



Current Issues and Future Directions in Hunter-Gatherer Studies

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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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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).

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-