanese islands? Sahara? South America?)-*cum*-“lost world” thesis on the enigmatic and ancient – “pre-aboriginal” – “Bradshaw paintings” in the Kimberley region of Northwest Australia, has triggered a furious debate amongst Australian rock art scholars, as well as “uncovered a hornet’s nest of Australian sensitivities and paranoias” (Hanbury-Tenison 2006: 13). The debate has galvanized interest in Aboriginal rock art, much the same way Lewis-Williams’s “shamanic thesis” on San rock art, presented in ever more accessible and attractively produced books (2002), has intensified scholarly, indigenous, and public interest in the subject.

22 Viz. Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988); Dowson and Lewis-Williams (1994); Lewis-Williams and Clottes (2002); Lewis-Williams (2002).

23 Lee (1988); see also Barnard (1993) and Ingold (1999: 400).

gathering" (276). Others have de-ecologised foraging, rather than hunting and gathering, treating it as not merely a subsistence or production mode but as an ethos or ideology, that informs social relations, kinship, and the cross-cultural interaction of foragers with neighbours.²⁴ The natural environment itself become ideational: instead of regarding it as a material, pragmatically exploited domain of resources and risks, it is seen – in an idiom that is paternalistic rather than pragmatic and animistic rather than economic²⁵ – as the “giving environment” which “provides for their needs,” to whom its hunter-gatherers denizens stand in a relationship of “cosmic sharing,” with “human-like relatives” (Bird-David 1992: 39; 1990; 1999; 2005). Bird-David’s ideas on the “giving environment” are part of a wider discourse, that was initiated by Tim Ingold in the mid-1980s (1986), on the largely socially constituted conceptualisations hunter-gatherers hold of nature – the environment (Bird-David 1990, 1999), animals (Ingold [ed.] 1986) and plants (Descola (1986), and even trees and roads – as opposed to paths – through them (the Malaysian rain forest), both of whose “social life” was explored by a hunter-gatherer researcher (respectively, Rival 1998, and Tuck-Po 2005).

Other processes of hunter-gatherer society, hitherto explained in terms of adaptation or risk-management, are given a predominantly social gloss, for instance exchange (Wiessner 1982), which is held to be not a subsistence or economic activity as much as a constitutive process of social life, with exchange items going beyond food, to such things as ornaments, stories and knowledge, names, sexuality, kith and kin (Myers 1988: 270). The type of exchange that is cast in such social and moral terms, more now than ever before, is sharing – the most socially charged of the “intimate economies” (Price 1975; Widlok and Tadesse 2005a). Turning to another basic structural feature of hunter-gatherer society, fluidity, its analysis, too, is taken beyond ecology: rather than holding it to be more than anything else an adaptive strategy of optimal resource utilization in a marginal environment, researchers now regard it as an economic stratagem for keeping at bay competitors from neighbouring camps, amongst commercial foragers (Bird-David 1988: 19), or a strategy for evading enemies.²⁶ And

among the Hadza, what may drive a man and his family away from a campsite is nightmares! (However, it is an arguable point whether this factor is material – bad digestion – or immaterial – active imagination.)

Deromanticizing the Bushmen (and Other Iconic Hunter-Gatherers)

Until recently hunter-gatherers were seen as living distinct and discrete lives – as well as discreet, or isolated ones. These lives were significantly different in their “quality of relatedness” or “sociality,” based on trust, rather than dominion, and on “relations of incorporation rather than exclusion” (Ingold 1990: 130). As well there are the once hallowed and now, to some extent, questioned or qualified hallmarks of hunter-gatherer society and ethos as sharing and cooperation, gender and social equality and individuality, non-acquisitiveness and humility.²⁷ Revisionists, as noted above, regard this mix of wholesome social and moral traits utopian and fanciful.

