

**David Wengrow, David Graeber**

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# Farewell to the “Childhood of Man”: ritual, seasonality, and the origins of inequality<sup>1</sup>

David Wengrow *University College London* and David Graeber *London School of Economics*

## *Abstract*

In this paper we explore the relationship between seasonality, social inequality, and the cultural efflorescence of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe. We begin with critical reflections on the concept of ‘complex hunter-gatherers’ and its current applications in archaeology and anthropology. Reviving an earlier tradition of anthropological research, we argue that a key feature of hunter-gatherer social life has been the ability to consciously alternate between contrasting modes of political organisation. Such alternations – including regular oscillations between egalitarian and hierarchical modes – were an emergent property of human societies in the highly seasonal environments of the last Ice Age. In exploring them we aim to shed light both on the nature of “complexity” among our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and on their millennial track record of pursuing non-egalitarian agendas, while avoiding the emergence of states.

If we seek to know about the past, a field of study that has never seemed dishonourable to any discipline other than social anthropology, the point of departure should be hunter-gatherers in favourable regions, hunter-gatherers who might not have been such and probably remain such only by reason of restrictive social forms that for them are quite possibly a distant and glorious heritage.

Alain Testart, ‘Some major problems in the social anthropology of hunter-gatherers’ (1988: 13)

## *Introduction: the ‘sapiens paradox’*

The Henry Myers lecture was endowed seventy years ago to promote new perspectives on the ‘the place of religious belief in human development’. Only recently, however, two leading anthropological theorists concluded that, to all intents and purposes, ‘religion’ does not exist – at least not in the sense of a discrete analytical category that we can expect to find and study across the whole range of human societies. We are referring here to Marshall Sahlins’ (2008) assertion that ‘the elementary forms of kinship, politics, and religion are all one’, and to Maurice Bloch’s (2008) conclusion that what we now term ‘religion’ is a historical residue, left over from the collapse of Bronze Age states where sacred and political power were initially fused.

If they are right, then a Myers lecture on human prehistory could in theory be about almost anything. By choosing to discuss the origins of social inequality – our main topic – we will also find ourselves talking about religion and, probably, economics and politics as well: a position that resonates with the kind of language used today by

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<sup>1</sup> An extended version of the 2014 Henry Myers Lecture, as given by David Wengrow

archaeologists and evolutionary theorists who no longer talk about the origins of ‘religion’ or ‘politics’, but rather of ‘behavioural modernity’ or ‘cultural complexity’. This is precisely to indicate that the earliest evidence for what we might now distinguish as ‘religious’, ‘political’, or for that matter ‘artistic’ behaviour is all of a piece, appearing together in striking configurations in the archaeological record of the last Ice Age. The main problem vexing prehistorians concerns the timing of that appearance.

To briefly summarise: the genetic and anatomical foundations of our species were established between 200 and 160 Kyr ago; but evidence for complex modes of symbolic communication – in other words, for typically modern human behaviour – becomes widespread in the archaeological record only tens of thousands of years later. First glimmerings appear at Blombos Cave, on the southern tip of Africa, where evidence for the use of ochre-based pigments (at 100 Kyr ago) and shell ornaments (at 70 Kyr ago) is found across a series of deposits dating to the Middle Stone Age (Henshilwood 2007; Henshilwood et al. 2011). But it is only after around 45 Kyr ago, when our species was busily colonising Eurasia, that quintessentially cultural and symbolic activities become more widely attested, as part of what has sometimes – and contentiously – been termed the ‘Upper Palaeolithic Revolution’ (Mellars et al. 2007).

None of these activities are exclusive to Upper Palaeolithic Europe and it is, indeed, likely that none of them originate there (see McBrearty and Brooks 2000). Nevertheless, it is across the southern and central parts of that continent that they are currently documented with greatest frequency and intensity. The activities in question include the use of advanced toolkits for hunting and handicrafts, the transformation of diverse materials (e.g. bone, clay, fibre) into durable images and structures, new ways of clothing and decorating the body, the use of musical instruments, the exchange of raw materials over impressive distances, and also what are generally taken as the earliest proofs of social inequality, in the form of grand burials and – after the Last Glacial Maximum (c. 20 Kyr ago) – monumental dwellings as well. It is this apparent lack of synchrony between the ticking of our genetic and cultural clocks that Colin Renfrew (2007) has provocatively termed the ‘sapient paradox’.

In seeking to resolve the paradox, prehistorians have so far offered two explanations. The first – which remains more of a supposition – is that a late but significant mutation took place in the human brain between c. 70 and 50 Kyr ago, generating new cognitive resources that made possible the cultural revolution of the Upper Palaeolithic (Mithen 1996; cf. Klein 2001). The second concerns demography. It predicts that, where critical population thresholds were reached, the transmission of complex cultural traits became incremental in an unprecedented way owing to the greater density of human interactions (Powell et al. 2009). This latter view has the advantage of explaining why so much of the earliest evidence for behavioural modernity appears in Europe, in what were then the game-rich valleys and steppe between the tundra and forest zones.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike cognitive or other biologically based explanations, the demographic model is also compatible with sporadic but widespread evidence for behavioural modernity in the African Middle Stone Age (see again McBrearty and Brooks 2000), since what it seeks to explain is not the origin of the behaviours in question, but their peculiarly dense manifestation in the archaeological record of the European Upper Palaeolithic.

These parklands – seasonally traversed by migrating herds of deer, bison, and mammoth – were distributed unevenly between the western Mediterranean and the south Russian Plain, acting as refugia for both human and non-human populations as the ice sheets advanced over the Continent (Hewitt 2000). Prehistorians have argued for some decades that the humans in question had nothing in common with those blissfully simple and egalitarian hunter-gatherer bands, once imagined to be our remote ancestors (see e.g. Price and Brown 1985). Yet the continued popularity of books (e.g. Fukuyama 2011; Diamond 2012) that preserve J-J. Rousseau’s vision of humanity in its original state of nature – innocent of power and complexity – suggests a reluctance to bid farewell to the “childhood of man”, and to embrace a new age of cynicism, where inequality is considered not only natural but also a primordial feature of human society.

Do we really have to choose between these stark alternatives? In what follows we argue that the pervasive characterisation of early human hunter-gatherers as ‘complex’ (rather than ‘simple’) or as ‘hierarchical’ (rather than ‘egalitarian’; e.g. Flannery and Marcus 2012) ignores a key feature of behavioural modernity: the ability to consciously alternate between contrasting modes of social and political organisation.<sup>3</sup> Building on the work of prehistorians such as Olga Soffer, we further propose that such alternations were a distinctive, emergent property of human societies in the highly seasonal environments of the last Ice Age. Dual or alternating social structures of this kind were also widely reported in early 20<sup>th</sup> century studies of recent hunter-foragers, most notably by Mauss and Beuchat (1979 [1904-5]) in their *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo*, which in turn has influenced the archaeological interpretation of prehistoric sites and landscapes. But, for reasons that we go on to discuss in greater detail (and see also McGuire 1983), the political implications of these ‘alternating societies’ – and their significance for general theories of social evolution – have so far gone largely unrecognised.

