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CRITICAL TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF HUNTER-GATHERERS

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INTRODUCTION

“Hunter-gatherer studies” were authorized in anthropology by Lee & De Vore’s imaginative combination of evolutionary and ecological adaptationist concerns in the *Man the Hunter* volume (108). While recent reviews of hunter-gatherer studies (16, 23) have explored significant substantive issues, they have not considered the importance of the comparative category itself in the formulation of anthropological research and theory. A major theme of this review is that the questioning of the category “hunter-gatherer”—rooted in varied responses to the evolutionary/ecological paradigm that constituted it—has been central to much contemporary work.

Current writing about hunter-gatherers can be understood in terms of four categories of critique (or “attack”) on the original paradigm of “hunter-gatherer ways of life.” I characterize the four broad theoretical orientations as (a) optimal foraging theory (or socioecology); (b) historicist (or ethnohistorical) approaches; (c) comparative sociology in the Marxist and structuralist tradition; and (d) humanistic approaches. In the latter, grab-bag category, I include those emphasizing hermeneutic and meaningful interpretation of insider’s views, reflexive works, and the advocacy research of political engagement often undertaken on behalf of hunter-gatherers.

Given good reviews of optimal foraging theory (23, 52, 112, 159, 181), I focus on categories b, c, and d. Their joint critical stance towards single archetypes for hunter-gatherer society suggests that the “comparative method” be considered an enduring problem in anthropology, a problem particularly marked in the very constituting of the category “hunter-gatherer.”

For archeologists and social anthropologists, the category “hunter-gatherer” as an evolutionary/ecological type had defined a shared area of

concern, related to the claim of special significance for the study of such societies, since they represented what had been the human way of life for 99% of human history (108). This is the view currently contested (29, 41, 148, 176). Like all good paradigms, this one generated much interesting research, but scholars have recently considered the comparative method to have constrained the study of such societies in ways that derive from the issues deemed to make it significant in the first place. The focus on an evolutionary type rewarded analyses that privileged the timeless “ethnographic present” as a convention of reporting and study. This is the source of the counterreaction. Schrire (147, 148) and others (26, 176) have shown how, in Lee’s work (101, 103) on the !Kung San, co-resident Bantu pastoralists and San engaged in the wider economy were excluded from his consideration of the precontact !Kung San society.

Most of the criticisms of the ecological paradigm in Lee’s work with the !Kung San (see below) have not successfully put his analyses in context. Nonetheless, the opposition to the evolutionary/ecological paradigm does define the stances.

HISTORICIZING OR ETHNOHISTORICAL APPROACHES

Although it is not concerned specifically with hunter-gatherers, Eric Wolf’s (182) criticism of anthropological treatments of non-Westerners as peoples without history is a legitimating benchmark for the development of historicism in hunter-gatherer studies. The corresponding trend among students of these societies is to locate them in specific histories and to deconstruct the conceptual baggage and preconceptions imposed on them by the category of study.

Anthropologists have become increasingly aware of the political consequences of their writing (130). Wilmsen’s (178), for example, criticizes the “unwitting anthropological naiveté” of work on the relations of hunter-gatherers to land when such work nurtures doctrines that are then used to deprive foragers of their land. Anthropologists have grown concerned with the assumptions behind “construction” of anthropological representations.

Deconstruction and Typological Thinking

Much of the historical and deconstructive work has focused critically on the assumptions of the ecological paradigm on which Lee (101, 103, 104, 106) and others relied; on the usefulness of the “hunter-gatherer” category; and on the use of !Kung San territorial organization, family and group structure, etc as the example not simply of the “pristine” hunter-gatherer but also of how life was in the Paleolithic. The problem with such practices, according to critics, is that the desire to fit examples into the chosen frame causes relevant

ethnographic details to be suppressed (44, 133). Denbow's research suggests that anthropologists should not feel "justified in analyzing one component of the [current] dual economy—foraging—as if it were independent from and unaffected by the activities and decisions of other sectors of a wider regional network" (44, p. 187), nor should they project this "constructed" economy into the past.

Thus, the historicists working on Southern Africa (44, 62, 63, 133, 147, 148, 176, 178) criticize Lee for what they argue is a distorting construction of the !Kung San. They show the !Kung history as part of a much wider social system of trade, interaction, and exchange over centuries. The picture recovered is one of opportunistic changes in subsistence strategies (44). These studies find a cyclical interaction and change through time, with the recent economic independence of the 1960s (as observed by Lee in the prime period of his research) related to a cattle epidemic and a collapse of the European market for game products.

