

David Wengrow and David Graeber “Many seasons ago”: slavery and its rejection among foragers on the Pacific coast of North America

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‘Many seasons ago’: slavery and its rejection among foragers on the Pacific Coast of North America

Introduction: protestant foragers and fisher-kings?

In a 1951 article, now rarely cited, the eminent anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt proposed an audacious thesis about aboriginal forager societies – Yurok, Hupa, and others – occupying the northwest corner of California. Their ‘structural and ethical characteristics’, he proposed, were strikingly analogous to those identified by Max Weber as the seedbed of European capitalism, in his famous essay on ‘The Protestant Ethic’. He could not, of course, claim to have discovered a full-blown capitalist economy among indigenous hunter-foragers, when such obvious features as wage labor and monetary interest were lacking. Instead, he followed Weber, in distinguishing between a ‘capitalist spirit’ and the more general pursuit of riches or large-scale economic enterprises. The focus was on a tight correspondence between ethical patterns and social structures:

... a system in which the individual was placed chiefly by personal acquisition of wealth which in theory was freely attainable by all, with both status and power resting upon the ownership of property ...

- underpinned by:

The moral demand to work and by extension pursuit of gain; the moral demand of self-denial, and the individuation of moral responsibility.

(Goldschmidt 195: 513)

- and accompanied, in turn, by specific institutional features such as the universal application of private property laws – including individual and alienable ownership of foraging grounds; the pervasive use of currency (dentalium shell) in property transactions, rental arrangements, dowries, and dispute resolution; and the attainment of social mobility through ‘fiscal strength’. Distinctive personality structures and psychological tendencies among aboriginal men and boys were also part of the argument. The exemplary Hupa or Yurok male was ‘exhorted to abstain from any kind of over-indulgence – eating, sexual gratification, play or sloth’ (ibid. 514). Big eaters were viewed as vulgar. Consumption was always to be slow and modest, the body kept slim and lithe. These ascetic values were put to the test on an almost daily basis by the ability of successful men to squirm headfirst through the tiny ritual openings of sweathouses; male cliques, reserved for the richest and most skilled.

Goldschmidt offered these observations as the basis for a larger study on the functional disconnect between social-ethical patterns and economic infrastructures. The study never emerged, and half a century later, in a personal retrospective for *American Anthropologist*, Goldschmidt (2000) offers some clues as to why. Quite simply, the argument was out of step with almost everything that was about to happen in American anthropology, or at least in forager studies. Briefly, the combined effects of the cultural ecology movement and neo-

evolutionism led to a refocusing of ethnographic research around questions of environmental adaptation; while the critical backlash, from the 1980s onwards, emphasized ‘dynamics of contact between modern hunter-gatherers and colonial and capitalist forces’ (Bird-David 1992, 21). Neither trend was amenable to ahistorical comparisons between small-scale foragers and large-scale agrarian or industrial societies.

Arguably, Goldschmidt’s remarkable essay has more in common with an earlier anthropological tradition, associated with the likes of Paul Radin (e.g. *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 1927) and Robert Lowie (e.g. ‘Incorporeal property in primitive society, published in the *Yale Law Journal* in 1928). The point of such studies, as Goldschmidt notes in his retrospective, was to put (19th century) evolutionism to the intellectual sword – to let the ‘savage hit back’, as Julius Lips (1937) put it, by exposing the atavism of modern mass society through the mirror of its ethnographic *doppelgänger*. What came instead was the revitalization of a ‘mode of subsistence’ approach to modern foraging populations, which subdivided their social characteristics along cruder lines, firmly anchored to the technical business of hunting and collecting food (i.e. the familiar oppositions between ‘simple/complex’, ‘immediate/delayed return’, ‘non-storing/storing’, ‘generalized/affluent’ forms; e.g. Testart 1982; Woodburn 1982; Kelly 1995).

There was one striking exception to this trend: the appearance, quite close in time, of Norbert Elias’s (1983) treatment of *The Court Society*, and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1987) discussions of *sociétés à maison* (1975; 1987). Both drew analogies between the aristocratic households of medieval Europe and the aboriginal forager societies of the Pacific Northwest Coast, inhabiting an ethnographic ‘culture area’ directly adjacent to Goldschmidt’s ‘protestant foragers’. What these studies highlighted among other things was the basic disconnect between extreme forms of political stratification and modes of subsistence. The organization of household estates into hereditary ranks of nobles and commoners; elite adherence to strict codes of honor and shame; valorization of warfare and inter-group predation; competitive feasting as a route to prestige; ownership of slaves and servants, and the leisure-time thus afforded elites: all these supposed hallmarks of agrarian ‘court societies’ were to be found, fully fledged, among hunter-fisher-foragers of the Northwest Coast.