In part, this more sober and somber perspective on these people also was assumed independently of, and prior to the revisionist paradigm and the general, discipline-wide postmodernist cynicism that is its hallmark (Edgerton 1992; LeBlanc and Register 2003). In hunter-gatherer studies it arose during the course of continuing, post-“Man the Hunter” field research and follow-up studies, some of it generated through conference networking and brainstorming. For one thing this new research revealed that the universal ideal vs. real discrepancy was found also amongst hunter-gatherers, something that may have escaped the notice of some of the earlier utopia-minded researchers. For another, further, and more balanced, research revealed a number of inherent contradictions and ambiguities in certain institutions and values.²⁸ Turning to the Kalahari again, the allegedly peaceful and “harmless” Bushmen – the “flower children of the Kalahari” – were, on closer inspection, seen to display a high incidence of homicides and sorcery accusations (Lee 1979: 397f.; Guenther 1992). Instead of solicitous, caring sharing, anthropologists now refer to this central mode of exchange and interaction as “demand sharing” (Peterson 1993). As an instance, of “prescriptive altruism” (Ingold 1988: 282, using

24 Bird-David (1988); Barnard (1993); Biesele (1993); Guenther (1999: 140–142).

25 This conceptualization is not unlike the one the Mbuti are said to have of their forest environment, which they regard as a providential parent (Turnbull 1961).

26 Bender and Morris (1988: 12); Lee and Daly (1999: 3); Hitchcock (1999b: 180); Kelly et al. (1999: 215).

27 Leacock (1978); Woodburn (1982); Lee (1982, 1988); Ingold (1988); Gardner (1991); Boehm (1993).

28 Lee (1982); Briggs (1982); Barnard (1993: 36f.); Guenther (1999: 20–55).

Meyer Fortes's term) which obviates reciprocity (Rival 1999: 82) and may be pointed and pressured, as well as altogether asymmetrical, it has been described among the Australian Aborigines (Peterson 1993; Macdonald 2000) and the Hadza (Woodburn 1998: 49). The San, too, regard sharing as an "entitlement" and may be seen vociferously and cantankerously to exact the same from one another through the "complaint discourse" (Rosenberg 1990). Some, in fact, find the moral expectation to share an irksome obligation (as I observed among the Ghanzi farm Bushmen of Botswana; Guenther 2005: 222–225). So charged with tension may be the action of sharing that it may give rise to physical fighting and homicide – or, among the Bushmen, a trance dance, to cool tempers (Guenther 1999: 45–48). Egalitarianism is described as a facade by one Kalahari researcher (Kent 1993) while another notes how people are chafing under the unrelenting requirement placed on a person with a skill personally and culturally cherished, say a hunter, orator, or headman, to "hide his light under a bushel," that is, to negate his ability or ambition, through a stereotyped self-effacement routine (Gulbrandsen 1991). Some researchers prefer to depict the Bushmen and other hunter-gatherers not so much as people who share and care, cooperate, trust each other and draw one another into the group, but as people with a "lack of commitment to others" (Woodburn 1982: 434) and, on occasion, as somewhat scheming operators, of the *homo manipulator* type, who exploit social relations, to kin and neighbouring bands and non-Bushmen, with the same cost-benefit assessment of individual gain and self-interest as evolutionary ecologists describe their subsistence and adaptive patterns and revisionists their relation to outsiders (Guenther 1999: 40f.).

As long as this less rosy side of hunter-gatherers is seen not as an *alternative* to the old view, but as a *complement* thereto (Guenther 1999: 49–57), this deidealized, de-Rousseauianized portrayal of hunter-gatherer is a valuable corrective to the field. It leads one to see hunter-gatherers not as some iconic stereotype but as "support[ing] any image of human society; generous or greedy, violent or peaceful, monogamous or polygamous, attentive or aloof of children," as Robert Kelly (1995: 338) concluded his comparative study of 120 odd hunter-gatherer societies. It would be desirable if other writers on hunter-gatherers were to portray the subjects of their labours in such terms – as people like any other people. If that message spreads to policy makers in government or development circles working toward the improvement of prospects of today's hunter-gatherer minorities, it might help

them in their struggles of gaining recognition as equal citizens, with an equal and equitable share of economic and political rights and resources.²⁹