Treatments of hunter-gatherers as people with their own histories (99, 148) have noted their considerable past interactions with pastoralists (44, 45, 133, 147, 176, 179), traders (62, 63, 83), agriculturalists (47, 48, 53, 65, 83, 84), and so on. Whatever else historicism has achieved, through the recognition of the complex and changing histories of hunter-gatherer societies scholars have abandoned more narrow perpetual-equilibrium models of simple societies (88, 149).

A critique of the projection of assumed continuities from ethnographically observed hunter-gatherers into their own past, as defined in recent studies (44, 88, 133, 148, 149), has long been a significant feature of scholarship on Native North American hunter-gatherers (30, 31, 93, 109, 160). Ethnohistorical research on American Indian societies has regularly challenged the tendency to represent as *traditional* social orders what are the products of complex histories (99).

Many studies question the typological projection of continuities from ethnography onto a more *generalized past*, a supposed stage in human social evolution (8, 12, 41, 176, 178). Such studies suggest that the attempt to use "hunter-gatherer" populations as samples of a way of life, removing them from the context in which they live, can lead to significant distortion (133). Thus by showing the changing prehistoric site location and deployment of subsistence strategies of San-like people on the southwestern Cape, Parkinson (133) challenges Lee's earliest claims (101) that the mix of subsistence activities characteristic of temperate zone hunter-gatherers consistently emphasizes gathering rather than hunting.

The implicit assumption of "natural forms" of hunting and gathering life is now questioned by documentation of enormous variability and changing strategies over time in one place. Some proponents of optimal foraging theory

(73, 159, 181), while seeking a theoretically cohesive explanation, equally criticize the dominance of “timeless and placeless” typological formulations of “band society.”

The Ideological Use of Hunter-Gatherers

Historicists have also concerned themselves with the uses of the anthropological constructions of hunter-gatherers, especially assessments of them as “natural” (41, 71, 91, 178, 180). Although Marxist, feminist, and other critical theories sometimes question such constructions, many have also appropriated the hunter-gatherer “other” to stand for a basic human possibility—e.g. of “primitive communism” (81, 105) or of “sexual egalitarianism” (18, 97)—in order to gain conceptual distance from our own social practices.

While the pitfalls of projecting the present into the past are not unrecognized by those who attempt it (99), we have not come fully to grips with the dialectical qualities of knowledge. Thus Lee questions the idealizing of hunter-gatherers, especially with regard to sharing and generosity, and the empirically observed reluctance to share; but then he returns, in a “critical” mode, to what we can learn about “the demands of collective existence” on “one’s own selfish, arrogant and antisocial impulses” (105, p. 55–56).

Indeed, the theoretical significance of the ethnography of “sharing” and the utopian representations (41) of hunter-gatherers on those grounds are much disputed. Anthropologists are increasingly aware of the impulse toward stratification (63, 177) or toward high levels of violence in just these societies (92, 113, 129). Scholars also question the “original affluence” (1, 65, 72, 118) of hunter-gatherers in light of the difficulties of obtaining carbohydrates.

When we seek to show that they are freer, less violent, more egalitarian, or less territorial than ourselves, we distort their reality, defining it largely in terms immediately meaningful to our own debates. Such constructions may also affect them politically. This problem is clearly represented in the considerations of “land tenure” in the 1968 *Man the Hunter* volume, which seems to have taken as its counterpoint Ardrey’s (5) discussion of human territoriality as universal human nature. One of the particular concerns with the critique of the territorial imperative model is that the depiction of hunter-gatherers as not defending exclusive rights can and has been used against them in their contemporary political struggles. Ironically, in 1969 land rights were denied to a group of Australian Aborigines (175) because these hunter-gatherers were deemed lacking in territoriality—a situation apparently being repeated in Botswana (178).

In criticizing as ideological the “dominant story” of hunter-gatherers within a framework of continuous technological evolution, Keene (91) questions the “artificial linearity” of seeing technology as the major source of change in human society. An alternative model, argued by Keene (91) and Gordon (62,

63), is that hunting-gathering may historically have represented a significant strategy of resistance to the powers that be. Thus, the Connecticut River Valley's prehistoric hunter-gatherers may have been not a cultural backwater but a refuge from or active resistance against intensification.