What seems remarkable, in hindsight, is that it never occurred to anyone to address the striking contrasts between Northwest Coast and Californian social systems as a historical problem. Nor has the co-existence of two such clearly opposed value systems, over many centuries and among foragers inhabiting adjacent parts of the Pacific littoral, excited much interest in either anthropologists or archaeologists. Nobody, we suggest, would subsume European feudalism and early modern capitalism within a single sociological category, just because both systems rested on an agrarian mode of subsistence. But when it comes to foraging societies, we find similarly opposed sets of values and institutions brought under such general headings as ‘non-egalitarian’, ‘trans-egalitarian’, or others mentioned earlier. It is as though the lack of farming (or other traits assumed normative, such as strict egalitarianism and perennial nomadism) had come to define such groups above all else, irrespective of their contrasting natures and histories, which this article sets out to explore.

A case for ‘schizmogenesis’ in foraging populations

A striking example of this kind of sociological reductionism is the bold, but deeply flawed argument, of Hayden’s (2014) *The Power of Feasts*, a study of the co-evolution of food production and social inequality, and the culmination of a series of influential studies published since the 1990s. In it, both Northwest Coast and Californian societies feature as ‘aggrandizing’ or ‘feasting’ societies, taken to illustrate the kind of ‘affluent’ populations that developed agriculture after the end of the last Ice Age. At one level, this is a restatement of Lips’ (1949) thesis on the definition of *Erntevölker* (‘harvesting peoples’) as living exemplars of a neglected evolutionary stage, between the migratory big game-hunters of the Pleistocene and the earliest Neolithic farmers. Lips’ own work fieldwork lay further east, focussing on the how the Great Lakes Ojibwa – despite their dependence on wild resources – had developed labor-intensive forms of land management and food processing, preservation, and storage, supporting fixed and dense populations; as well as complex legal systems for regulating access to groves, swamps, root beds, grasslands, and fishing grounds (see also Lips 1938).

Hayden goes further, positing a causal relationship between the demand for specific luxury foods – deployed in agonistic feasting ceremonies – and the intensification of their production, leading to the development of agriculture. Yet he cannot document any such direct transition from “feasting foods” to domestication, and the latest archaeological and genetic findings suggest a non-linear transition to farming, extending – in all parts of the world – over many centuries, or even millennia (Fuller 2010). Furthermore, the workings of “feasting societies” are demonstrated from the ethnography of regions – notably the Pacific Coast of North America – distinguished by their staunch *resistance* to the adoption of corn, beans, and other native domesticates, long prior to European contact. We also note a logical inconsistency in holding a change in consumption patterns responsible for a change in mode of production. A full explication would surely have to consider the nature of the productive system that makes feasting possible in the first place.

It is striking, in this context, that the definition of “feasting” or “aggrandizing” societies rests heavily on Northwest Coast ethnography, yet hardly addresses the importance of slavery and servile institutions in household economies, to be discussed below. Lips’ original formulation suffered a similar slave-blindness, despite well-known synthetic accounts of aboriginal slaving systems in hunter-gatherer populations, going back to Nieboer’s [1900] *Slavery as an Industrial System*. Once this basic element of Northwest Coast societies is factored back in, it becomes difficult to see how they might form a precursor to food production. Systemic inter-group raiding among relatively small-scale foraging groups is hardly conducive to sustained intensification of land-use; and indeed offers an alternative route to food production and internal demographic growth in supporting the growth of leisured elites, centralized populations, and specialized industries (cf. Meillassoux 1991; Santos-Granero 2009).

Most surprising of all, perhaps, is the classification of Northwest Coast and neighboring Californian societies as exemplars of a common ethnographic type,

based on their feasting practices. To maintain the illusion of typological similarity, we are asked to deny almost every ethnographically known detail about the differences between their respective forms of ceremonial life. One would have to overlook the absence in California of almost everything that defines the famous Northwest Coast *potlatch* as a cultural institution: the distinction between high and low cuisine (painstakingly recorded by Boas and Hunt [1905]), ranked seating orders and serving equipment, obligatory over-eating of greasy foods, the competitive hacking to bits or burning of ancestral valuables, self-aggrandizing rhetoric and poetry, slave-sacrifice, and all other public manifestations of the intense rivalry between nobles, fighting for titular privilege and inherited wealth (Codere 1950).

The introduction of such features into northern Californian societies was clearly regarded as a controversial exception, even an anomaly, as with Leslie Spier's (1930) discussion of Klamath groups who accepted limited features of *potlatch* – along with the practice of slaving – following their adoption of the horse at c.1800 AD, and engagement with Chinook traders (the word “potlatch” itself is Chinook trade jargon). One could point to more typical and widespread features of ceremonial gatherings in aboriginal California, which in fact present quite the reverse of *potlatch* principles. For example, the emphasis on exchanging and consuming staple rather than luxury foods, and the importance of showing moderation in doing so (Powers 1877, 408; Vayda 1967); the playful transgression of group boundaries that accompanied ceremonial dances; or the careful public wrapping and unwrapping of ancestral valuables, such as obsidian blades, passed from village headmen into the temporary custody of ‘dance leaders’ (Goldschmidt and Driver 1940).