With some exceptions, treated in a later part of this paper, research on seasonal variability in Palaeolithic archaeology has tended instead to focus on issues of subsistence and long-term environmental change. For the Upper Palaeolithic, in particular, coping with ever more seasonal environments has been identified as a key factor in hominin adaptation and colonization, especially of the world’s northern latitudes (Gamble 1998: 19). It has been widely noted that the specialised hunting of migratory game – practised throughout Europe by early human, and perhaps also Neanderthal,<sup>4</sup> populations – implies a high degree of complexity in social

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<sup>3</sup> Humans share with chimpanzees (and some other animals) the cognitive capacity to operate in “fission-fusion” types of social system, where the community ‘is dispersed over a wide area and forages in parties that coalesce, inter-mix, and disperse again with relative ease’ (Dunbar et al. 2014: 335), and usually in accordance with the uneven distribution of natural resources (and see, more generally, Dunbar et al. eds. 2014); but the alternations we are concerned with here – while ultimately dependent on the same kind of cognitive resources – are of a much more sophisticated kind, since they demand not only regular changes in the physical constitution of groups, but also the conscious reversal of time-transcendent social structures and associated moral codes. Such behaviors, as recently discussed by Maurice Bloch (2008), are distinctive to our species, since they rely on a type of social imaginary that is unique to the human mind (what he terms the ‘transcendent’, as opposed to the ‘transactional’ aspect of human sociality). We return to this point in our conclusion.

<sup>4</sup> See Britton et al. 2011. Based on seasonality data from gazelle remains, Daniel Lieberman (1993) argues that – in the prehistoric Levant (Israel/Palestine/Jordan) – anatomically modern humans (AMH) were considerably more mobile than their Neanderthal contemporaries, with only the former practising long-range seasonal migration between habitats in pursuit of game. Steven Kuhn and Mary Stiner

organisation and logistical planning (Nitecki and Nitecki eds. 1987; Mellaars 1998: 61). Here, however, we will consider how seasonal variations – and the alternations in social structure that often accompany them – might be relevant to a much broader set of issues concerning the nature of inequality in early human societies, and the cultural efflorescence of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe.

*Some problems with “complex hunter-gatherers”*

In approaching these issues, we begin with the puzzling phenomenon of “rich” hunter-gatherer burials, sporadically attested from Upper Palaeolithic rock shelters and open-air settlements across much of western Eurasia, from the Dordogne to the Don. Some of the earliest instances come from the eastern end of this distribution, at sites such as Sungir (in northern Russia) and Dolní Věstonice (in Moravia), where they date to between 26 and 30 Kyr ago, before the Last Glacial Maximum. These are not cemeteries but isolated interments of individuals or small groups, whose bodies were placed in striking postures and decorated – or, in some cases, virtually saturated – with ornaments. In the case of Sungir these included many thousands of mammoth ivory beads and perforated fox canines, originally attached to items of clothing. Some of the most lavish ornamentation at this site was associated with the conjoined burials of two children – a boy and girl – whose bodies were flanked by great lances made on straightened mammoth tusk (Bader 1998; Trinkaus et al. 2014).

At Dolní Věstonice a triple burial contained two young males with elaborate headdresses, posed on either side of a female, all of them lying on a bed of ochre-stained soil (Klíma 1988). Of similar antiquity is a group of cave burials unearthed on the coast of Liguria, near the modern border between Italy and France. Complete bodies of young or adult males (including one particularly lavish burial known as *Il Principe*) were again laid out in striking visual arrangements and suffused with decorative objects, here including beads made on marine shell and deer canines, as well as blades of exotic flint (Henry-Gambier 2003). Further west, on the Dordogne, the 16 Kyr old burial of a young woman – known as the ‘Lady of Saint-Germain-la-Rivière’ – contained a rich assemblage of stomach and pelvic ornaments, made on shell and on the teeth of young stags hunted some 300 km away, in the Spanish Basque country (Vanhaeren and d’Errico 2005).

Spectacular burials of this kind have been taken as evidence that – many thousands of years before the origins of farming – highly developed systems of ranking existed among at least some Upper Palaeolithic societies. Attention has focused on the extraordinary outlays of labour involved in making the grave goods (some ten thousand work hours are estimated for the Sungir beads alone); the highly advanced and standardized methods of craft production; the inclusion of exotic (and therefore prestigious) raw materials; and the association of wealth with young individuals, taken to imply ascribed rather than achieved status. On such grounds we are asked to abandon the idea that early human hunter-gatherers were uniformly simple or egalitarian in their social arrangements, and to accept the fundamentally complex and

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(2006) further suggest that only AMH regularly supplemented large game with a wide spectrum of small mammal and plant resources, developing a sophisticated division of age and gender roles in order to do so. Such diversification strategies, they propose, most likely developed in tropical or sub-tropical environments, but would have had the greatest returns – in terms of cultural and demographic expansion – in the more seasonally variable habitats of Upper Palaeolithic Europe.

hierarchical nature of their social systems (e.g. White 1999; Vanhaeren and d'Errico 2003; 2005).

A second category of evidence, from which similar conclusions have been drawn, is monumental architecture. In Old World prehistory, the most famous and widely discussed examples are currently the stone buildings of Harran Plain, in southeast Turkey. These lie outside the main chronological focus of this paper, but are nevertheless relevant to any wider discussion of hunter-gatherer complexity, and can therefore be briefly mentioned. Around twenty years ago, on the plain's northern frontier, German archaeologists began to uncover prehistoric remains at a place known locally as Göbekli Tepe. What they found has since come to be regarded as an evolutionary conundrum. The main source of anxiety is a group of twenty megalithic enclosures, raised there at a time – around 9000 BC – when the surrounding plain was woodland-steppe, teeming with wild plant and animal life that colonised the Taurus piedmont after the end of the Pleistocene. Scientific dating places these structures within the 'Pre-Pottery Neolithic A' period but, on current evidence, the groups responsible for their creation lived by hunting and foraging alone (Schmidt 2006).

Just a few of the enclosures known to exist at Göbekli Tepe have been excavated. Each comprises pillars – some over five metres high, and weighing up to a ton – that were hewn from the site's limestone substratum, raised into sockets, and linked by walls of rough stone. Each pillar is a unique and remarkable work of sculpture, carved with images from the world of dangerous carnivores and poisonous reptiles, as well as game species, waterfowl, and small scavengers. Animal forms project from the rock in varying depths of relief, some hovering coyly on the surface, others emerging boldly into three dimensions. They follow divergent orientations, sometimes marching to the horizon, sometimes working their way down into the earth. And in certain cases the pillar itself becomes a sort of standing body, with human-like limbs and clothing (see also Dietrich et al. 2012).