Such complex and dialectical relations between hunting-gathering peoples and an encompassing society may persist (3, 8, 10, 12, 25, 28, 50, 53, 146) rather than shift inexorably in favor of the dominant society. It should be pointed out that ethnohistorical studies, based on documents fashioned by outsiders, can themselves offer a skewed history of how hunter-gatherers respond to their social and physical environment. Such studies may ignore or lack evidence of the internal structures or cultural values of the part-societies they seek to understand. One might ask what the observed inequality (in terms of cattle ownership) among the San at Nyae Nyae (62) means to them? Does it represent a drive to dominate, to exclude—as might be suggested by Wilmsen's (177) account of a single family's control of resources?

We understand such things by attending not only to the *material* relations as we define them but also to the local culture's meanings. Investigations of the local meanings of interaction with the outside are developing in Aboriginal Australia (3, 122, 144) as well as with South Indian foragers (24, 25, 53, 123). But historical work in Southern Africa, more concerned to debunk the myths of "splendid isolation" and the "remnant Paleolithic," has been less interested in how San peoples might have understood their relations with surrounding peoples.

Historical analysis must be as wary as any other anthropology of reading its own meaning and motivation into records of human action. Because the long term of adaptive or ecological time is quite different from that of ethnographic time, it seems obvious one should not confuse meaning and function. Do relations of commodity exchange inevitably turn formerly communal Indians or Aborigines into accumulators? And if they do so eventually, what does this tell us of the motivation of participants? Even Leacock's historicizing of Algonquian hunting territory systems as the emergence of private property may be questioned on such counts. In discussing the anthropological debates on the impact of the fur trade, Feit (51) adduces the cultural meaning of such territory systems to argue that they do not constitute a form of private property in the Western capitalist sense.

The historicists disagree among themselves on how to understand the Bushmen, and they, too, interpret what they see in terms of their own judgments. Gordon, for example, criticizes Wilmsen's (176) interpretation of the long tradition of "coexistence" between Bushmen and Hereros in Ngami as based on the operation of "compatible forms of interaction." This emphasis on "compatible interaction," Gordon (62) claims, ignores the realities of violence, exploitation, and domination. At the same time, Gordon's un-

derstanding of the Bushmen as “bandits” (based on the Dutch category of “Bossiesman”) and “hot shot traders” fails to deal with Parkington’s (133) explanation of the category “Bossiesman” as one made of quite distinct historical populations, including devolved pastoralists as well as transformed hunter-gatherers.

Historicizing, Change, and Advocacy

These studies suggest that if one gives up the fetish of “forager” one can view hunter-gatherer society as involving a more flexible shifting back and forth with greater or lesser dependence on particular subsistence systems. Differences lie in scholars’ attempts to understand the significance of changes in the lives of hunter-gatherers, especially in the struggle for the rights of indigenous peoples (6, 8–10, 12, 34, 94, 107, 128, 175, 177). Conflicts between native groups and developers in the Subarctic, for example, have led to research (6, 34, 50, 150) that reveals the survival of a hunting way of life in the present.

Those working in the historical vein have both struggled against the dominant societies’ typological evolutionary narratives and considered the inner meanings of the local cultural forms, especially exploring the comparability of legal ideas about property and ownership in the Subarctic (8, 10–12, 50, 51, 150) and the Kalahari (178, 179). The complexity of interpreting relations to land has parallels in Aboriginal Australia (66, 90, 96, 114, 119, 131, 175).

These studies of regional interaction help us to overcome the sense that hunter-gatherers are successful only in isolation and are doomed to destruction by contact with other ways of life. As Asch (8, 12) has noted, this script seems to dominate Western thinking about the future of Subarctic hunters, but it also applies to other hunter-gatherers, such as those in the Kalahari who have long been intermeshed in compound economies with herders (44, 45). Histories show that indigenous foraging economies are not necessarily displaced completely. Dene pursuit of “country” food remains a primary locus for the reproduction of their own culture. Historicist work, important in its own right as a particular history, is analytically significant in understanding indigenous attitudes toward “change,” which are different from those of the dominant culture that sets contemporary social policies.

COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY: STRUCTURALIST AND MARXIST APPROACHES

Regional Emphases

Each ethnographic region has its own empirical problems. In Australia, the outpouring of research and reconceptualization has replaced the once “ortho-

dox" patrilineal clan model of social organization with a focus on complex relations to land (78, 129, 131, 134, 170, 175), gender (19, 20, 67–70, 116, 117), politics (21, 79, 89, 127, 129, 146, 161, 174) and the relationship between Aborigines and the larger society (17, 122, 144). The recent emphasis in the Kalahari seems to have been the historicist work I have discussed, although fascinating findings on land tenure and spatial organization (36–38, 178, 179) deserve comparison with Australian practices. Equally significant studies on Native North America, guided by the investigation of cultural orders and the applied hermeneutics of advocacy research (7), reveal the processes and structures of regional organization (7, 10, 98, 153, 154, 165, 167, 168) and cultural subjectivity (141–143).

Work on tropical-forest hunter-gatherers provides valuable comparative leverage. These studies include the various Pygmy groups in Africa and foragers in South India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Borneo, and the Amazon region of South America. They evidence changing conceptions of the problem of making a living in the forest (15, 48, 49, 65, 71, 73, 80, 85, 118)—especially in regard to limited carbohydrate resources—and the complex relations between foragers and nonhunter-gatherers (13, 14, 24–29, 47, 48, 53, 65, 83, 84, 123). The internal orderings of these social systems, including the relationship between individual behavior and the larger society, are of particular interest (27, 29, 75, 76, 125, 132).

Prevailing Models

A few structuralist and Marxist models have dominated the comparative sociology of hunter-gatherers in recent years (16, 40, 60, 87, 97, 100, 183, 184). These attempt to identify or conceptualize the basic—possibly distinctive—units and characteristics of “hunter-gatherer society.” Both “bands” and “spatial organization” have been reconceptualized. As substantive problems, “sharing” and land tenure have provided fertile ethnographic ground for theory.

Responding to criticisms that subsistence pursuits are not a meaningful basis for comparative study, recent models do not actually define their analytic category by “subsistence.” Instead, recognizing significant variability among those seen as “hunter-gatherers,” scholars have sought to identify the sociologically meaningful differences. They have studied the internal relations or constitutive processes of social life in societies that in terms of their subsistence techniques are not totally (24, 25, 27, 29) or even primarily foragers.

Ingold (87), for example, contrasts human hunter-gatherer society with nonhuman society. He also contrasts hunter-gatherer with pastoralist modes of production—not in terms of subsistence activities (which he calls “extraction”), but in terms of the hunter-gatherer social principle of “collective

appropriation of resources" versus the pastoralists' "divided" access to often similar resources. Thus, Ingold reexamines the supposed distinction between hunter-gatherers and pastoralists/cultivators regarding their "mastery over nature."

Woodburn (183, 184) follows Meillassoux (115) in contrasting what he calls "immediate return societies" (a subclass of hunter-gatherers) with "delayed return" societies (mainly agriculturalists, but including Australian Aborigines and others) in terms of the relations of production and the significance of property. While Collier & Rosaldo (40) pursue a political economy of gender, for both Woodburn and Ingold an understanding of property, ownership, and sharing practices is an essential focus of ethnographic inquiry.

In a structuralist formulation, Turner (167, 168) criticizes the implication that "band societies" are "the 'missing link' between primates and humanity" (168, p. 13). He contrasts Australian hunter-gatherers with Subarctic North Americans, noting different forms of integration between local groups and society. Turner sees these varying structures as defining a regional sociality, rather than assuming that the band or elementary kinship unit is basic. Most Aboriginalists, however, disagree with Turner's conception of the local groups and exchanging units throughout Australia as patrilineal corporations. Few believe such groups act corporately in marriage (see 151). Increasingly the emphasis is on treating these social entities as realized out of other processes, but Turner's models do not encompass the relationship among supralocal orders, land ownership, and the bilateral residential groups usually found (126, 129, 134).

What Is a Hunter-Gatherer?

It is clear that the goal of structuralist and Marxist approaches has been one of defining appropriate units of analysis for comparison. Such work allows analysis to break up the gross category into more comparable entities.

These models have recognized that the lack of social groupings and binding social relationships among hunter-gatherers is a positive structuring principle, not a simple, "flexible" adaptation to outside forces (183, 184). Woodburn views individualism and autonomy as the goals (or functions) of specific social institutions—they are "levelling mechanisms."