No doubt, the mutualistic aspects of Californian seasonal gatherings can be overstated. Local headmen certainly benefitted monetarily and in reputation by hosting them (Blackburn 1976: 230-5). Yet to reduce such systems to their “aggrandizing” functions seems an unwarranted distortion, especially given the levelling functions of periodic ‘trade feasts’ and ‘deerskin dances’, and their documented role in promoting inter-group solidarity (cf. Chase-Dunn and Hall 1998, 143-4). Napoleon Chagnon (1970, 17-18) went so far as to argue that:

... it was functionally necessary for the Yurok to ‘desire’ dentalia [i.e. money], but only if they were obtained from their neighbors. The social prestige involved with obtaining wealth in this fashion effected a more stable adaptation to the distribution of resources by allowing trade to be the alternative to raid in times of local insufficiency.

Moreover, the death of its owner normally occasioned the removal of personal wealth from circulation, by burning, or through burial with the deceased; and less gifted offspring of chiefs stood little chance of attaining the status needed to organize regional gatherings (Loeb 1926, 195-9; DuBois 1935, 66).

Following this line of argument, we will be making a case for the occurrence of ‘schizmogogenesis’ among indigenous populations of the West Coast. As defined by Gregory Bateson (1936), schizmogogenesis refers to the progressive and self-conscious differentiation of cultural norms within groups, as a direct outcome of

cumulative interactions between them, leading eventually to rupture. The scale of differentiation with which we are concerned is that of ‘culture areas’ (or ‘food areas’, as Clark Wissler [1938] termed them; cf. Kroeber 1939), rather than the more intricate patterning of language and kinship groups. There has been little comparison of ethnographically documented societies on this scale, despite growing archaeological and historical evidence for interaction between California and the Northwest Coast (e.g. Hajda 2005; Ames 2008). Our focus will be on clarifying what might have constituted a frontier between these two major ‘culture areas’, given the politically de-centralized character of foraging societies on both sides of the divide.

Turning modes of subsistence inside out

We note, at the outset, that processes akin to schizmogensis have been quite widely explored for foraging societies in their relationships to agrarian empires and industrial states (Ingold et al. eds. 1988). Perhaps the broadest study of this kind is James C. Scott’s (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed*, which argues that many internal features of forager and low-level farming groups in highland Southeast Asia evolved as counter-responses to the predatory interests of lowland kingdoms (and later nation-states) in their vicinity. Such features range from segmentary lineage systems to the cultivation of what he terms ‘escape crops’ (e.g. root vegetables) that grow invisibly below ground, and so are difficult for states to quantify, tax, or plunder. Similarly with the rejection by highland folk of fixed field systems in favour ‘mobile, fugitive subsistence strategies’, all of which presents ‘a nearly intractable hieroglyphic to any state that might want to corral them’ (Scott 2009, 195).

We also note, however, that many forms of predation and parasitism associated by Scott with agrarian states and empires – notably the “harvesting” of people and their labor through systematic raiding, enslavement, and tribute – can also be found in comparatively small-scale and non-agrarian societies. On this point we are grateful to Scott for himself pointing us towards Fernando Santos-Granero’s (2009) study of aboriginal slaveholding systems in the American tropics. Using sources that date back to the 15th and 16th centuries AD, Santos-Granero identifies a subset of indigenous groups, which he terms ‘capturing societies’. On the face of it these spatially disparate populations have little in common, least of all their modes of subsistence, which often evade any simple scheme of classification:

In northwest Amazonia the dominant peoples were sedentary horticulturalists and fishermen living along the largest rivers who raided the nomadic hunting-gathering bands of the hinterland. In contrast, in the Paraguay River basin they were semi-itinerant hunter-gatherers who raided or subjugated village agriculturalists. In southern Florida we find a similar situation: the hegemonic people were fishermen-gatherers who lived in large permanent villagers but moved seasonally to fishing and gathering sites, and who raided both fishing and farming communities. In all the other cases, the struggle was between societies with similar economies based on slash-and-burn

agriculture combined with hunting and fishing in different degrees.
(Santos-Granero 2009, 42-34)

Two factors nevertheless allow him to consider these societies as a group: 1) their respective monopolies over optimal environmental niches ('optimal', that is, in terms of resource abundance); and 2) their maintenance of predatory and/or parasitical relations with weaker neighbours, who they subjugated through well-coordinated raiding. In some cases, riverine or coastal hunter-foragers – such as the Guaicurú of the Paraguay palm savannah, or the Calusa of Florida Keys – exerted quasi-feudal powers over the land, labor, and resources of nearby farming populations. In all cases slave taking, combined with regular extraction of tribute, exempted a portion of the dominant society from basic subsistence chores, supporting the existence of leisured elites, as well as specialized warrior castes.