Evidence for large-scale construction among early hunter-gatherers – implying sophisticated design and coordination of labour – is not confined to the Middle East, or to the onset of the Holocene. Before the last glacial maximum (c. 20 Kyr ago) the loess plains of central and eastern Europe were inhabited by groups living in what are often considered surprisingly dense concentrations. The settlement record of the Dolní Věstonice-Pavlov region in southern Moravia, then a steppe-tundra on the edge of a vast ice sheet, is a good example (Svoboda 2001). And between 18 and 12 Kyr ago, along a transect of the glacial fringe reaching from Krakow to Kiev, people lived in impressive circular houses that Olga Soffer (1985b) describes as the Pleistocene's version of 'public works or monumental architecture'. Each such dwelling was built on a framework of mammoth tusks and carefully selected mammoth bones, arranged in alternating sequences and (sometimes) in rhythmic patterns that go beyond the merely functional. Wooden versions – of which only the post-holes and sunken floors remain – are likely to have existed at other open-air sites such as Pavlov and Kostenki. These were settlements of considerable scale whose inhabitants exchanged amber, marine shells, and animal pelts over impressive distances (see also Soffer 1985a); and they find their western European counterparts in the large rock-shelter occupations of southern France, such as La Madeleine and Abri Pataud (Mellars 1998: 61-63).

Basing their conclusions on evidence of this kind, archaeologists can now claim to have pushed back the evidence for social inequality to a very early phase of human history, dispelling the myth that we are, by origin and nature, a fairly simple and egalitarian sort of species (cf. Flannery and Marcus 2012). We also note the suggestion, in a recent review of ‘complex hunter-gatherers in evolution and history’, that recognising institutions of rank among non-farming populations constitutes one of ‘the most significant advances in anthropological research in the last thirty years’ (Sassaman 2004: 228).

Taking a longer-term view of research on this topic, we would strike a less triumphal note. In fact the existence of ranking and other hierarchical structures among non-farming societies was common knowledge for much of the twentieth century, both for anthropologists and archaeologists (see e.g. Childe 1954: 41-42; and we discuss some well-known examples below); but more importantly, we would contend that simply observing the existence of inequality in certain aspects of social life and material culture, in certain times and contexts, says almost nothing about social evolution in general. The real question is what these differences actually meant, and what their long-term social implications might have been?

A pervasive problem with current definitions of Upper Palaeolithic complexity, we suggest, is that they assert the cognitive modernity of early hunter-gatherers while continuing to ascribe them a classically primitive type of social intelligence. It is assumed that, rather than being aware of multiple social possibilities, early *Homo sapiens* were effectively (or perhaps stereotypically) childlike, living the only lives they were able to imagine. Instead of experimenting with different social structures in different contexts, they are cast back into a single evolutionary stage – albeit a slightly more advanced one. This revised concept of the “complex hunter-gatherer” creates an evolutionary puzzle that it fails to answer: if social inequality was so firmly established among Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic societies, then why does it seem to flicker in and out of the archaeological record? And why, moreover, did it take so many millennia to produce anything such as stratified classes, kingdoms, or a ‘state’?

To substantiate these criticisms, and suggest alternative ways forward, we want to revisit an earlier tradition of anthropological research, linking the work of Marcel Mauss (Mauss and Beuchat 1979 [1904-5]), Robert Lowie (1948), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1944; and for the relationships between them, see also Lévi-Strauss 1949). What interests us about this group of studies – aside from their broad comparative scope – is their attentiveness to the institutional plasticity of groups that practice (among other things) a regular regime of hunting and foraging. Moreover, instead of approaching these groups as analogies for or survivals of prehistoric peoples, each of these writers considered them as accomplished experimenters in social organisation, whose example might prompt us to rethink some general principles of social theory.

#### *Revisiting an earlier ethnography*

Our starting point is a 1944 study of chieftainship by Claude Lévi-Strauss, which centres on the Nambikwara, a small tribe inhabiting the resource-starved savannah of northwest Mato Grosso (Brazil). Lévi-Strauss felt that, precisely because of their material impoverishment and aversion to competition, a study of Nambikwara chiefs could expose ‘some basic functions’ of political life that ‘remain hidden in more

complex and elaborate systems of government' (under cover of complexity, as it were). In particular he argued that the role of 'chief' seemed analogous – in its social and psychological aspects – to that of a national political or statesman. It also attracted similar kinds of people who 'unlike most of their companions, enjoy prestige for its own sake, feel a strong appeal to responsibility, and to whom the burden of public affairs brings its own reward'.

The role of the chief also had everything to do with the way that the Nambikwara shifted back and forth between two different modes of social and economic organisation: the hilltop villages of several hundred people, occupied mainly in the rainy season when they practised horticulture, and the small foraging bands into which they dispersed for the rest of the year. Chiefs made or lost their reputations by offering guidance during 'the nomadic adventures of the dry season'. And with the greater abundance of the wet season, a chief who had performed this task well could attract large numbers of followers to settle in villages, where he directed the construction of houses and tending of gardens.<sup>5</sup>

Neither patriarchs, nor petty tyrants, nor mystical healers, Lévi-Strauss's chiefs were truly and fully holders of public office: the pivot of something like a small-scale welfare state. They were also mature and self-conscious politicians, capable of moving regularly back and forth between what we are now inclined to see as different stages of evolutionary development, and developing careful strategies to do so. It was their skill at guiding small bands of hunter-gatherers that qualified them to later play the role of mediator and representative in the village plaza. For Lévi-Strauss it was precisely this quality that made the Nambikwara chief seem so peculiarly familiar as a political figure: the calm sophistication with which he shifted between different social arrangements, all the time balancing a sense of individual ambition with the common good.

The essay on Nambikwara chieftainship was written quite early in Lévi-Strauss's career; but it received little attention even at the height of his fame. In emphasising the political similarities between hunters, horticulturalists, and modern industrial democracies it cut against the grain of an emerging evolutionism: not only the formal distinction between 'bands', 'tribes', 'chiefdoms' and 'states' laid out by Elman Service (1962), but also the larger research agenda on hunter-gatherers set out in the 1966 Chicago symposium *Man the Hunter* (Lee and DeVore 1968), to which Lévi-Strauss offered a forlorn and now equally forgotten epilogue. Instead it was behavioural ecology, and rigorously quantified studies of African savannah and rainforest groups – the Kalahari San, Eastern Hadza, and Mbuti Pygmies – that provided the basis for a new characterisation of hunter-gatherers.

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting, in the context of the present discussion, that Lévi-Strauss began his essay by pointing out some of the obvious limits of ethnographic analogy for archaeological reconstruction (e.g. the fact that, unlike Pleistocene hunter-gatherers, modern peoples who practice hunting and foraging occupy marginal rather than optimal environments, and frequently supplement these activities with various forms of low-level cultivation and/or herding; cf. Kelly 2013; Testart 1988). The point, for him, was not to use ethnographic accounts as proxies for particular stages of past life (as defined, for example, by modes of subsistence), but rather as a source of insight into features of the human condition that might be considered of general evolutionary significance.



