CAMBRIDGE WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY

THE PALAEOLITHIC SOCIETIES OF EUROPE

CLIVE GAMBLE

1999

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CHAPTER 8

THE PALAEOLITHIC SOCIETIES OF EUROPE

Human history is created by intentional activities
but is not an intended project

Anthony Giddens
The Constitution of Society

Under the paving stones – the beach

Student slogan
Paris, May 1968

I have now reviewed the evidence for social life during the Palaeolithic period in Europe. I am conscious that the continent I have drawn the data from, and the time frame of 500,000 to 21,000 years ago, are to some extent the filling in the sandwich of human evolution. I have omitted early social evolution in Africa and stopped at the last glacial maximum after which the data increase geometrically in quantity. Moreover, on a Palaeolithic timescale it is a short step from there to plant and animal domestication and further exponential changes in human affairs.

It has not however been my intention to present an overview of social evolution. My main concern has been to demonstrate how Childe's judgement, still widely followed, that the reconstruction of Palaeolithic social life is doomed by the data was incorrect (1951:85). While Palaeolithic data have never been helpful in the way that pyramids, palaces, ball-courts and granaries most definitely have been to the social archaeologist working in later periods, it is not the evidence which is at fault. We have always had, relative to the knowledge of the times, high-quality and often well-dated evidence for all periods of the Palaeolithic and particularly from Europe. These data have always been available to examine intra- and inter-regional variation, which has been a rewarding framework for writing social narratives about the Minoans or the Romans. We now have more Palaeolithic data than fifty years ago but so, by comparison, does every other period. If we blame the data for the difficulties of investigating Palaeolithic society then we will always be running to catch up.

It has been my aim in the preceding chapters to show that it has been the way we approach the investigation of Palaeolithic society that has doomed such projects to failure. I deliberately stopped the analysis at 21,000 bp because at that point it does get easier in a pyramids and ball-courts sort of way. For a start

there are many more data from all regions of Europe. The timescales are short and we can examine in detail questions of recolonization (Housley et al. 1997) and compare it, for example, to the wave of advance among later farmers (van Andel and Runnels 1995). There is, apparently, abundant cave and mobiliary art as well as more burials leading to the later cemeteries of the early Mesolithic (Whittle 1996). The transition from studying ecological adaptations to reconstructing social relations is smooth. Several global overviews bear out this point (Gamble and Soffer 1990, Soffer and Gamble 1990, Straus et al. 1996, Zvelebil 1986). But none of these Late Glacial advantages must deflect us from the possibility of investigating much earlier Palaeolithic societies. We should not judge the exercise as doomed because of the expectations of a social archaeology worked out with later, more varied materials.

My point, however, is more fundamental for the pursuit of a social archaeology. If, as I have argued here, we need to recast the way we approach the reconstruction and understanding of society in the Palaeolithic, then we must necessarily rethink many of the assumptions and approaches to social archaeology in the more recent periods. This has already been done in a number of post-processual critiques (Hodder 1990, Thomas 1991, Tilley 1996). By adding the Palaeolithic to such agendas there can be no turning back to the days of social typologies and evolutionist accounts (e.g. Johnson and Earle 1987). I hope that by bringing the Palaeolithic into such discussions we will now find many new things to do with our painstakingly collected data than just talking about calories and tool maintenance. I also hope that we will move beyond social reconstruction as merely an assertion of what must have gone on during rituals around open graves, against cave walls and in our ancestors' heads. In other words, we will move beyond the idea that their social life only resided in the space between meals.

What follows is intended as my personal summary of the issues which can now be investigated. Here is a framework for new research with data that, while theory laden, are still the assets for writing more interesting stories. The task which faces us will not just be composing those narratives but also verifying them.

The starting point

Wilson stated one of the ground rules for studying Palaeolithic society:

> we must imagine *H. erectus* or early *sapiens* not so much as a blank upon which any and all impressions can fall, but as a creature of immense but inchoate promise and potential, whose problem is to devise from his capacities the instruments and means to create specific modes of organisation that will enable survival. (Wilson 1980:41)

The individual is presented to us as a creative but constrained agent rather than a hominid cipher pre-programmed to produce *Homo heidelbergensis* society. Wilson goes on to argue that the challenge which faces us is not the detailed reconstruction of social forms. It is instead deciding upon the general

principle that made it possible for our ancestors to construct the varieties of social life comparable to our individual experience of the complex business of living (*ibid.*:54).