Where we have 'foragers' consuming large quantities of domestic crops, extracted as tribute from nearby farming populations, the concept of 'modes of subsistence' may be safely consigned to the back drawer. What structures relationships within and between groups is an overarching mode of production based on the capture of people from enemy groups, their incorporation as subordinates, and often their transformation into sources of ritual value, through sacrifice, or the processing of their body parts into trophies and talismans. In the tropics, food was involved at every stage, both practically and conceptually. Raiding was assimilated to predation (men's work); captives to vanquished prey, then later pets, while their re-socialization into households meant extensive nurturing, instruction, and cooking meals (women's work). Sacrifice took the form of collective feasts – presided over by ritual specialists – and could include the eating of enemy flesh as a way of diverting vitality to the bodies of a conquering population (Fausto 2000).

All this circulation of food, however, was just one aspect of a more encompassing system of social reproduction, which Santos-Granero calls the 'Amerindian political economy of life'. At a broader theoretical level, David Graeber (2006) has suggested that 'modes of production' (including 'modes of subsistence') might be usefully re-imagined in exactly these kinds of terms: not so much as ways of generating and struggling over certain kinds of material outcomes (as in recent studies by Gurven et al. 2010; Bowles 2011), but as processes that are ultimately directed by the perceived need to produce and reproduce certain distinctive kinds of people, and certain distinctive kinds of status relationships among them (e.g. nobles, commoners, slaves). It is in precisely such terms that we propose to explore the cultural divergence of foraging populations between California and the Northwest Coast.

Wogies: a cautionary tale, and schizmogentic "smoking gun"

We are emboldened to do so in part by a remarkable story, which comes down to us via Stephen Power's compendious (1877) *Tribes of California*. A.W. Chase (1873) seems to have been the first to report it, in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, as an account given to him by the Chetco of Oregon concerning the origins of the word 'Wogie' (pronounced "Wâgeh"). William MacLeod thought it worthy of comment in his (1929) study of 'The origin of servile labor groups'. Neither historians nor anthropologists have given it much attention since:

The Chetkos say that, many seasons ago, their ancestors came in canoes from the far north, and landed at the river's mouth. They found two tribes in possession, one a warlike race, resembling themselves; these they soon conquered and exterminated. The other was a diminutive people, of an exceedingly mild disposition, and *white*. These called themselves, or were called by the new-comers, 'Wogies'. They were skilful in the manufacture of baskets, robes, and canoes, and had many methods of taking game and fish which were unknown to the invaders. Refusing to fight, the Wogies were made slaves of, and kept at work to provide food and shelter and articles of use for the more warlike race, who waxed very fat and lazy. One night, however, after a grand feast, the Wogies packed up and fled, and were never more seen. When the first white men appeared, the Chetkos supposed that they were the Wogies returned. They soon found out their mistake however, but retained among themselves the appellation for the white men, who are known as Wogies by all the coast tribes in the vicinity. (Powers 1877, 69)

It is unsurprising, perhaps, that a hunter-forager group of the Oregon coast should narrate white colonization as an act of historical vengeance. Aboriginal populations of that region were among the first on the Pacific littoral to succumb to diseases introduced by Euro-American traders and settlers, which, combined with genocidal attacks by settlers, caused them to suffer almost total demographic collapse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even in Chase's time, he reported there were only two Chetco families left. As a result, there are no detailed accounts of their culture and society to compare with those of the two major ethnological study regions – 'Northwest Coast' and 'Californian' – lying to either side. Indeed, this linguistically and ethnically complex sub-sector of the coast, between the Eel River and the mouth of the Columbia, posed significant problems of classification for scholars seeking to delineate the boundaries of 'culture areas' in western North America (Kroeber 1939; Jorgensen 1980), and the issue of their affiliation to one area or another remains contentious today (see Donald 2003).

Given this considerable body of modern research, it may seem frivolous to evoke a nineteenth century story – of questionable historicity – as a basis for renewed discussion of the classification of foraging societies on the Pacific Coast. Yet we would argue there are sound reasons for doing so. A growing body of archaeological and linguistic evidence now demonstrates extensive migration and trade along the coast, extending back many centuries before the commencement of the ethnographic record, and transgressing the boundaries of traditional 'culture areas'. Prior to European contact, a vibrant canoe-borne maritime trade linked coastal and island societies, conveying valuables such as shell beads, copper, obsidian, and a host of organic commodities north-south across the diverse ecologies of the Pacific littoral (Arnold 1995). Various lines of evidence point towards the taking and movement of human captives, in the context of inter-group raiding, as an aspect of these ancient trading systems (Ames 2008; cf. Angelbeck and Grier 2012).