As summarised by Richard Lee and Irving DeVore (ibid. 11), foraging peoples could be assumed – by virtue of their fragile and unstable mode of subsistence – to ‘live in small groups’, ‘move around a lot’, and follow egalitarian principles, resolving conflicts by ‘fission’ rather than arbitration or violence.<sup>6</sup> This quickly became self-evident wisdom across a range of social science disciplines, such that it is still commonplace for economists and psychologists to remark that, for 95% of human history, all humans lived in tiny bands of twenty or thirty people with no social structure or internal differentiation, other than distinctions of age and gender (and for a critical review of the concept of the hunter-gatherer ‘band’, see Ingold 1999). Here we propose to explore how a return to the earlier ethnographic tradition of Lévi-Strauss, which flourished between the abandonment of Victorian evolutionism and the neo-evolutionary theory of the ‘60s, might help to resolve some aspects of the ‘sapiens paradox’.

### *Individuality and egalitarianism in the Upper Palaeolithic*

The first of Lévi-Strauss’s points that we wish to develop is a relatively simple one. It is generally acknowledged that egalitarian societies of the Americas were typically marked by an ethos of extreme individualism. Far from encouraging a stifling conformity, they emphasised individual autonomy and self-realisation. In practice this meant that even in these least materialistic and competitive of societies, individual differences – whether of psychology and personality, or for that matter physical capacities and appearance – were treated with respect, and even valued in and of themselves. This ethos existed in tension with egalitarianism, and such societies were also marked by mechanisms (e.g. mockery of proficient hunters) that seem designed to prevent extraordinary individuals from undermining the fundamental principles of the group.

Similar tensions might account for one startling feature of those Upper Palaeolithic burials that have been interpreted as the earliest material expressions of hierarchy or ranking in human societies. In a remarkable number of cases the bodies of these individuals bear evidence of striking physical anomalies that could only have marked them out dramatically from their social surroundings (see Formicola 2007; Cowgill et al. 2012, with further references). They include pronounced congenital deformities (the adolescent females of Sungir and Dolní Věstonice) and examples both of

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<sup>6</sup> In an influential study, James Woodburn (1982) subsequently identified an important distinction in the economic systems of recently documented hunter-gatherers, distinguishing between systems in which people receive a ‘direct and immediate return from their labour’, and those in which material and social assets are stored in order to obtain ‘delayed returns’. He further argued that strategies of “assertive egalitarianism” – such as prohibitions on the monopoly of violence, or on the accumulation of wealth and technological skills – are most likely to succeed in societies of the ‘immediate-return’ type. Woodburn himself was cautious about the extension of this dichotomy to prehistoric hunter-gatherers (ibid. 447), and clearly it does not allow for the kind of internal alternations in social and moral codes that we discuss here. The behavioral ecology approach to modern hunter-gatherers is extended in an important study by R.L. Kelly, which concludes that we should ‘study hunter-gatherer prehistory in terms other than broad typological contrasts such as generalized versus specialized, simple versus complex, storing versus non-storing, or immediate versus delayed return’ (2013: 275). However, Kelly’s own discussion (ibid. ch. 4) of seasonal variations and mobility focuses mainly on issues of childrearing and resource management, and he himself maintains a broad dichotomy between ‘egalitarian’ and ‘non-egalitarian’ hunter-gatherers as distinct types of society with stable internal characteristics (tabulated as a binary contrast between ‘simple versus complex’ forms; ibid. 242, Table 9-1).

dwarfism (the Romito Cave of Calabria) and extreme height (Grimaldi Cave). This leaves one to wonder if the anatomically typical skeletons similarly treated may have been those of individuals with qualities – physical or otherwise – that just as readily differentiated them from their kin, but left no traces in their skeletal remains. We can know little of the day-to-day status of those buried with rich grave goods; but in such cases we can at least suggest that they would have been seen as the ultimate individuals, about as different as it was possible to be.

What does this really tell us about the origins of social inequality? It seems unlikely that Palaeolithic Europe produced a stratified elite that just happened to comprise a high proportion of physically anomalous people. On the other hand, the ethnographic literature is full of examples of anomalous beings – human or otherwise – who are treated simultaneously as exalted and profoundly dangerous, or that alternate between the two. A being revered in life might well prove dangerous in death, or vice versa.<sup>7</sup> It may be relevant in this context that the very practice of burying corpses intact, and clothed, appears to have been socially anomalous in the Upper Palaeolithic. The majority of corpses seem instead to have been subject to various processes of defleshing, fragmentation, and curation. Human teeth, for instance, were made into jewellery and modified crania circulated as relics and containers (surveyed in Pettitt 2011).

Palaeolithic people seem to have been very much at home with human body parts, which (properly cleansed and processed) formed an integral part of their material world. If so, then the human corpse in its complete and articulated form – and the clothed corpse perhaps even more so – was something quite unusual and, one would presume, inherently marginal and strange: incompletely absorbed either into the community of the dead or that of the living. In many of these cases, as Paul Pettitt (2011: 213) observes, an effort was clearly made to contain the bodies of the deceased by covering them with heavy mammoth scapulae, pinning them down with wood, tightly binding them, or weighing them down with stones. Saturating bodies with clothing, weapons and ornaments may extend these concerns, celebrating but also containing the dangerous powers of extraordinary individuals.

Clearly there is no single interpretation that accounts for the full range of Upper Palaeolithic burial practices, which are both diverse and widely separated in time and space. But seeing them as evidence for hereditary systems of social ranking – as has generally been done – seems to us the most improbable interpretation of all. If anything, the ostentatious display of personal wealth was ritually associated with the same kind of ‘otherness’ seen as inherent in anomalous or exceptional individuals, and extended by the unusual practice of decorating, displaying, and burying articulated corpses. Such burials were exceptional in every sense, and can hardly be interpreted as simple proxies for social structure among the living.

They do, however, reveal the existence of elaborate and creative ritual practices, for which little evidence exists in earlier periods of human prehistory. This takes us back

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<sup>7</sup> In Mary Douglas’ (1966) formulation, anomalous beings are more likely to be treated as sacred in social orders open to the surrounding world, and as abominations in those that emphasise group boundaries. The former seems a better fit for those Upper Palaeolithic societies where “princely” burials occur, and in which long-range movements and exchanges of materials and populations seems to have been commonplace.

to the larger question of the ‘sapien paradox’. If the cultural efflorescence of the Upper Palaeolithic period in Europe is not the reflection of some new and complex form of social stratification, then how *should* we understand it? Here, we think, the Nambikwara example – and the larger body of ethnographic literature on which it draws – point in a very different and promising direction; one that hinges on the reversible nature of authority among historically documented hunter-gatherers.

*The politics of reversal: seasonal variations, social consciousness, and institutional change*

In the Nambikwara case, as outlined above, charismatic leadership and ingenuity were highly valued as chiefly traits during the mobile foraging season, when group sizes were small and resources scarce. By contrast, in the densely settled villages of the wet season, the chiefly role was largely one of arbitration and diplomacy. If Lévi-Strauss did not draw special attention to these seasonal variations in Nambikwara political life,<sup>8</sup> we suggest it was largely because early 20<sup>th</sup> century studies of hunter-gatherers took for granted this kind of institutional plasticity.