Social theory as applied to hunter-gatherers has grown in conceptual sophistication. Of particular importance is Ingold's (87) critique and synthesis of recent work. For Ingold, the characteristic feature of hunting-gathering is not the exploitation of wild, as opposed to domesticated, resources. Rather, it is a particular structure of social relations, namely "the collective appropriation of resources," summed up in his concept of "sharing." Such sharing is not simply a distribution at the end of production but instead "constitutes the common purpose that people *bring into* the productive process itself" (86). In other words, people hunt and gather to satisfy obligations deriving from their

relations to others. This recognition leads Ingold to a series of critical distinctions between material interactions and the intentional control of them by willful human agents: (a) sharing vs cooperation; (b) tenure vs territoriality; (c) making vs construction; (d) appropriation vs extraction. Ingold thinks of mastery of nature as the rational, planned application of technological knowledge. He thus avoids a priori notions of what is material or ideological, and offers a renewed interest in hunter-gatherers' consciousness as critical to understanding their mode of production. This point is argued strongly by recent Subarctic ethnography (139, 141, 142, 154, 155, 162).

Towards a Political Economy of the Band?

Considerable insight into the problems of the reification of the band in social theory has been gained through (a) the reconceptualization of the "band" as constituted of relations of production and distribution (115) and (b) empirical investigations of how individuals live, and of the life cycle in hunting-gathering societies (36, 39, 126, 129, 131, 134, 153, 161). This work questions whether the "band" is a unit (and what kind) enduring through time or realized out of other social categories, replacing the band focus with a more cosmopolitan (98) conception of hunter-gatherer sociality.

Not all scholars have regarded "band societies" as a single category. Woodburn (183, 184) sees "immediate return societies" (as opposed to "delayed return") as characterized by egalitarian social relations and disengagement from interpersonal dependency or obligation through time. In these societies, "sharing" or "reciprocity" are levelling mechanisms that prevent accumulation and the emergence of inequality. They stand in contrast as critical features to "storage," accumulation or property. Whereas cultural ecologists initially explained the emphasis on sharing as an adaptation to uncertain resources (64, 101), Woodburn and Testart (163, 164) see sharing as central to the definition of societal types.

SHARING AND/OR EXCHANGE? A number of writers have examined how "sharing" gives way to "storage" (37, 138) or how the two coexist (2, 87). Cashdan (37) explains the Basarwa practice of "reciprocity" (as opposed to storage) as a form of "risk insurance" that prevails under particular economic circumstances. The evidence of many such shifts of practice in Kalahari history (see above) opposes Woodburn's (184) claim of the durability of "noncompetitive egalitarianism." The continuation of norms of reciprocity among "settled" former hunter-gatherers is well known, as are the strategies with which individuals respond to it or accumulate within this regime (see 2, 38, 146). In fact, the reproduction of such norms among people like Naikan part-time foragers in India may owe something to the value placed on particular sorts of social relations for their own sake in opposition to the dominant society (24, 25).

Much recent ethnography has recognized the human ambivalence about sharing (2, 105, 129, 131). Riches (136) considers how the practice of sharing is reproduced. As with Peterson's (135) discussion of sharing as accomplished through demand by others, Riches recognizes that prestige, not "generosity," may motivate sharing.

The emerging perspective emphasizes the constitutive (rather than subsistence) dimensions of *exchange* (54, 131). The question of what is or is not shared takes on importance (171). Different sorts of objects (knowledge, food, names, objects, stories, land) have different properties or cycles of exchange. The Australianists have recognized the organizational significance and special qualities of transactions in myth, knowledge, and other ritual property (90, 95, 116, 121, 129, 131). Names as a form of objectified identity are much overlooked (116, 179), as is sexuality (117) (despite Mauss's famous treatment of Eskimo exchange). These concerns are not exclusive to Australia, of course (132, 172, 179). In an important article, Altman & Peterson (2) note differences in the obligation to share large vs small game in North East Arnhem Land. Finally, Gibson (54) insists that the difference between the form and content of material transactions is critical for societal organization, often opposing the implications of the subsistence system itself.

THE POLITICS OF HUNTER-GATHERER LIFE One of the empirical developments of the field is the growing awareness of hunter-gatherers as "people with politics" (see 79, 105). Numerous scholars have explored the immediacies of band life in terms of the characteristic forms of politics and decision-making in such face-to-face groups (33, 105, 110, 111, 129, 139–141, 145, 146, 155, 158, 161, 174). Typically, such ethnography has struggled with a complex sense of individual autonomy and communalism, but this is not enough. A "band" in one society is clearly not the same as a "band" in another.