The generalized principle I have pursued came from studies of both primate and modern societies. I returned to the individual rather than the group as the object of society and based social life upon the opportunities and rules which stem from interaction. I have stressed how it is involvement with the world and with others, summed up by the concept of agency, which marks this distinction. This removes the goal of searching for the material remains of social institutions such as rank, religion, economies or bureaucracy. Instead we must examine the acts which arise from co-presence, the varied performances which are possible when the body is the prime form of social communication and power. We can also examine the changing role of artifacts and culture in such performances, especially when objects and other animals take on the traits of people. This extension of social behaviour results in the 'release from proximity' (Giddens 1984:35, Rodseth et al. 1991:240) which is identified as the hallmark of human social evolution.

Rules and resources can be measured and predicted. Patterned outcomes result from interaction. These concern the use of different resources – emotional, material and symbolic – to create bonds of distinct intensity and importance in an individual's varied networks. The outcomes from such a bottom-up approach to social structure can be seen in the recurrent demographic patterns that emerge.

The methods

But the individual has always been regarded as a shadowy creature lost in the long corridors of Palaeolithic time. This view, expressed to me on many occasions, still strikes me as strange since it runs counter to our Palaeolithic data. There is more contact with the micro-scale world of individual action in the Palaeolithic than there is with the invisible face in the crowd at the Roman Colosseum. Why do we bother to piece-plot thousands of artifacts at Lower Palaeolithic excavations such as Boxgrove if we do not think we can get closer to individual action? Roe was right when he described such events as precious moments in time (1981:197). If we want to investigate Palaeolithic society through individual and group action we can devise methodologies which tack repeatedly between such fine-grained scales to the wider contexts of space and time where the data are often coarser (Figure 3.2). But even without such well preserved, freeze-frame moments, 'the fact that prehistorians cannot identify individuals is no reason why they should ignore their existence' (Clark 1957:248).

The methods need to bridge the micro and macro scales of human social life and social history. The middle-range theory advocated here has adopted the insights of Leroi-Gourhan (1993), who was particularly concerned to apply

ethnological approaches to archaeological contexts. The body as a source of action and a reference for power lies at the heart of his analysis. The body produces patterns through movement and gestures applied to materials. It creates, but it is also limited by physical constraints. The link between the locale and the region, the micro and macro scale of social activity, is based on rhythms involving performance and gesture. The key point which I have emphasized continually is that technical acts are at the same time social acts. It is involvement with the world rather than analysis of the world which marks this out.

Hence I have preferred a phenomenological definition of culture in this book. The emphasis has been on the active engagement of people with their environment rather than the enhanced linkages between mental modules that a cognitive, or classificatory, view of culture requires (Mithen 1996, Parker and Milbrath 1993). In deciding on this emphasis I followed Dennett's view that 'the trouble with brains is that when you look in them, you discover that there's nobody home' (1991:29). Brains need to be put into a context of action if we are to understand the changes and selection they underwent. They cannot be the main object of study by themselves if we are to avoid falling into a circular argument to explain social and cultural change. That context can only be supplied by the creation of social life where brains are a part of the whole organism and its surrounding environment. They are not in the driving seat plotting their own destiny. It is for these reasons that I have distinguished culture from society. Culture is an expression of that active engagement. It structures the social processing of information through activities that involve rhythms and gestures which encompass other people and materials. This processing is not necessarily linguistic. Nor is it solely recorded in the style of artifacts. Instead it is an outcome of attention, perception and movement without which social life does not exist.

This approach identifies two areas where we have hardly begun to investigate Palaeolithic culture, learning and memory. These involve the cultural transmission of information about how to act and how to control the body during the performance of social life. Currently a strong tradition exists which accounts analytically for change in the Palaeolithic. Here the emphasis is more on training the mind to anticipate problems and to use culture as a means to solve problems in a game against the environment.

For example, the important discussions over planning depth by Binford (1989:19) focused attention on the differences in organization between Neanderthals and Crô-Magnons. This concept deals with variation in the amount of time and technological investment between anticipatory behaviour and the actions it facilitates. The outcome points to greater planning depth among Crô-Magnons who had more complex and varied tools 'designed for use in directly coping with the environment' (*ibid.*:21).

I now see this transition differently (Gamble 1995b). Planning depth and anticipation are concepts which depend upon detachment from the world. Life becomes compartmentalized for understandable analytical purposes. Specific

behaviours emerge and the individual starts to fade into the murk of an imposed institutional-like framework.

