Anarchic Theory and the Study of Hunter-Gatherers

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ples and stand as an option to centralized authoritarian structures. Efforts must be made to attain such balance, however, and research ought to be aimed at studying the means by which balance was attained by past peoples. Hunter-gatherers appear to be particularly successful in attaining balance both in the present and perhaps the past; anarchic theory may therefore be particularly useful in studying these groups.

Conclusions

Archaeologists interested in studying the simplicity of past human groups, particularly hunter-gatherers, can look to the writings of anarchic theorists for inspiration. These writers discuss the underlying philosophies that inform a view of the world in which equality of power is seen as critical and alienation as antithetical to human happiness. Long described in terms of ecological productivity, technological inferiority, or cultural stagnation, anarchists instead provide an understanding of social simplicity as a goal for many people—a goal difficult to attain but well worth the effort.

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The study of hunter-gatherers, long a mainstay of archaeological research, is currently enjoying a resurgence of interest—largely focused on questions of complexity (e.g., Arnold et al. 2016). A greater appreciation of hunter-gatherer complexity has helped reverse more than a century of unilineal thinking in anthropology and instead refocus attention on the myriad ways non-agrarian peoples, both the past and the present, often organized themselves in complex manners. While archaeological understandings of hunter-gatherer complexity have advanced dramatically in the last 40 years, remarkably little attention has been paid to complexity's counterpoint; rather than being a subject of study, simplicity is often taken to be a preexisting condition and a "natural" state hardly worth investigating (although see Bettinger 2015). Ignoring simplicity, or relegating it to the edges of our analytical programs, is detrimental to our understanding of both past and present peoples. Research, often by anarchist writers, shows simplicity, defined in part as balanced power relations, is rarely simple; rather, it is an achievement for many people who value self-governance and equality of entitlement. As such, simplicity should be a point of study equivalent to the study of complexity, particularly within the study of hunter-gatherers whose societies are often characterized as egalitarian, balanced, or heterarchical.

Within this short article, I offer a rather binary understanding of simplicity and complexity to largely mean the absence or presence of entrenched societal imbalances. This is clearly an essentialist stance, but I do so because it serves a goal—I am arguing in favor of studying power equality with the same enthusiasm as we study inequality and so have little time to offer nuanced understandings of each. I also focus on hunter-gatherers within this article even while acknowledging that defining people based on the means by which they feed themselves is, at best, problematic. I do so, again quite purposefully, because I am responding to a vast field of study predefined as based on hunter-gatherers and therefore quite resistant to fine-grained discussion within a short article.

Accepting these caveats, I suggest that the study of hunter-gatherers requires a renewed appreciation for simplicity through three adjustments—first, we must recognize that simple social systems often require a great deal of energy to form and maintain; second, we need to appreciate the ways in which power-hungry individuals are often contested through acts of "counter-power"; and third, we should be willing to accept that "counter-power" often exists prior to the emergence of a centralizing authority.

Although none of these ideas are new, they currently reside at the peripheries of our major theoretical understandings of the past. In contrast, anarchic theory has a long history of studying how balanced power relations can be formed through active discouragement of power centralization. As such, anarchic theory, long ignored by academics, is particularly well suited to understanding simplicity in both modern and ancient worlds.

Complexity, Simplicity, and the Study of Hunter-Gatherers

For decades, hunter-gatherers were viewed by both anthropologists and archaeologists as exemplars of simplicity. While there were a few cautionary voices, the "Man the Hunter" model dominated anthropological and archaeological discourse and helped define hunter-gatherer communities as small, mobile, and egalitarian. Simplicity remained the dominant paradigm until the 1970s and 1980s, when research began to show a significant number of non-agrarian peoples engaged in activities once thought to occur only in agricultural societies. Over the last 40 years the list of "precocious" activities practiced by hunter-gatherers has grown and now includes examples of monument building, village formation, long-distance exchange, creation of larger societal bodies, promotion of sociopolitical conflict, and enactment of large-scale organized ritual activities. The discovery and appreciation of these practices has

academic attention toward the social and political effects of voluntary association, direct action, individual autonomy, and horizontal power structures based on consensual decision-making (McLaughlin 2007). Anarchism also has unique understandings of how authority can be earned and preserved within a society while retaining balanced power relations (Bakunin 1970 [1871]). Much of this balance emerges out of contextualizing and limiting the status of decision-makers to particular situations, therefore frustrating attempts at centralizing power (Kropotkin 1910). Together, anarchists offer a nuanced understanding of simplicity and balanced power relations rarely found in archaeology (although see Crumley 1995; McGuire and Saitta 1996).