The groundwork was laid with Marcel Mauss’s (1904-5) *Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés eskimo*, written in collaboration with Henri Beuchat (English trans. 1979). There they defined the ‘double morphology’ of hunter-gatherer societies in the circum-polar North. Mauss, in his own later words, believed he had shown that ‘the Eskimo, and likewise many other societies ... have two social structures, one in summer and one in winter, and that in parallel they have two systems of law and religion’ (cited in James and Allen 1998: 37). He observed, for example, how the congregation of Inuit families in the long winter months was much more than an adaptive response to the presence of walrus and seal on the Arctic coast (cf. Bravo 2006). Winter aggregations brought together both an extended society of the living and also the recent and remote dead, who were inaccessible to the living for much of the year. The winter houses gave expression – in wood, whale-rib, and stone – to time-transcendent principles of Inuit social life that endured even through those summer months, when groups dispersed under the authority of a single male elder in pursuit of fresh water fish, caribou and reindeer.

But many aspects of winter life also reversed the values of summer. In the summer, for instance, property rights were clearly asserted and sometimes physically inscribed onto personal objects, especially hunting weapons. But in the communalistic atmosphere of the winter house, generosity trumped accumulation as a route to personal prestige. The right of male patriarchs to coerce their sons (and indeed the group as a whole) was acknowledged only in the summer months. It had no place around the winter hearth, where the principles of Inuit leadership were turned on their

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<sup>8</sup> Based on field research conducted thirty years later, Paul Aspelin (1976) argued that Lévi-Strauss and other early observers of the Nambikwara had produced an over-simplified account of their ‘dual economic system’. Focusing mainly on subsistence practices, Aspelin found considerable overlap between the activities of the dry and wet seasons. Lévi-Strauss (1976: 32) clarified his position in response, noting that the early accounts of Nambikwara economic dualism were ‘corroborated by the missionaries who, having lived for ten years in contact with the natives, had ample time to get acquainted with their seasonal moves’, and suggested that the subsequent construction of airfields and highways across Nambikwara land may have considerably altered their patterns of mobility.

head. Legitimate authority became a matter of charisma rather than birthright; persuasion instead of coercion.

In his conclusion Mauss drew a contrast with the tribes of the American Northwest Coast. For the Kwakiutl, inequality was most dramatic in the winter settlements, when society became structured around ‘religious confraternities in which nobles and commoners form a hierarchy’, only to give way again in the summer to smaller clan formations which, though still ranked, were less formal and coercive. What remains consistent – whether we are talking about Inuit, Nambikwara, or Kwakiutl – is the oscillation of social life between two clearly distinct systems, which accompanied seasonal changes in the material form and composition of groups. The “complexity” of their moral, religious, and political systems cannot be measured on a single scale, just as their demographics – while perhaps reducible to raw population figures – are more accurately expressed as an alternation or flux between different types of mass, volume, and density.

Mauss’s observations, we suggest, had profound political implications. The different seasonal modes of existence typically involved different forms of political organisation and different ways of exercising authority. What’s more – and this, for us, is the really crucial point – everyone was quite self-conscious about these differences. Among the Kwakiutl, for instance, individuals adopted different names in summer and winter seasons, literally becoming different people, depending on the time of year (Boas 1966). As a result social structures not only became visible; they were regularly assembled and disassembled, created and destroyed. It is surely no coincidence that much of Kwakiutl art plays visually on the relation of name, person, and role – relations laid open to scrutiny by their seasonal practices (Lévi-Strauss 1982).

Much of this could be said to be implicit in Mauss’s essay; but it was not the aspect he chose to emphasise. His own analysis tended instead to contrast the relatively pragmatic and secular existence of the summer with the intense ceremonialism of winter life:

Winter is a season when Eskimo society is highly concentrated and in a state of continual excitement and hyperactivity. Because individuals are brought into close contact with one another, their social interactions become more frequent, more continuous and coherent; ideas are exchanged; feelings are mutually revived and reinforced. By its existence and constant activity, the group becomes more aware of itself and assumes a more prominent place in the consciousness of individuals. (Mauss and Beuchat [1904-5] 1979: 76)

One can already see here the kind of language that Durkheim (under Mauss’s influence) was to subsequently use in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), juxtaposing the ordinary economic life of Australian bands – concerned mainly with obtaining food – to the “effervescence” of their seasonal gatherings. It was there, in the excitement of the *corroboree*, that the power to create society appeared to them, as if it were an alien force projected into totemic spirits and their emblems. In this account, the potential for self-conscious social transformation is never actually realised: ‘social action follows ways that are too circuitous and

obscure, and employs psychical mechanisms that are too complex to allow the ordinary observer to see when it comes' (Durkheim [1912] 1915: 209).

In the sociological tradition of Mauss and Durkheim seasonality was of interest because it lay bare the mechanisms of human sociality, not so much to the participants themselves, as to the outside observer. There was, however, a different strain of thought emerging from this tradition, which took a more explicitly political direction. In a largely forgotten (1948) Huxley Lecture, the Austrian-born anthropologist Robert Lowie extended his own work on the Crow to consider more general features of political organisation in Great Plains societies, where – during the late summer months – small and highly mobile bands of Cheyenne and Lakota congregated in large settlements to make logistical preparations for the buffalo hunt, and for subsequent collective rituals. Lowie's conclusions were startling, and are worth citing at some length:

In order to ensure a maximum kill, a police force – either coinciding with a military club, or appointed *ad hoc*, or serving by virtue of clan affiliation – issued orders and restrained the disobedient. In most of the tribes they not only confiscated game clandestinely procured, but whipped the offender, destroyed his property, and, in case of resistance, killed him. The very same organisation which in a murder case would merely use moral suasion turned into an inexorable State agency during a buffalo drive. However ... coercive measures extended considerably beyond the hunt: the soldiers also forcibly restrained braves intent on starting war parties that were deemed inopportune by the chief; directed mass migrations; supervised the crowds at a major festival; and might otherwise maintain law and order. (Lowie 1948: 18)

The 'unequivocal authoritarianism' that prevailed before a bison drive, and during the later Sun Dance rituals, was kept in check by the dispersal of sovereignty among tribal chiefs and police squads ("soldiers"), and also by the 'seasonal rhythm' of social life on the Great Plains. 'During a large part of the year', as Lowie (1948: 19) noted, 'the tribe simply did not exist as such; and the families or minor unions of familiars that jointly sought a living required no special disciplinary organisation. The soldiers were thus a concomitant of numerically strong aggregations, hence functioned intermittently rather than continuously'. Their sovereignty was no less real for its periodicity; and we must therefore accept that the Plains Indians knew something of state power, without ever having developed a state. In more recent evolutionary parlance, they were a kind of band/state amalgam.