Conclusion: The Future of Hunter-Gatherer Studies

The field of hunter-gatherer studies has at all times been rich in debate and controversy (Lee 1992; Lee and Daly 1999: 7–12), especially after 1966, when legions of field-workers dispersed to various regions of the world to study such people, and, on alternate years, aggregated at conference venues (around permanent watering holes, between sessions), sharing information and enriching the disciplines' store of concepts, models, and paradigms. The field is now richer and more contentious than ever, being in the process of synthesis of two opposed paradigms, thereby expanding the formal and substantive parameters and perimeter of the discipline as never before. For this reason I do not share the attitudes of doom and gloom of some writers,³⁰ about its utility, viability, and future (Guenther 1995), nor the pessimistic, resigned tone about the appearance of hunter-gatherers and the "foraging way of life, humankind's most successful adaptation for many thousands of years" having "come to a close with the end of the second millenium" (Headland and Blood 2002, from book jacket).

It is no doubt true that the hunter-gatherer peoples of old are no longer around, having disappeared or been transformed into "postforagers," and also that the old concepts and models we have about them may indeed, be "a mirage," as Ernest Burch contends, and no longer "a useful category for theoretical purposes" (1994: 454), but only heuristic and pedagogical ones (Kelly 1995: 35). Yet, much work that is new and fresh is left for the next generation of students who might wish to work in

29 The counterproductive effects of the romanticist primordialism trope on the political aspirations of contemporary San and other Khoisan groups over southern Africa, in the context of post-apartheid identity politics, has become a subject of much discussion, amongst both academics and politically active and astute Khoisan individuals and groups. A number of conferences or museum exhibitions have been convened involving both sets of participant, such as the "People, Politics, and Power. The Politics of Representing the Bushman People of Southern Africa" held in Johannesburg in August 1994 and "The Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference" held in Cape Town in July 1997 (Bank 1998; also see Tomaselli 1995; Skotnes 1996; Hitchcock 1996; Boden 1997).

30 Arcand (1981, 1988); Barnard (1983: 208f.); Burch (1994: 454f.); Kelly (1995: 33–35).

the field of what will likely then be called postforaging studies. Some of the work on these erstwhile hunter-gatherers now living in other places and other ways still deals with some of the same issues that have preoccupied researchers in the field for decades. The difference is that what is investigated – property and equality (Widlok and Tadesse 2005a, 2005b), say, or the social economy of sharing (Wenzel et al. 2000), or the impact of cash (Peterson and Matsuyama 1991) – is focussed on changing or changed, postforagers, to examine the dynamic of change and modernisation on a “traditional” institution or process. As for the interaction of hunter-gatherers with neighbours, the interest of the historically-minded researchers in the field, the neighbours are now not agropastoralists nomads or precapitalist regional states but modern nation-states and their bureaucratic agents and agencies (Trigger 1999), as well as other ethnic groups with which the hunter-gatherer ethnic minority competes for land, work, recognition, and rights.³¹

However, the social, economic, and political situation of today’s postforaging societies and peoples also present brand-new research challenges to researchers in the field, for which they may not necessarily have the conceptual tools, on such issues as commoditization (Peterson and Matsuyama 1991), tourism (Guenther 2002; =Oma and Thoma 2002), identity politics,³² development (Young 1995; Saugestad 2001), and even so specific and complex an issue as giving expert testimony in courtrooms, usually on land claims cases (Thuen 2004). There are also new ethical issues, for instance, cultural property rights (Joram/Useb and Chennells 2004). These issues and challenges to hunter-gatherer researchers will make their research an effort that is arguably more worthwhile than it was ever before. Shed of its evolutionist and pristinitist baggage, with and for people who are engaged in an empowering, counter-hegemonic struggle for rights and recognition, and with theoretical significance that takes the field of hunter-gatherer studies into an expanded realm of social theory, the field will be more relevant to the people and the discipline than it has ever been before.

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31 Hitchcock (1999a); Lee and Hitchcock (2001); Kent (2002).

32 Bank (1998); Hitchcock (1996, 1999a); Barnard and Kenrick (2001); Merlan (2005).

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