In my view, this theoretical insufficiency will continue until the social relations constituting participation in a band are conceptually distinguished from other concurrent social relations. Among the most illuminating works to tease out the multiple, conflicting dimensions of band relations are the recent studies that focus on women (4, 19–22, 35, 40, 43, 46, 55–57, 61, 67–70, 157). Because they begin with a concept of sexual politics that has a particular social value under specific historical conditions, an understanding that participants might have partially opposing interests and power bases, their sense of a potentially shifting internal dynamics opposes overly monolithic representations of hunting-gathering societies.

A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BAND RELATIONS Hunter-gatherers as "producers" of subsistence enter into relations of production not just as bodies, but with complex social identities that cannot be ignored theoretically (87, 178).

For example, the wider identity of all Mbuti as “children of the Forest,” actively produced in ritual and initiation, demands further theoretical consideration. As shown in Mosko’s (125) culturally sensitive reanalysis of Turnbull’s materials, this wider identity should be seen as a higher level of social organization through which particular bands, as temporary productive units, are realized. Moreover, relations beyond the band—such as Malay slave raiding of Bateks (47) or the well-reported San relations with Herero and Bantu (see above)—may be critical to understanding its internal forms (135, 176; but see 185).

In my view, whether or not historical interethnic relations prevailed in these cases, it is difficult to imagine how the relationships of those living in a “band” can be considered apart from their relationship to others in a larger regional system. For example, Asch’s (6, 7, 12) and Sharp’s (153, 154) work shows what Helm (74) called the “regional band” among northern Athabaskans to be one way of formulating such supralocal relations, through endogamous marriage exchange among categorically delineated groups within the “regional” community. This means that a good deal of rethinking, such as Peterson (134) has provided, is necessary about the definition of the “band” in such societies. This is especially true of the conceptual distinction between the social relations of the band and territorial organization (87, 134).

Band Societies and Regional Systems

Many of those who have questioned the analytic primacy of the “band” have done so in terms of the situation of localized units of subsistence production within a larger regional system (12, 27, 57–59, 125, 126, 129, 137, 151, 153, 154, 165–167, 173, 179). The relationship between the local and supralocal order—what Barnard (16) called “levels of socioterritorial organization”—is a critical dimension for any understanding of the hunter-gatherer political economies.

The increasingly productive study of land tenure among Australian Aborigines (78, 134) offers important insights into the complex indigenous political processes of acquiring rights to place (39, 126, 129, 131, 170, 173), especially because of the varied forms of spatial organization being delineated there. Most general theoretical models have given little attention to understanding the variable ways that “place” or space enters into hunting and gathering societies as a dimension of social relations (57–59, 120).

Tenure over land must be distinguished from use of land. What is ignored in confusing tenure with territoriality (87, 134) is consideration of affiliation to place as part of a person’s social identity, which may define him or her for a variety of social relations within a wider system of organization. A “band” is, from the regional perspective, a moment in the reproduction of broader social relations.

In distinguishing the social relations of production from subsistence and

land tenure (as social relations between subjects) from territoriality, Ingold's model parallels Peterson's (134) distinction between social organization and territorial organization. For example, the sociocultural potential of religious knowledge in structuring Aboriginal society, Layton argues, has distinct and "different structural consequences for political relations which are *not* reducible to the demands of the production economy or the environment" (95, p. 29).

Regional organization is not constituted through place in the simple manner that the patrilineal, patrilocal band models implied. Thus, there are informative similarities between Turner's structural models and social organizations of other hunter-gatherers outside Australia. Two striking cases are Mosko's (125) account of the Mbuti as an endogamous community who cycle individuals through different exogamous patrifilial sub-bands and Wilmsen's (179) discussion of the !Kung San for whom shared names define the limits of marriage. The similarities become evident when we regard the patrilineal groups of Turner's (166) models as essentially social categories in relation to a larger whole.

The functional significance of tenure, in such a theoretical framework, can at least be regarded as distinct from that of territorial organization. Like any culturally constituted entity, place may enter into relations of exchange among persons (131), creating social relations that do not depend on physical co-presence. Such analyses emerge most clearly through an emphasis on the personal and individual process of tenuring, viewing relations to place in a life-cycle perspective, examining the intersection and mutual involvement of individual biographies through time (36, 126, 129, 131, 178, 179). What is important to recognize is that cultural form is not more easily or directly reducible to function among them than among us.