Hence, there is nothing inherently implausible about the story of a slave-holding society migrating south over water into new territory, at some remote time, and either subjugating or killing the autochthonous groups it found there. Of greater interest are the details of the story, including its geographical location – in precisely the intermediate zone where the Northwest Coast practice of chattel slavery seems to have declined – and the pragmatic criteria given for the enslavement of an alien group, which have an air of historical reality about them. ‘Wogies’, as encountered by the Chetco, were already socialized to perform those collective activities most highly valued by their new masters (essential, no doubt, given the cost of housing and feeding slaves, and the difficulties of instruction across language boundaries). What the proto-Chetco captured was not abstract “Wogie labor”, but the accumulated *savoir faire* of a hunter-fisher-forager people not too unlike themselves, and in some respects clearly more capable.

More intriguing still are the story’s ethical dimensions, which resonate with certain widespread features of native Californian morality, including the high value placed on hard work and individual autonomy, as discussed by Goldschmidt (1951; and cf. Garth Jr 1976). Indeed, the whole legend – told, it seems, among a variety of coastal groups – makes most sense as a cautionary tale for those tempted to render others slaves, or to acquire wealth and leisure through raiding. Having forced their victims into servitude, and grown ‘fat and lazy’ on the proceeds, it is the Chetco’s newfound sloth that makes them unable even to pursue the fleeing Wogies, such that they end up losing their servants. The Wogies come out of the whole affair better than the other groups in the story, by virtue of their pacifism, industriousness, craft skills, and capacity for innovation; and indeed get to make a lethal return – in spirit at least – as Euro-American settlers equipped with “guns, germs, and steel”.

Quite apart from showing that Hegel was not the only thinker to contemplate “master-slave dialectics”, the tale of the Wogies raises wider questions about the historical divergence of foraging societies in Pacific North America, and about the nature of diversity in foraging societies generally. For behavioural ecologists, the definitive statement on this matter has for some time been Robert L. Kelly’s magisterial (1995) book, *The Foraging Spectrum*, which uses ethnographic data from every continent to convey the diversity of societies that subsist on wild resources, including the effects of their “encapsulation” by agro-pastoral peoples and industrial states. In practice, however, behavioural ecologists seek to account for this diversity by drawing comparisons among historically unrelated groups within the global sample of known foraging societies (e.g. Alden-Smith et al. 2010).

Hence, the concept of a ‘foraging spectrum’, as currently in use, falls victim to a contradiction between theory and practice. In theory, the approach acknowledges diversity among foraging societies resulting from their historical position in a larger network of societies. Yet in practice, it recognizes the operation of such historical processes only where foragers encounter farmers and states. In other cases, it addresses variability in terms of human-environment relations, such as the extent of seasonal mobility or resource abundance, as opposed to the mutual differentiation of institutions and values between neighboring groups. The tale of the Wogies invites us to explore ‘schizmogentic’ processes of the latter kind. In

doing so, and by way of clarifying our own position, we will first consider a recent and stimulating application of behavioural ecology to aboriginal California, and suggest some shortcomings.

Apparently irrational foragers

We should begin by considering the kind of predictive modelling used by behavioral ecologists, which provides a set of rational expectations against which to measure the actual behavior of foraging populations. It can be assumed, for instance, that wild resources are targeted by foragers on a cost-benefit basis, calculated in terms of calorific return relative to labor expended in their collection and processing. A simplified model might postulate that big-game hunters shift their attention down the trophic scale only if obliged to do so, moving on to smaller and more abundant food packages (e.g. rabbit, fish), and supplementing these where needed with 'third order' foods (e.g. shellfish, acorns, pine nuts, or wild seed grasses). Based on such calculations, all resources in a given catchment area can be ranked (see e.g. Winterhalder 1981).

Where the evidence deviates from this ideal cost-effective pattern, it becomes necessary to ask why foragers might opt for a sub-optimal mode of subsistence. One such deviant case is California. Marine and fluvial resources are abundant there, from the Pacific coast as far inland as the Sacramento-San Joaquin river system, and aquatic resources – including anadromous fish – formed an important part of the aboriginal economy. Yet it has recently been argued that even among some coastal groups, aquatic foods generally came second to acorns and pine nuts, both in terms of dietary significance and longevity of exploitation. Even when taphonomic issues are accounted for, a wide range of evidence, including isotopic studies on human remains, corroborates the precedence of boreal over aquatic resources as staple foods, as far back as four millennia ago (Tushingham and Bettinger 2013).