Anarchists are particularly interested in the deployment of counter-power not only in response to already emergent elitism but also as a series of acts that predates power centralization (Clastres 1989; Graeber 2004). Attempted aggrandizement and incipient elitism occur in every society, including supposedly egalitarian groups (Flanagan 1989). Left unchecked, these forces can result in the vertical power structures that run counter to the presumed notions of equality guiding many simple societies. As such, just as power exists in every human relation, so too does the possibility of counter-power (Call 2002). Resistance to authority does not require the presence of authority, but rather can precede its emergence and act to insure it does not occur. This is an important point for those of us studying egalitarian societies, as it suggests that we need not wait for the emergence of domination to look for the means by which it is combatted—instead, the lack of domination likely suggests the successful application of counter-power as a means by which domination has been effectively quelled.

As such, the adoption of anarchic theory reverses traditional assumptions of causality or natural ordering. Simplicity is not just the precursor to complexity, but is rather its counterpoint. To be more precise, balanced power relations can be the goal of past peo-

disorder, violence, and mayhem. Tied together by an interest in self-governance, equality of entitlement, and voluntary power relations marked by reciprocity and unfettered association, anarchists emphasize the importance of individual decision-making and equality of power relations as central to human fulfillment. There are significant divisions within anarchy regarding the primacy of individual liberties or communal good, the place of technology as a source of liberation or domination, and the proper place of authority in relation to experience and ability. Nonetheless, anarchists are united in their negative view of vertical power structures and their shared goal to find alternative means of social organization in which their ideals of equality are preserved (see Amster et al. 2009 for a review of current anarchist studies across academia).

From an archaeological point of view, anarchic theory holds great potential because it flips many presupposed notions of human development and society on their head. Points of "dissolution" or "devolution" in which vertical power structures fail and societies "collapse" into more simple configurations can be seen instead as the successful promotion of horizontal structures and the development of more just societies. Likewise, long periods of reported "stagnation" can instead be viewed as times marked by remarkable achievement in which balance was achieved and preserved over generations. For anarchists, the formation of increased "complexity" is perilous to the degree that opportunities for centralized authority and personal advancement are increased and the study of complexity therefore becomes one focused on how elitism was or was not combatted.

The archaeological study of decentralized power structures and active resistance to authority has become increasingly common and often benefits from Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, and indigenous critiques that highlight the importance of class, gender, and race in formulating power structures. Anarchic theory shows similar promise as it has the potential to refocus

rewritten our understanding of hunter-gatherers and led a number of archaeologists to describe many as "complex."

While there are several notable exceptions (e.g., Bettinger 2015), over the last four decades the search for hunter-gatherer complexity has become a central research goal within archaeology (Figure 1). The result of this focus is that societies, structures, and practices deemed as complex (or at least vying for the label) get the lion's share of research and publication attention while less complex practices and peoples receive less scrutiny.
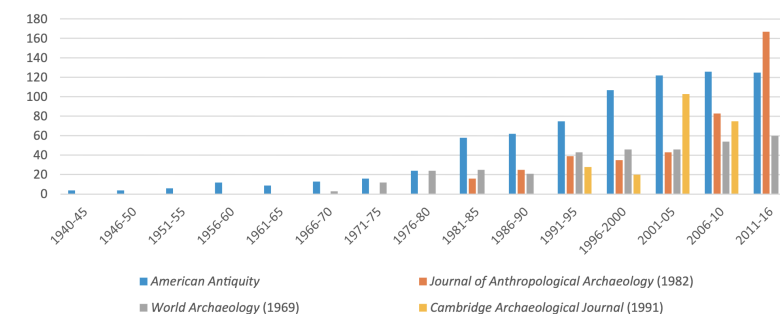

Figure 1. Graph of articles with "complex" or "complexity" and "hunter-gatherer." Search conducted using Google Scholar on October 14, 2016. Year in parentheses notes when the journal started if post-1940.