Even more critically, Lowie observed that the Plains nations – like almost all societies of the Americas – were quite self-conscious about the dangers of authoritarian power, and created explicit mechanisms to limit its abuse (e.g. rotating the clan or warrior societies that held office so that anyone holding coercive powers one year would be subject to them the next). Most of the rest of his essay focuses on the role of chiefs, arguing that the power of political leaders over the largely 'anarchic' societies of the Americas was so carefully circumscribed as to exclude the internal emergence of permanent structures of coercion. Insofar as states – or indeed any peacetime powers of command – emerged in the Americas, he concludes, it could only have been

through the power of prophecy, with religious figures claiming direct inspiration from the divine.

This is, of course, precisely the argument developed a generation later by Pierre Clastres in his famous (1974) essay *La Société contre l'État*. Indeed Clastres's essay follows Lowie's so closely<sup>9</sup> that it can only have been directly inspired by it. His argument – that stateless societies do not represent an evolutionary stage, innocent of higher organisation, but are based on self-conscious rejection of the principle of coercive authority – has been enormously influential. Still the one element not carried over by Clastres from Lowie is that of seasonal variations; and this despite the fact that many of the Amazonian societies he discusses did have very different structures at different times of year (cf. Maybury-Lewis 1979). On the face of it this seems odd. A common objection to Clastres' argument is to ask how Amazonian societies could have consciously organised themselves against the emergence of forms of authority they had never actually experienced. But, as demonstrated by the Nambikwara example, or those of the Gê and Bororo societies of central Brazil (who break up their wet season villages to form smaller “trekking” bands under the authority of male elders), this is not so much of a mystery as sometimes suggested (cf. Gross 1979).<sup>10</sup>

The result of all this, we suggest, is that the promise of Mauss's early essay as a contribution to political anthropology has never been fully realised. His insights are known to us today largely through Durkheim, who stressed the dual seasonal structure of hunter-gatherer societies but turned away from the notion of political self-consciousness; or through Clastres, who embraced the notion of political self-consciousness but disregarded the role of seasonality in structuring hunter-gatherer social organisation. What, then, does this foray into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnography imply for the Upper Palaeolithic, and for social evolution in general?

### *Seasonality and social evolution in the Upper Palaeolithic*

As Gregory Monks (1981) pointed out some decades ago, the full implications of seasonality studies for archaeology may only be realised if the concept is extended from its traditional focus on environmental adaptation and subsistence to include a broader array of human activities, including ritual and trade. But the more fundamental break with established theories of social evolution comes, we suggest, when we begin to consider the significance of seasonal variations for modes of social organisation in their totality; in other words, cases where the same population might

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<sup>9</sup> For example in its outline of chiefly authority as consisting of peacemaking, hospitality and oratory. Clastres does not cite Lowie; but in general he cites only ethnographic sources and never theoretical ones.

<sup>10</sup> The problem, perhaps, is that in Amazonia dispersal had almost the opposite implications as on the Great Plains: rather than being a time for the disassembly of centralised political structures, dispersal – as Terence Turner (1979) has argued – acted there as an opportunity for older men to assert power over female kin, in ways they could not do in the larger villages. Turner further suggests that such variations in group size and organization did not answer to any sort of economic necessity at all, but were self-conscious political mechanisms designed to reinforce patriarchal authority. All this introduces complications to Clastres' argument (he was particularly unwilling to address gender issues) that he seems to have felt were best kept to the side. For instance, he saw war as a mechanism for keeping groups small and dispersed, and hence avoiding the emergence of concentrated power. This idea subsequently became enshrined in Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the “war machine” but it would be very difficult to square with the Gê-Bororo practice of dispersing as a means to sustain chiefly power.

experience entirely different forms of economic relations, family structure, and political life at different times of year.

It is simply not possible to have an evolutionary progression such as ‘band’-‘tribe’-‘chiefdom’-‘state’<sup>11</sup> if your starting point is a society that moves effortlessly between institutions deemed exclusive to one category or another; or that experiences – as aspects of contemporary reality – what are supposed to be discrete stages of evolution, moving back and forth from bands to tribes or even organisations with elements of the state (such as a legitimate monopoly on the use of violence within a given territory). For similar reasons, seasonal dualism throws into chaos more recent attempts to classify hunter-gatherers as more or less “simple” or “complex”, since it assumes that supposedly diacritical features – like territoriality, social ranking, material acquisitiveness, or competitive display – will be put into effect at certain times of year, but then effectively reversed at others, routinely, within the same population.

What specific bearing do these observations have on the archaeological record of Upper Palaeolithic Europe, with its sporadic but striking evidence for social inequality? There can be little doubt that humans inhabiting the northern latitudes of the Pleistocene world experienced much sharper seasonal variations than their contemporaries elsewhere. But to what extent does the archaeological evidence support the idea that their social structures alternated in harmony with such variations, for example through patterns of regular aggregation and dispersal, linked to the seasonal predation of large migratory game? The archaeological literature on this topic is voluminous, and here we can offer only a brief – but hopefully representative – summary of the major points.

The identification of aggregation sites, and their relationship to seasonal variations in hunter-gatherer ecology, is in fact a long-standing methodological problem in Palaeolithic archaeology. Attempts to tackle this problem have nearly always been informed by the ethnography of recent hunter-foragers. Lewis Binford’s (1978) pioneering ethno-archaeological work, undertaken among the Nunamuit during the 1960s, was exemplary in this respect. Motivated in part by the desire to understand such variations through their material traces, Binford (2001: 11-31) later acknowledged Mauss and Beuchat’s essay as a guiding influence. Mauss’ work on seasonality was also a stimulus for early studies of Upper Palaeolithic settlement patterns by Margaret Conkey (1980) and Randall White (1985).

Focussing on the valley systems of the French Périgord, White identified a close spatial association between the larger sites and natural “choke points” along the Dordogne and Vézère, such as fords or meanders: ideal locations for intercepting herds of reindeer on their seasonal migrations. Close analysis of site size and location,

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<sup>11</sup> The tradition of ‘oppositional thinking’ (e.g. bands *versus* tribes, etc.) on which such models are based has its roots in the “stadial” evolutionism of the Scottish Enlightenment, which insisted both on the essential singularity of human social forms, and on their direct correlation with modes of subsistence (see O’Brien 1993). We are certainly not the first to critique the ongoing use of such models (see e.g. Sherratt 1995), or to consider the dual nature of prehistoric political systems (see, notably, McGuire and Saitta’s [1996] characterisation of Pueblo political organisation in the American Southwest as alternating routinely and strategically between ‘communal’ and ‘hierarchical’ modes of governance).

combined with seasonality studies on reindeer tooth and antler (Delpech 1978), led him to propose that Magdalenian hunter-gatherers in southwest France (one of the most densely populated areas of Palaeolithic Europe) followed a ‘cycle of annual [winter] aggregation and [summer] dispersion’ – prompting him to draw direct comparisons with Mauss’s description of the Inuit.