From the perspective of behavioral ecology, this is something of a mystery. Acorns offer tiny individual food packages. Most variants require extensive grinding and leaching to remove toxins and release nutrients prior to consumption (Driver 1952). As such they are 'high-cost, low-ranking' foods. Salmon, by contrast, are relatively 'low-cost, high-ranking', by virtue of their ease of capture in season and their nutritional value, which includes the provision of oils and fats as well as protein. On the Northwest Coast, bulk harvesting of anadromous fish is documented as far back as 2000 BC, and remained a cornerstone of the aboriginal economy until recent times (Ames and Maschner 1999), suggesting an ancient divergence from the Californian subsistence pattern prevailing to the south. In some respects, the divergence is easily explained. The main forest species of the Northwest Coast are conifers bearing few edible nuts or acorns. Moreover, the density and diversity of anadromous fish is greater than in California, and includes smaller species such as eulachon (candlefish), intensively exploited for its oil, which was both a staple food and a core ingredient of competitive feasts (Mitchell and Donald 2001).

The ecological puzzle centers rather on California, and the choice made by foraging societies to intensify their exploitation of wild oak groves and pinion

stands, when abundant fisheries were also available to them. Unlike their Northwest Coast neighbors – famous for “squandering” wealth in competitive banquets – aboriginal Californians were notoriously prudential in their handling of private property (resulting, among other things, in a degree of psychoanalytical speculation over the ‘problem of Yurok anality’; Posinsky 1957): all the more intriguing, then, to find a preference for uneconomic foods among groups otherwise known for their calculating behavior.

Escape crops before agriculture?

So – why acorns before salmon? Framed in such general terms, the question has wider evolutionary implications. Intensification of these two distinct food pathways – the aquatic-coastal and the boreal-terrestrial – is more widely characteristic of post-Pleistocene societies. There is a lively debate in archaeology about whether the optimal niches for expanding ‘Mesolithic’ and ‘Archaic’ populations were mainly on coastal shelves, newly exposed by glacial retreat after the end of the last Ice Age, or inland areas where riparian woodland spread across former zones of steppe-tundra (or, indeed, the ecotones between; Bailey and Milner 2002). A compelling answer, arising from ecological considerations, might have predictive value for modelling global demographic processes after the retreat of the ice, including those associated with the domestication of plants and animals.

Tushingham and Bettinger (2013) approach the problem in terms of a modified behavioral ecology, factoring in the predation risks incurred when wild resources are stored for delayed consumption. What matters, they point out, from the perspective of prospective thieves and raiders, is not simply whether things are stored, but also the amount of labor expended in their processing prior to storage, or what might be called ‘front-loading’ costs. With seasonal fish harvests these are very high, since abundance is determined mainly by the group’s capacity for efficient processing and preserving of the catch: the skilled and timely performance of cleaning, filleting, drying, and smoking to prevent exposure and infestation.

On the Northwest Coast, successful completion of these tasks was critical for the group’s physical survival, and also its social survival in the competitive feasting exploits of the winter season (Suttles 1968). Nonetheless, rules of decorum often prevented nobles and even male commoners from engaging in such work. This resulted in periodic shortages of controllable labor that were addressed through seasonal slave-raids on neighboring groups. Captives (mainly female) were incorporated into the households of their captors, and their offspring remained as hereditary slaves (Donald 1997). Economic intensification was thus achieved as much by harvesting people as by constructing weirs, clam gardens, or terraced plots for rhizome cultivation. These diligent acts of ‘niche construction’ (Thornton et al. 2015) were embedded in cycles of inter-societal warfare and predation, which defined underlying relationships between the lower orders who worked and the men of honor who feasted (Ruyle 1973; Ames 1995).

Inter-group raids were also opportunities to seize large quantities of processed food and other chattels. It can be argued, then, that by pursuing an aquatic path to

intensification, aboriginal societies of the Northwest Coast were also constantly making and re-making a noose for their own necks. By investing in the creation of a storable food surplus – and to the work of post-harvest processing we should add the pre-harvest labor of net weaving, trap making, and weir construction – they were simultaneously creating an irresistible temptation for plunderers. Successful raids on a winter store yielded not just “food” but finished products: varying grades of highly processed cuisine, including the fats and oils so conspicuously consumed in “grease feasts” – in short, durable and portable goods that could be instantly redeployed in hospitality or traded onwards (Turner and Loewen 1998).

Acorns and nuts present neither such risks nor such opportunities. Californians managed their oak woodlands by burning, weeding, and pruning (Anderson 2006), but harvesting techniques seem to have been quite simple, and there was no need for extensive processing prior to storage. By far the bulk of subsistence labor was deferred to a time shortly before consumption, when women emerged from their homes to withdraw granary stocks and begin the arduous process of grinding and leaching to produce porridges, bread, and biscuits. As Bettinger (2015, 233) puts it, the acorn is ‘so very back-loaded that its capture as stores represents little saved time ... with correspondingly less potential for developing inequality, likewise for attracting raiders or developing organizational means to defend or retaliate’. What the remote ancestors of the Maidu, Pomo, Miwok, Wintu, and others sacrificed in short-term nutritional value they gained, over the long-term, in food security.