As the search for hunter-gatherer complexity has increased, a great deal of disagreement has arisen over whether past hunter-gatherer complexity was common or limited to only a few examples. Likewise, defining complexity has been a difficult process, particularly within hunter-gatherer contexts in which some aspects appear complex (such as the creation of large-scale monuments), while others are far less so (often the lack of institutionalized power imbalances). Some (e.g., Arnold et al. 2016) have explicitly linked entrenched social imbalances to societal

complexity and argue that they many past hunter-gatherer groups were complex. Others (e.g., Binford 2001) instead view hunter-gatherer complexity and entrenched social imbalances as a late development and relegated to a few societies living in highly productive ecological areas.

Whichever side is correct, there are a significant number of hunter-gatherer communities, both historic and archaeological, that are described as simple, egalitarian, and otherwise lacking the hallmarks of complexity (e.g., Winterhalder 2001; Woodburn 1980). The study of these simple hunter-gatherers, unlike their complex brethren, is dominated by deterministic models in which balanced social structures are often the result of particular ecological conditions (e.g., Bettinger 2015) or are simply taken for granted. Although we have long been warned against assuming simplicity is a "natural state" (Trigger 1990), archaeologists have typically assumed that egalitarianism and equality arise with little or no effort, while elitism and horizontal power systems require energetic input. The vocabulary we use is quite telling as we often talk of "emergent elitism," "achieved specialization," and "attaining power," yet we rarely, if ever, discuss the "rise of simplicity."

The lack of archaeological engagement with simplicity is surprising given that there is a rich ethnographic literature, largely drawn from hunter-gatherers, in which detailed accounts of "counter-power" are given. Counter-power can be defined as any act designed to degrade, diffuse, or debilitate the centralization and institutionalization of power (Graeber 2004). Within hunter-gatherer communities, ethnographic accounts are brimming with descriptions of counter-power, including "leveling mechanisms" like ostracism, public disgrace, and violence, used to resist centralization of authority (Cashdan 1980; Woodburn 1982). Ethnographic accounts of hunter-gatherers also report community ethos in which individual ownership over materials is quite tenuous and "demand-sharing" often occurs (Peterson 1993). The result of leveling mechanisms and demand-sharing is a relatively even distribution of material wealth within many societies and an active discouragement of centralized control over resources. Ethnographic accounts also highlight how mobility and residential distribution interact with the formation of social structures as highly mobile hunter-gatherers are often thinly dispersed across a landscape and quite difficult to exert authority over (Kelly 1995). Mobility also plays out in small-scale decision-making as individuals or families can "vote with their feet" when broader community decisions are not to their liking and move elsewhere—further defusing any attempt at building centralized authoritative structures.

The studies cited above suggest that hunter-gatherer simplicity was once an important research direction within anthropology and was marked by an understanding that equality was often attained through direct action. My suggestion that. we return to a study of hunter-gatherer simplicity is not to suggest that we return to the "Man the Hunter" paradigm and disregard the massive gains made over the last 40 years. Instead, I suggest that archaeologists would be wise to attend to the more "simplistic" aspects of past hunter-gatherer communities—particularly in terms of how authority, power, and decision-making are often dispersed and contextualized within these communities. It is important to not homogenize our understanding of simplicity, however; rather, we ought to focus on the various ways in which equality is defined, attained, and protected within different communities.

Reversing the Lens Using Anarchic Theory

I suggest that anarchic theory is particularly well suited to understanding how balanced power systems can be attained and therefore is especially applicable to studying hunter-gatherers. Anarchism has a deep intellectual history yet is poorly understood by academics and the public, who equate anarchy with