Turning to northern Spain, the famous cave sites of Altamira and Castillo were identified long ago as aggregation locales based on their topographical location, the dominance of seasonally available resources (deer, ibex, shellfish) in associated faunal assemblages, and the sheer density of painted and engraved imagery within them (Straus 1977). In her 1980 study, Conkey added a detailed analysis of decoration on portable bone and antler objects, identifying patterns of spatial and stylistic variation that, in her view, supported an aggregation/dispersal model of late Upper Palaeolithic settlement on the Cantabrian coast. She further proposed a link between episodes of aggregation and heightened levels of artistic and ritual activity; but like earlier hypotheses, those of Conkey remained limited by the rudimentary excavation methods of the caves’ original investigators in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Olga Soffer’s comprehensive (1985a) analysis of Upper Palaeolithic remains on the Central Russian Plain led her to interpret differences of site-scale and complexity as evidence of seasonal variability, reflecting the sharply uneven distribution of animal resources on the periglacial “mammoth steppe”. Spectacular settlements such as Mezhirich and Mezin – with their mammoth-bone dwellings, abundant portable art, fixed storage installations, and imports of amber and marine shell – were suggestively aligned on major river systems (Dnepr and Desna), which also channelled the annual north-south movements of steppe bison, horse, reindeer, and mammoth. Sites lacking those features typically occurred at higher elevations, away from the floodplains, forming ‘seasonal and occupational variants of the same settlement system’.

Intriguingly the pattern here does not seem to have been one of aggregation and dispersal over long distances, but of more limited oscillations between warm and cold-weather base camps, with the latter exhibiting a greater density of trade items, personal ornaments, and elaborate architecture: a process of flux that Soffer (again echoing Mauss) sees as driven, less by environmental pressures, than by social and ideological factors (see also Soffer 1985b).

Among the most richly documented areas of Upper Palaeolithic habitation in Europe are the Pavlov Hills of southern Moravia. Prior to the last glacial maximum this region formed part of a narrow belt of forest-steppe vegetation, linking the valley of the Danube and the northern European plain, and bridging the non-glaciated zones of eastern and western Europe (Svoboda et al. 2000). The largest Moravian settlements, such as Dolní Věstonice I and II, are characterised by planned dwellings, extensive cooking areas, diverse craft activities, and also elaborate burials, figural art, and evidence of long-distance trade in the form of exotic stone, shell, and pigments. An abundance of plant and wetland resources, combined with exploitation of both large and small game, made year-round habitation a possibility at such locations (Mason et al. 1994).

This does not, however, exclude marked seasonal variations in the density of human activity and occupation, as indicated by impressive accumulations of mammoth



remains at the majority of Moravian sites. It is still debated whether these result from large-scale, coordinated hunting (Musil 1994), or simply from the location of settlements adjacent to available carcasses (Soffer 1993). Either way it is clear that seasonal abundance of bone, ivory and frozen meat provided opportunities for social gatherings of considerable scale and intensity (Svoboda et al. 2005), and various other lines of evidence support the current interpretation of these hunter-gatherer “mega-sites” as aggregation points ‘where sizeable groups of people gathered between early autumn and the spring months’ (Soffer 2000: 59).

The quantity and quality of palaeo-environmental data to support such interpretations has increased markedly in recent decades. Inferences about prehistoric hunting strategies are now routinely made on the basis of bone, tooth, and antler from archaeological prey assemblages, which exhibit growth marks indicating the age of the animal at death and the season in which it was killed. Studies of this kind are supplemented by isotopic analyses to determine the migration patterns and diet of hunted game (e.g. Vlačík et al. 2013). Rather than a uniform pattern of aggregation and dispersal, this growing body of information indicates a complex mosaic of seasonal hunting strategies and types of mobility across the forest, steppe, and tundra zones of southwest France (Pike-Tay and Bricker 1993), the Middle Danube (Nývltová Fišáková 2013), and central-eastern Europe (Péan 2001).<sup>12</sup>

Allowing for such regional and local variability it seems reasonable to conclude that the movements, activities, and social lives of human populations in many parts of Upper Palaeolithic Europe were organised in accordance with pronounced seasonal variations in climate and resources, notably the annual or biennial migrations of large game. Furthermore, and as outlined above, evidence for cultural efflorescence and social differentiation – including the “rich” burials of Ice Age Europe – often clusters at points of intense aggregation along natural (often riverine) corridors, from the Vézère to the Dnestr, offering seasonal access both to migrating herds and an abundance of floodplain resources. This, we suggest, is no coincidence.

To be clear, we are *not* arguing that such seasonal variations actually caused changes in human social or cognitive capacities, at least not in any “hard wired” sense. Rather what we propose, based on the lessons of an earlier anthropological tradition, is that strongly dualistic or alternating patterns of organisation – such as seem likely to have existed along the glacial fringe of Upper Palaeolithic Europe – created new possibilities for explicit reflection on the nature of social relations, and for the self-conscious manipulation (or even reversal) of social structures on a regular basis; a point that we will return to and expand upon by way of conclusion.

It is precisely within such contexts that we might expect to find the first archaeological traces of heightened symbolic communication: that is, expressive activities – visual, ritual, or otherwise – intended to resolve such perennial problems of human existence as the relations between men and women, people and animals, good and evil, fortune and misfortune, life and death. It is also within such extended

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<sup>12</sup> In the latter regions, seasonal mobility has been further linked to the large-scale movement of flint for manufacturing tools and weapons, notably between the Kraków Basin (in southern Poland) and the Vag River (in western Slovakia), where an overwhelming majority of stone tools are made on exotic raw materials, originating between 60 and 300 km away from their places of discovery (Kozłowski ed. 1989).

arenas of social experimentation that we first encounter the instrumental use of symbolic resources, as groups and individuals explored new types of political arrangements, including a range of hierarchical and egalitarian possibilities, and ways of expressing them materially (cf. Cohen 1974).

It may be significant, in this respect, that the much earlier human occupation at Blombos Cave – with its clear signs of cultural complexity – also formed part of a seasonal migratory round, as indicated by recent studies of blue antelope dentition from Middle Stone Age deposits (Faith and Henshilwood, in press). Similar correlations between pronounced seasonal variations and evidence of “behavioural modernity” might also be sought in other areas of early human expansion, such as the later Palaeolithic of the Indian subcontinent (cf. James and Petraglia 2005) and western Asia (Maher et al. 2012). We argue, in short, that any attempt to explain the uneven and discontinuous record of cultural complexity and social inequality in the Palaeolithic should take into account – not just demography – but also the ‘seasonal morphology’ of the societies in question.

*Conclusion: farewell to the “childhood of man”*

What we have proposed here is that the archaeological record of Ice Age Europe is, to the archaeologist, as the ethnographic record of the Inuit was to the anthropologist: a world of structured extremities, in which elementary features of human sociality that might otherwise be imperceptible are made strikingly visible. Similarly structured variations may even lie behind the much later phenomenon of Göbekli Tepe, where isotopic studies now indicate a link between the construction of “stone temples” and periods of annual superabundance, when large herds of gazelle descended onto the Harran Plain (Lang et al. 2013). It is relevant, in this context, that despite their monumentality, each of these massive structures appears to have had a relatively short lifespan, culminating in the rapid and deliberate infilling of its walls with the remains of large-scale feasting: hierarchies raised to the sky, only to be swiftly torn down again.