Bettinger goes on to suggest that the distinct modes of subsistence followed by Northwest Coast and Californian foragers – both equally “rational” in their own way – might also explain other differences in social organization, notably the presence among the former of rigid social stratification and endemic raiding; absent among the latter. If his explanation holds good, then there is little analytical value in considering relationships across the frontiers of these adjacent culture areas. Broad regional differences in modes of subsistence would be sufficient to account for variations in the foraging spectrum, and the tale of the Wogies consigned to the imaginary world of ‘many seasons ago’. An alternative explanation, which we wish to consider, is that acorns and nuts might here be considered forager equivalents of “escape crops”, in Scott’s (2009) sense. That is, crops consciously selected as part of a wider set of cultural strategies, through which native Californians maintained a boundary between their own mode of social reproduction, and that of their neighbours to the north.

Where aboriginal slavery stopped on the Pacific Coast

A logical place to begin looking for such boundary mechanisms is the Californian Northwest – the lands of the Yurok, Karuk, Hupa, and Tolowa – which Alfred Kroeber considered a zone of transition between the two great culture areas of the Pacific littoral. There the distribution of ethnic and language groups became compressed, accordion-like, into a sub-region of extraordinary diversity, which nevertheless presents strong cultural commonalities. It is this “shatter zone” of aboriginal cultures that we will focus on, beginning with an observation from

Chase-Dunn and Mann's (1998) pioneering study of "very small world systems", *The Wintu and their Neighbors*:

Unlike most ethnographically studied hunter-gatherers, the indigenes of Northern California had little or no contact with people from state-societies prior to the arrival of Euro-Americans in the early nineteenth century, nor did they interact with any peoples who had large complex chiefdoms with class-stratified societies. ... A possible exception is the Athabaskan-speaking peoples (Yurok, Karok, Hupa, and others) living in the northwestern corner of California. These groups must have migrated from the north, where Pacific Northwest Athabascans had their famous big-man societies. The Athabascans in California did have cultural institutions such as private property and ranked lineages that stemmed from their Northwest cultural heritage, but they had otherwise lost most of their hierarchical features and became rather similar to their egalitarian [Californian] neighbors.

(Chase-Dunn and Mann 1998, 73)

Perhaps the most obvious of these "lost" institutions, at least in terms of household organization, is chattel slavery. On the Northwest Coast, from Alaska down to Washington State, inter-group slave raids were endemic, and the possession of domestic slaves was a defining attribute of noble status. At any time captives might constitute up to a quarter of the tribal population (Mitchell 1985). These proportions, recorded in census figures of the early-mid nineteenth century, rival what could be found on the cotton plantations of the colonial South, and are in line with estimates for household slavery in classical Athens (MacLeod 1928; Donald 1997). Moreover, chattel slavery appears to be a long-term feature of Northwest Coast social dynamics, with major demographic and cultural impact on the wider region.

A variety of archaeological indicators point to the likely existence of some form of household bondage on the Northwest Coast as least as far back as the Middle Pacific period (c. 1850 BC), when the focused exploitation of anadromous fish also began (Ames 2008). Such evidence includes defensive fortifications and signs of warfare, in conjunction with indicators of labor intensification, expanding trade networks, and extreme disparities in treatments of the dead. At the "top end", these include burials exhibiting formal systems of body ornamentation and the staging of corpses in seated or other fixed positions, presumably referencing a hierarchy of ritual postures then current among the living. At the "bottom", they include the mutilation of bodies, recycling of human bone for industries, and the "offering" of people as grave goods. The overall impression is of a wide spectrum of formalized statuses, ranging from high rank to non-persons (Ames 2001).

Such features are absent from the archaeological record of California, just as the ethnographic record presents a downward cline in inequality the further south one goes. Organized raiding and chattel slavery seem to have lessened in intensity through the shatter zone, dwindling into various forms of debt slavery on the lower reaches of the Columbia River, while beyond that stretched a largely slave-free zone (Hajda 2005). Despite their highly developed systems of private ownership and extensive use of shell money, most Californian societies beyond

this point seem to have avoided the treatment of human beings as household property (for limited exceptions, see Powers [1877, 254-75]; Kroeber [1925: 308-320]; Spier [1930]). Understanding the evolution and operation of this anti-slaving buffer is no easy task; but would seem crucial to comprehending, not just the historical divergence of foraging societies in Pacific North America, but also the possible range of explanatory factors leading to diversity in the ‘foraging spectrum’ as a whole.

To fully appreciate the difficulty of the problem, it is first necessary to rule out some obvious – but certainly incorrect, or at best partial – answers. It must be noted at the outset that nowhere in the aboriginal territories of Oregon, Washington State, or Northwest California is any kind of organized physical resistance to slavery documented; at least not of any unusual scale or significance. Might we then apply the same kind of “eco-logic” as the preceding argument, about acorns and fish, but this time with regard to humans as captive resources? Was there, in short (and to borrow a Hupa idiom), some sense in which the “acorn eaters” of aboriginal California were as unattractive a prospect for predation as the contents of their granaries; their embodied stores of knowledge being as useless as their wicker stores of acorns? If so, then this could only apply to a very distant past, since most ethnographically known Californians have traditions of weir building, netting, basket trapping, filleting, curing, and oil extraction, no less sophisticated than those of the Northwest Coast (Kroeber and Barrett 1960).

