

From Eurocentric to Geocentric The Perspective from Small-Scale Societies

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Abstract. – Western, or “eurocentric” thought still struggles to fit small-scale societies into the human scenario. Based on the modern accumulation of data, this article introduces a new paradigm concerning the adaptive efficiency of simple and complex cultures. *Minima strategy* is advanced as a cultural model with application to both historical/prehistorical interpretation and human engineering. [*Compensatory devices, coefficient of failure, adaptive trades, minima strategy, experiential predictability, population/space ratio*]

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Introduction

This is a position paper regarding the place of “hunter-gatherer” studies in anthropology and, by extension, the broader theoretical and applied impact such studies have on Western thought. The modern body of data assembled on hunter-gatherer societies is large enough to permit, in fact to demand, their updated integration into the wider anthropological context. The state of hunter-gatherer studies has been ably reviewed recently (Barnard 1983, Myers 1988, Bender and Morris 1988, Barnard and Woodburn 1988); instead, the focus here is on generalizations rooted in existing descriptive and analytical sources. Studies of small-scale societies, like all inquiries into human diversity, must not be seen as unalterable intellectual monuments, but rather as brush strokes in the painting of a human synchronic and diachronic portrait.

General agreement exists as to an overall simple-to-complex trend in human culture history. The stress here is on the “simpler” side of the continuum and the effect of extrapolating insights from the “simple” to the “complex” to the “gener-

al.” I will use the terms “hunter-gatherers” and “simple” or “small-scale” societies as general referents. Strict definitions would not be useful here, although these terms and contrasts such as “nomadic-sedentary,” “storer-immediate consumer,” or “egalitarian-stratified” can be useful as limited analytical categories with descriptive, situational value within the simple-complex continuum (Testard 1981, 1988). Problems of labelling are present in all aspects of research conducted in a transitory probabilistic world where existence and persistence express adaptive selection. Labels are organizational devices which should not be permitted to become analytical tyrants.

This essay is concerned with hunter-gatherer studies as part of the total anthropological sample, the import of those studies on Western thought, and the effect of eurocentric existential and normative postulates on our process of generalization. Core concepts, generated by the evaluation of different levels of cultural complexity and associated degrees of adaptive success, are introduced. Using these concepts as a foundation, I advance a cultural model applicable to the interpretation of the human past, the organization of the present, and the conduct of the human future.

The general aim of this essay is to outline a theoretical approach with pragmatic applications that integrates humankind into the greater ecosystem, or “macrosystem,” of life on Earth. Secondly, it is an approach which can slow interpretative swings in views of small-scale societies – from savage to noble savage, from greedy ape to altruistic communist – attributable to hunter-gatherer researchers as well as to the general public. I, therefore, direct my efforts towards a “new” conceptualization of human adaptation derived from small-scale societies, and suggest ways in which we can use the mass of ethnographic material at our disposal to alter preexisting paradigms and create new ones.