Viewed in a larger perspective, all this suggests new questions about the origins of agriculture, urbanism, and many other aspects of settled life. This, however, is not the place to explore them. Instead, by way of conclusion, we return to the question of self-consciousness and, in deference to Henry Myers, to the themes of ritual and religion. Mauss ended his essay by suggesting that the seasonal ebb and flow of Inuit sociality – with its alternations between times of collective intensity and pragmatic, individualistic dispersal – is a general feature of all human societies. Simply put we are incapable, psychologically and emotionally, of living in constant awareness of our full social universe. But he also held that it was in the moments of effervescence, of ritual intensity, that we become most clearly aware of our social existence, and hence capable of creating new social forms, even if we are never quite conscious of how we achieve this.

There is a direct parallel, we suggest, between Mauss’s argument and Durkheim’s later speculations on the ‘constitutional duality of human nature’ (transl. I. Eulriet 2005). There he attempted to resolve another kind of paradox: while “society”, at one level, consists simply of a collection of individuals, each of them feels bound by social conventions that appear as if imposed by some exterior force. In the end,

Durkheim suggested, there might literally be two different parts to the human brain. It was just that, in seasons of ritual intensity, we were able – through song, dance, chanting, trance, repetitive and coordinated gestures – to leap into that otherwise unconscious portion of our mind where the collective resides, and to draw on its creative power, before dispersing again to pursue our individual projects.<sup>13</sup>

Most contemporary theories of ritual emerge from this tradition. The assumption is that ritual seasons – for instance, the period between Carnival and Lent in Medieval Europe, or the Christmas/New Year “holiday season” in modern Europe, or even individual rites of passage – are miniature versions of such ancient seasons of collective effervescence. As such they are often assumed to be, in one way or another, statements of unity and cohesion. Ritual is mostly presented as a celebration of cosmic order, which provides a foundation for social life. The most sophisticated and, to our minds, compelling formulations of this position are Maurice Bloch’s (2008) notion of the “transcendental” versus “transactional” realms; and Seligman et al.’s (2008) argument that ritual creates a “subjunctive” or “as if” domain of order, consciously set apart from what is always seen as a fragmented and chaotic reality.

These recent studies draw insights from cognitive and developmental psychology to argue that ritual is, in essence, an extension of the logic of etiquette. Social roles, corporate groups, and most everything we call ‘social structure’ does not really exist in this perspective; or better does not exist in the concrete, empirical way we like to imagine. It is all a kind of collective make-believe that we are continually bringing into existence, either in very small ways – such as everyday acts of respect towards elders, or saying “please” and “thank you” – or in very large ways – like collective rituals when abstractions such as ‘clans’, ‘moieties’, ‘movements’ or ‘nations’ are made, temporarily, to take on embodied form.

Bloch (following Harris [2000]) has even suggested that this is precisely what the Upper Palaeolithic Revolution actually consisted of: the emergence of an apparently unique human capacity to create such imaginary and transcendent social realms, as reflected in the efflorescence of pictorial art, elaborate structures for dwelling, clothing and ornamentation, and burials in which the bodies of the deceased were organised into complex dioramas. This is a powerful line of argument, but it has always been confronted with a major problem: rituals do not always act to reinforce order, deference, hierarchy, or respect for social form. Sometimes they have just the opposite effect.

Even before the popularity of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ([1940] 1993) work on the “carnavalesque” there was a lively literature about the subversive potential of seasonal festivals like the Roman Saturnalia, the medieval carnival, and May Day – their possibilities as ‘rituals of rebellion’ or attempts to create a ‘world turned upside down’. Such rituals would typically alternate between dramatic assertions of social and cosmic hierarchy, and apparently revolutionary moments where all eminences were toppled to the mud, intentionally cast into disarray. But were such processes

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<sup>13</sup> For a recent discussion of Durkheim’s relevance to contemporary research on Palaeolithic cognition and religion, see Gamble (2013).

genuinely subversive or, in the end, merely ingenious methods of maintaining social order? Such questions are no doubt as old as the rituals themselves.<sup>14</sup>

If we look back at the literature on seasonality and social structure we find the same kind of confusion. The Durkheimian tradition suggests that times of seasonal aggregation should also be moments for the assertion of an ultimate collective authority, even the birth of religion itself. Yet Mauss's own Inuit material suggested how just the opposite could be the case. With seasonal gatherings the authority of fathers and husbands, rules of property and even sexual propriety, were more likely to be challenged, subverted, or simply melt away. The societies of the Great Plains created structures of coercive authority that lasted throughout the entire season of hunting and the rituals that followed, dissolving when they dispersed into smaller groups. Those of Central Brazil, by contrast, dispersed into foraging bands as a way of asserting a patriarchal authority that was ineffectual in village settings. And the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast explored still other possibilities, granting effective police powers to performers in the Midwinter Ceremonial (the "bear dancers" and "fool dancers") that could be exercised only during the performance of the ritual itself.

There is no pattern here. Or, if there is one, it resides precisely in the fact that this shifting back and forth allowed mature and self-conscious political actors to be continually aware that *no* social order was immutable: that everything was at least potentially open to negotiation, subversion, and change. Are rituals and ritual seasons expressions of arbitrary authority or venues of social creativity? Are they, in essence, reactionary or progressive? Were our earliest ancestors simple and egalitarian, or complex and stratified? Are humans good or bad? Perhaps all these questions blind us to what really makes us human, which is our ability to negotiate between such alternatives.

We do not have to choose between an egalitarian or hierarchical start to the human story. We just have to bid farewell to the childhood of man and acknowledge – as Lévi-Strauss insisted – that our early human ancestors were not just our cognitive equals, but our intellectual and philosophical peers too. Likely as not, our Palaeolithic forbears were aware, at least in a very broad sense, of many later social possibilities. Likely as not they grappled with the paradoxes of social creativity just as much as modern theorists, and understood them – at least the most reflexive among them – just as much, which means also just as little. Perhaps this is what being 'intellectually modern' actually means. If there is a riddle here it is why, after millennia of constructing and disassembling forms of hierarchy, *Homo sapiens* – supposedly the wisest of apes – allowed permanent and intractable systems of inequality to first take root?

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<sup>14</sup> As Peter Burke (2009: 283-5) notes, the idea that rituals of rebellion were simply "safety valves" or ways of allowing common folk to "let off steam" is first documented only two years after the invention of the steam engine – the favoured metaphor had earlier been to let off the pressure in a wine cask. At the same time, however, medieval authorities were keenly aware of the fact that most peasant revolts or urban insurrections would begin precisely during such ritual moments (see Bercé 1976). Those who turned the world upside down were often reluctant to put it back the right way up again. Consider also Caillois' seminal essay on "the festival", written for Bataille's *College de Sociologie* in the 1930s (trans. 2001). It went through two drafts, the first holding forth the festival as a model for revolutionary social liberation, the second, as a harbinger of facism.

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