A person's identification with a place or places is a critical component of his or her social identity. According to Asch (12), Dene (Athabaskan) rights to land provide a basis not primarily for excluding other people's access but for political autonomy, for human action as a peer. Relationship to place, as Shapiro (152) argues for most Aboriginal people, operates as one of the psychodynamically significant processes of personal identity or as part of a sort of machinery for transcending time.

Problems with Structuralist Models

Both structuralists and Marxists consider the "value" or "meaning" of any sociocultural form in terms of its relation to the whole. In this practice lies both the insight of the models and their limitations. The question is not simply how to interpret the available ethnographic facts, although this is of first consideration, but also how to understand the comparative significance of ethnographic interpretation.

If structural models are as distantly related to ethnographic reality as they often seem, what use can they serve? Certainly, such models have provided frameworks within which to understand the reported facts of hunter-gatherer ethnography, directing attention to data significant to the people we study but disregarded by our own theories. They generate conceptual leverage, an awareness of previously invisible similarities and differences between societies. They suggest, for example, that kinship among hunter-gatherers differs from that in agricultural societies, and that relations to land might have a different *significance* among hunter-gatherers than that of controlling access to resources. The antipositivism of these models, assuming that the meaning of social forms must be located within the larger structures of which they are part, diminishes somewhat the impulse to universalize.

While the models are useful for the interpretation of social facts—of ethnography—what they enable us to infer is less clear. Hadza “immediate return” and Mbuti “immediate return” may be, in certain contexts, different things. Such models go wrong when they too begin to essentialize, to attribute social reality to the structures they uncover. Clearly, the apparently monolithic structures of “collective appropriation” or “immediate return” must not be identified with the societies themselves; such structures are constituted out of complex and differing, dialectically related internal forms, with their own histories and implications for historical transformation.

This consideration leads to the problem of how these systems behave through history. The temporary structure is constituted dialectically, out of different elements, and during historical change they may not act in new contexts as they did before. Available notions of property, for example, can easily be elaborated in a new context (for the San, see 62, 63, 82, 169, 177). Indigenous delineations in property rights according to various classes of objects, as described by Altman & Peterson (2), may be central to directions of change. Similarly, the ambivalence towards sharing (77) and the failure of society to make of people just what it needs can be further understood only by linking anthropology, more strongly, to theories of human nature.

Structuralist and Marxist models have given theoretical and philosophical significance to consciousness and human purpose, and to the significance of the social subject to the extent that such cultural forms are recognized among the hunter-gatherers themselves. Change is not understandable in terms of the subsistence technology alone but is also directed by the purposes and aspirations of the participants. Thus, there may be “hunter-gatherer people” who hardly seem to hunt and gather any more (26, 29). Even more importantly, these reconceptualizations make the social subject—the person as constituted in particular societies—an increasingly critical component for anthropological understanding of these societies. The individual as conceived in the West, radically asocial and brought into economic relations, is then contrasted with

the distinctively social emplacement of the person realized in these societies (124, 129, 141, 142, 162). This is partly a conceptual rather than an empirical matter, but one with great consequences for empirical study.

HUMANISTIC APPROACHES—AND THE CATEGORY “HUNTER-GATHERER”

The final class of hunter-gatherer studies to be considered here is a composite I have termed “humanistic.” Beginning more with a sense of the similarity between hunter-gatherer peoples and others rather than a concern with generic differences, humanistic accounts have in common an interest in exploring the “cultural” dimensions of hunter-gatherer life—the meanings through which they construct the world. Many of these works lie outside the canon of “hunter-gatherer studies” since they are not defined with relationship to the comparative category. Furthermore, in these accounts, the current situation of former hunter-gatherers is not factored out but remains part of the life-world they inhabit. For these reasons, and others, such studies often indicate the limitations implicit in the category of comparative analysis.

Some of these studies (157, 180) dramatize the interaction between Western culture (and our categories of understanding) and the local culture. They do this either through an emphasis on “reflexivity” in the researcher, through participating in political engagements with the people studied, or through other forms of contextualizing in which the representation of the hunter-gatherer is clearly marked as a construction. Such work locates anthropological understandings of the people studied in particular interactions between researcher and subject, as in Lee’s “Eating Christmas in the Kalahari” (102) or Brigg’s *Never in Anger* (32), rather than reifying these understandings beyond that context; but these are no longer simply discovery procedures for ethnographic understanding. Ridington’s (143) description of his initial interaction, when he was a PhD student, with the culture and goals of the Beaver delineates his path toward knowledge of Beaver concepts about the self. The original interactive context was the communication through which partial understandings of their world emerged. His work (139–141), along with Brody’s (34) and (to an extent) Sharp’s (155), allows us to understand the practical foundation, in vision quest and myth, of the Athapaskan cultural representation of “knowledge” and “power” as one.