Clark was well aware of this danger when he reminded us that human foresight does not imply that every time we engage in activities directed to our future well-being we display this valuable quality. Instead 'our planning is as social as our sharing of memories' (1989:431). Using the vocabulary of this book, we are engaged with the world and evolve within its social networks rather than outside them. Thus, Clark's view about learning and memory as applied to anticipation and planning sits more comfortably with the perspective from a less analytical tradition, here described by Brody living among Athabaskan hunters:

> To make a good, wise sensible hunting choice is to accept the interconnection of all possible factors, and avoids the mistake of seeking rationally to focus on any one consideration that is held as primary. What is more, the decision is taken in the doing: there is no step or pause between theory and practice . . . Planning as other cultures understand the notion, is at odds with this kind of sensitivity and would confound such flexibility. The hunter, alive to constant movements of nature, spirits, and human moods, maintains a way of doing things that repudiates a firm plan and any precise or specified understanding with others of what he is going to do. (1981:37)

The course of action cannot therefore be predetermined since activity itself undermines any so-called plans. It is for these reasons that, as well as using the rhythms of the chaîne opératoire and paths and tracks, I have also developed Ingold's notion of the taskscape. This concept of a mutual environment which surrounds individuals as they go about the business of living allows us to break out of the way of thinking that in the Palaeolithic all people did was adapt to the environment. These games against the environment, as McGlade (1995:115–16) has commented, place nature out there and so relegate the role of the social to specialists other than archaeologists. The taskscape with its emphasis on continual action and attention to others removes this unhelpful dichotomy. It still allows for selection on action but it also allows for that creature of immense but inchoate promise and potential.

The earliest Palaeolithic societies in Europe: 500,000± to 300,000 years ago

Europe was colonized late. The exact date is disputed but at some time between one and half a million years ago hominids are found in regions along the north Mediterranean and throughout all but the northeastern parts of the continent. The archaeological record changes very significantly after 500,000 years ago. This suggests that there is still a great deal to be discovered about the process of early colonization and that we should cease to treat it as an event with a fixed date.

I attribute the process of colonization, the late date and the earlier evidence from the Mediterranean rather than southern and northern Europe to social factors. The first Europeans had purpose in that they undertook intentional acts

within socially constituted contexts. However, it was never their intention to colonize Europe. That was a consequence of changes and organization within their social lives. What we can be clearer about are the skills which they brought to the negotiation of these social lives – the face-to-face interaction in a complex society. These skills were generic to hominids throughout those parts of the Old World then occupied. These skills dealt with rituals of attachment to locales and attention to other people. The body was the prime resource for individuals to perform their version of society and to engage others in their projects. The resources which they used depended upon the conversion of patterns of attention, grooming, caring and parenting into emotional ties. Such a basis for society required frequent reaffirmation, close contact and affective responses. Learning was vertically transmitted from one generation to another in contexts supported by these emotional ties. The result was the faithful copying of gestures and responses structured by these affective bonds negotiated face to face. Repetition and redundancy are therefore expected in their technical acts. The memory of the relationships was long lasting because the performance of the bonds was contained in the muscle-memories of gesture and action enacted between individuals and learnt by successive generations.

The intimate bonds in such complex societies were elaborated through the use of material resources to build effective networks. At this level co-operation existed as the outcome of practical action. It was not a planned activity or a new piece of behaviour. We do not need to look for the origins of such behaviour since it must have been part of the social legacy from the last common ancestor five million years ago. But while we do not have to be surprised by evidence for co-operative behaviour, we do need to recognize that the form it took was constrained by the networks which supported it. Therefore, co-operation at this time depended on co-presence and the negotiation of social relationships using embodied resources.

The archaeological evidence has well-preserved locales which show very little formal structure. There are patterns as people came and went, and these can now be examined as sets of gestures which followed the attaching and detaching of individuals to and from gatherings. Searching for explanation solely in terms of functional or practical survival misses the information contained in the data. A very great variety of individual action resides here precisely because the taskscapes of these individuals did not involve the regular movement of materials. Individuals usually built the next gathering from materials *at* hand rather than *in* hand. They must have carried babies, clothing, food and raw materials but only if these confirmed, through movement over distance, those intimate and effective bonds performed in locales.

The scale of movement is consistently small, as studies of raw materials show. The landscape of habit rather than the social landscape contained these people. As a result life was local and the principle of exclusion dominated relations beyond those negotiated in intimate and effective networks.