With the growth of work organized from the point of view of the author’s own involvement with the community and its people, one wonders whether there might be a special ethnographic (rather than simply stylistic or literary) value to such accounts for small-scale societies like those of hunter-gatherers (42). Is anthropological reflexivity motivated by the real conditions? Reflexive works have offered an intuition of the personal or familiar nature of the

worlds of hunter-gatherers, and in that sense this work contributes significantly to our understanding of hunter-gatherer sociality.

In much of the best-known writing about hunter-gatherers, the circumstances in which they are currently living have been ignored or downplayed. This approach may be well-intentioned, aiming to show through the present what a different way of life was really like. Yet, this dehistoricizing is determined by the comparative frame ("hunter-gatherer") that we bring with us, an interesting concept but one that tends to erase many of the sociocultural activities on which anthropologists base their studies. Hunter-gatherer studies have often been somewhat removed from the event-oriented and processual studies now in vogue, because the contemporary circumstances of these peoples are at a remove from the pristine hunting-gathering world we seek.

The readers of our work are surprised (or disappointed) to learn that the people we study are actually living in reservations, in mixed economies, and so on. There are two difficulties here. First, if one gives descriptive priority to contemporary life, do the data we have lose their applicability to foraging life? Second, a "realistic" representation of the outer form of hunter-gatherer societies may suggest that they are on the verge of self-destruction, or that they are fundamentally poor people who happen to be Indians or Inuit (or Australian Aborigines) instead of members of an autonomous culture (12). If, as these difficulties suggest, the relationships among academic practice, social theory, and our empirical object have become problematic (51, 94, 114, 119, 130), many of the humanistic accounts have attempted resolution.

Some of the most illuminating studies of Australian Aboriginal social life (e.g. 122, 146) and Native American hunter-gatherer society (12, 142, 155) are in situations of dramatic change. In such accounts, readers may get the greatest understanding of these peoples as directing themselves through complex ideas and values. There is frequently in such work an emphasis on the event, on specific individuals (156, 157) and their deployments of beliefs. Because "hunter-gatherers" continue to exist in a world dominated by other practices, such studies are poignant and stark.

Exploring current local meanings and situations, humanistic ethnographers reveal how people continue their ways of life within the limits of encapsulating societies (see 7, 9); they disclose survival where others saw destruction (146).

A dominant interest in these studies of late has been the concern to illuminate "subjectivity" among hunter-gatherers, to discern what cultural resources mean to individuals. On occasion this has meant explicitly a concern with the "self" or the "person" as culturally defined (124, 129, 139, 141, 157). In other writings, ethnographers have attempted to articulate the style and goals of "political" processes among hunter-gatherers in relationship to the frequently enunciated hunter-gatherer valuation of "individual auton-

omy" (see 34, 39, 78, 105, 110, 127, 128, 146, 158, 161, 174, 184). The specification of this "autonomy" has been ethnographically difficult. Attempts to fend off the assimilation of "their" autonomy to "our" individualism have been especially marked in Subarctic ethnographies (162), but are not limited to this area of the world (129).

Much of the humanistic work reflects a different sort of participation in local people's lives than has traditionally been recognized in the research methodology of anthropology (130). Given the growth of ideologies of self-determination among peoples in Australia and North America, at least, very often this participation in local life on the subject people's terms is the political requirement of research. The larger point to recognize in this work is that hunter-gatherers inhabit a world in which the dialogical relations between cultures, between theirs and ours, cannot be washed out of our studies because they define so much of the current meaning of what we study.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the task of understanding the "hunter-gatherer" social form without imposing our judgments on it can never be achieved. The most effective direct means of attempting it, however, have been (a) the reflexive approach, and (b) the advocacy focus of recent works that attempt to translate between indigenous concepts and the legal codes of the dominant societies. This applied hermeneutic has emphasized the creative potential of culture. Such developments do not foretell an end to comparative research. After all, the humanistic approaches, too, must rely on a larger framework.

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