These micro and macro scales and the rhythms which supported them con-

ditioned the patterns of cultural transmission. While these people no doubt added verbal accompaniments to their social performances, such utterances acted as an attention device rather than as an organizing principle. In the same way making objects was an important social act, defining individuals by what they did, rather than necessarily by what they made. But the outcomes are sufficiently standard to show that learning gestures and rhythms of action with, and away from, others produced a vertical pattern of cultural transmission that was heavily determined by the rules of face-to-face interaction. I cannot say whether males and females had different networks and even if they did there would have been great individual variation. But this is a question for further investigation. To sum up: they had lives of great variety within a small social neighbourhood of possibilities.

Neanderthal complex society: 300,000 to 27,000 years ago

Individual variation provides the basis for change in biological as well as cultural systems. The locus for any selective developments resided in the effective network since here was the opportunity for negotiating more varied ties based upon a wide range of resources. This network differs from the intimate in the strength of the bonds which an individual forges. Thus ambiguity and alternative interpretations of performances are introduced into social relationships. An individual's intimate network is limited by time and numbers. But the quality of the ties which bind its members is such that relationships are more often than not unquestioned, unanalysed and hence unambiguous. The effective component of an individual's personal network has far more possibilities for competition, negotiation, creativity and hence ambiguity. The most obvious archaeological example of this occurs within the landscape of habit where raw materials start to be transferred over greater distances and in more altered states. After 300,000 BP chains of connection were extended in all regions of Europe. It was no longer necessary to see a gesture for its outcome, the artifact, to have significance. Therefore, the objects individuals produced now carried the potential to represent the act. The difference lies in making these away-from-body performances simpler, if not in execution then at least in meaning. They had a system of communication dedicated to social relations but it did still not act as one means of stretching relationships across time and space.

The skills they employed were generic to being a hominid rather than specific to place and the construction of a social landscape. But in some instances we can see a move in the direction of such specific skills. For example, a greater degree of inter-regional variation can be found as well as more complex routines and longer chaînes opératoires.

Greater co-operation in hunting has been suggested by some for this period but is not surprising, reflecting only the larger scale of effective networks which individual Neanderthals achieved. Much is made at this time of

pre-determined flint working, the levallois technique, and further planning to secure prime-aged animals. But as we saw above, such anticipation was only possible due to the networks that individuals lived in and which extend their ambit of action. These changes in the acquisition, manufacture and use of resources, be they stone or animal, do not measure changes in complexity. Instead they reflect the latent properties of social relationships to change the necessity for resources.

This assessment of novelty in the archaeological record of the Neanderthals stems directly from the social approach I have taken in this book. Moreover, it has an important repercussion for evolutionary models. It is often stated that our bodies are under darwinian selection whereas our culture is open to Lamarckian development (Gould 1996:219–22). This is true to the extent that culture represents ideas which are transmitted and accumulated outside the body. We can therefore speed up and direct the course of cultural change in ways which we cannot where biological evolution under natural selection is concerned. Nowhere does this seem more so than with the manufacture and design of artifacts.

However, this may not always be the case and for a simple conceptual reason. The lamarckian view of cultural change proposes a separation of object and person to justify a progressive view of cultural development. Thought is applied to objects in a very rational way so that spears become more accurate, huts warmer, nets tougher, and technology lighter and more portable. Directed problem solving, similar to anticipation and planning depth discussed above, is essential to the structure of learning and memory that leads to cultural evolution in a material sense.

I would contend that in this period there was no separation between object and person. Such detachment remained a latent possibility rather than an acknowledged act integral to social performance. Objects still needed to be animated by gestures to have significance. When they were used in the performance of social life they formed part of the mutual environment which surrounded the individual, the taskscape. What was being learnt and remembered were the gestures and rhythms of individuals rather than the accumulated products of history and the innovations which marked breakthroughs in survival. These were not bright ideas to be worked on or adapted to changing circumstances. The pace of change in the Palaeolithic was not slow because the number of people and minds were so few (Clark 1957:249) and hence the likelihood of new ideas limited. Instead it was because of the use made of resources to define social life in the intimate and effective components of an individual's personal network. The vertical transmission of knowledge, concerning chaînes opératoires, tracks and taskscapes, and which occurred as individuals moved between locales within regions of varying sizes, greatly reduced the options for new solutions to be selected.

These Neanderthal societies, the product of large-brained hominids, equipped with language to talk about themselves, alive with gestures and incor-

porating objects, were, for all that variety and creativity, still exclusive, local and complex. Theirs was a most successful hominid society. Well matched to the longer rhythms of the ice ages and interglacials, they drew on renewable resources to perform social lives of subtle differentiation.

Transition and complicated Crô-Magnon society: 60,000–21,000 years ago

The stretching of social relations across time and space, the release from our primate heritage of proximity, marks the development of complicated social life (Strum and Latour 1987). Paradoxically for any progressive view of change in the Palaeolithic, the archaeological record becomes simpler, more understandable, at this point. It is possible, for example, to describe consistently the time–space dimensions of archaeological cultures. This is partly due to an increase in the variety of material culture to include ornament and display. Furthermore, locales were now invested with association and meaning. They not only hosted gatherings but also became social occasions and places. At the macro scale these locales were structured within a social landscape, whereas previously it was the landscape of habit alone which described action at this scale. Objects became people and the externalization of memory and action was possible due to the extended component of the personal network and the global network this immediately defines.

However, we should not assume that such understanding results from the fact that we are now investigating people-like-us, modern humans in both limb length and network skills. We must reject the impulse to raise the curtain at this moment on the first act of civilization. Human society did not start at this time, associated with new objects and the colonization of new lands (Gamble 1993a). We have not reached the first rung on the evolutionist ladder of bands, tribes, chiefs and states.

The European evidence indicates a gradual transition to the replacement of Neanderthal people. This is emphasized by over 15,000 years of contact and coexistence between Neanderthals and Crô-Magnons in some parts of the continent.

But rather than seeing this replacement as an absolute change – a new type of society to match a new type of hominid – we see instead that its roots lie deep in the effective and intimate networks, our hominid heritage. The use of materials as symbolic resources in an individual's extended network of negotiated ties was foreshadowed in the gestures which made handaxes. The eventual use of artifacts as symbols, be they handaxes or carved horses, is an exaptation, available for use by reason of their form rather than designed by natural selection for that purpose (Gould and Vrba 1982). What makes them symbols is their contribution to integrating and structuring what people do when they are separated. In the same way the gestures involved with attaching and detaching from gatherings and locales formed an existing rhythm for the elaboration of ritual based on symbolic performance rather than material and emotional resources alone.

Away from the structure that flows from co-presence, attention and perception new resources are required if, on the one hand, ambiguity and incoherence are to be avoided and yet, on the other, the richness and creativity of social life are to be preserved. Here is another example of the two sides of power. Extension comes at a price; social life must become complicated, reduced to simpler sequences of actions. The selective pressure for such change works on the variety which each individual possesses biologically, historically and culturally. The context for selection lies in the overlapping networks within which individuals find themselves; those constraints and possibilities which are inherent in a full personal and global network. These forces place demands on time, attention and the decisions about allocating resources. Instead of learning and memory being transmitted vertically there is now the possibility of horizontal transmission. The effect was dramatic. Rather than the familiar gestures, which empower an individual as an active social agent, being passed between parent and child and within intimate, or at most effective networks, they can now skip horizontally between networks (Cullen 1996:425). In a vertical system faithful reproduction of sequences and rhythms is expected. Culture and the individual are in the same evolutionary boat, so neither rocks it. Stasis and gradualism are expected. But in a horizontal system such a benign relationship need not exist. That curious alchemy takes over where culture begins to negotiate us as much as we use it to moderate our lives. Extended networks can be used by individuals to negotiate their social position as well as those of others who are bound into their intimate and effective spheres. Faithful transmission gives way to asymmetrical power relations that now fall along the lines of age, sex and genealogy. In particular, the principle that life was local and access exclusive to the overlapping personal network of a small demographic unit has changed. Now life can be both exclusive and inclusive through the extension of social life and the creation of an individual's global network. Power, in the sense of harnessing and enhancing the lives of others to a particular symbolic performance, now takes on a simpler but more familiar aspect. It replaced that same enhancing and harnessing based on the affective and material resources used by Neanderthals.

The Palaeolithic societies of Europe provide an opportunity to observe, in some detail, the variable outcomes of social interaction over a period of some 500,000 years. I have not attempted a full explanation of why the extended networks developed late in human evolution. But I hope that by examining a model for Palaeolithic society and a method for applying it to Palaeolithic data we can now move in that direction. To attempt such a big question without considering the societies either of the late glacial in Europe or from further afield would run into accusations of parochial answers to a world inquiry. However, what I hope to have shown is that with a social perspective we can begin to move beyond reconstructions of Palaeolithic people as either stomach-led or brain-dead. We can raise the curtain on a much more interesting past.