Might we then invoke legal and fiscal barriers to the taking and holding of slaves? Alfred Kroeber – the only ethnographer, it seems, to have addressed this question – reported that northwest Californian laws relating to compensation seem designed to undermine the predatory logic of inter-group raiding, making impossible or impractical the retention of captives as chattel slaves. Death in warfare was treated as legally equivalent to murder, and required similar levels of reparations. In fiscal terms, military advantage became a liability to the superior party – ‘The *vae victis* of civilization might well have been replaced among the Yurok, in a monetary sense at least, by the dictum: “Woe to the victors”’ (Kroeber 1925, 49). Macleod (1929, 102), however, was unconvinced of this point, noting the existence of similar legal mechanisms among Tlingit and other Northwest Coast groups, alongside the ‘subjection of foreign groups, tribute taking, and enslavement of captives’. Yet all sources concur that the only real slaves in the northwest of California were debt-slaves, and that even these were few in number (cf. Bettinger 2015, 171). Some other mechanism for the suppression of chattel slavery must therefore be at work.

At this point, it seems, we are obliged to turn back to aboriginal notions of personhood, as captured in the story of the ‘Wogies’, and in which Goldschmidt perceived a key to understanding the wider social and economic principles of Californian societies. For example, on the Northwest Coast – as with the biblical Gibeonites – hewing and carrying wood was a signifier for drudgery, a prototypical act for slaves, and unthinkable for a noble (Donald 1997: 124-6). Gathering wood for a Californian sweathouse ritual seems to have been carried out in such a way as to invert these very principles:

All men, particularly the youths, were exhorted to gather wood for use in sweating. This was not exploitation of child labor, but an important religious act, freighted with significance. Special wood was brought from the mountain ridges; it was used for an important purification ritual. The gathering itself was a religious act, for it was a means of acquiring “luck”. It had to be done with the proper psychological attitude of which restrained demeanor and constant thinking about the acquisition of riches were the chief elements. The job became a moral end rather than a means to an end, with both religious and economic involvements.

(Goldschmidt 1951, 514)

Similarly, the ritual sweating that ensued – by purging the Californian male’s body of surplus fluid – can be seen to invert the excessive consumption of fat, blubber, and grease that signified masculine status, and attracted further wealth, in the competitive banquets of the Northwest Coast. To enhance his status and impress his ancestors, the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) chief threw candlefish oil on the fire on the tournament fields of the potlatch; the Maidu chief burned calories in the closed seclusion of his sweathouse. Moreover, native Californians seem to have been well aware of the kinds of values they were rejecting, institutionalizing them in the figure of the Clown whose public exhibitions of sloth, gluttony, and megalomania – while giving voice to the familiar discontents of Californian society (Brightman 1999) – seem also to parody the most coveted values of a proximate civilization.

If we accept that what we call “societies” are essentially processes of the mutual creation of human beings, and what we call “value” refers to the self-conscious forms in which these processes are regulated and articulated (Turner 2008, Graeber 2001, 2014), then it is hard to see the Northwest Coast and Californian civilizations as anything but diametrical inversions of one another. Both were characterized by extravagant expenditures of labor, far beyond anything necessary for subsistence. Speaking of Kwakwaka-speakers (“Kwakiutl”), Codere writes

In a region where subsistence demands could have been met easily by concentration on getting and storing enough of a few natural products such as salmon and berries, the Kwakiutl chose the grand manner in production as well as in the great displays, distributions and even destructions of wealth so distinctive of their culture... Each household made and possessed many mats, boxes, cedar-bark and fur blankets, wooden dishes, horn spoons, and canoes. It was as though in manufacturing as well as in food production there was no point at which further expenditure of effort in the production of more of the same items was felt to be superfluous... (Codere 1950:19)

This material superabundance, she notes, was consistent with the extravagant theatricality of the potlatch; but potlatches, in turn, were occasions to “fasten on” noble names to aristocratic contenders, the creation and allotment of such titles being the ultimate focus of Northwest Coast ritual life. All the work was ultimately aimed at the creation of specific sorts of person. The result is—among

other things—an artistic tradition considered one of the most breathtaking the world has seen. It is also one focused above all on exteriority: on masks, surfaces, boxes, and theatrical trickery. The very word for “ritual,” literally meant “fraud” or “illusion” (Boas 1966: 172; cf. Goldman 1975:102).

Californians were equally extravagant in their own way. But if they were potlatching anything, it was labour. As Thomas Garth (1976:338) wrote of the Atsugewi

The ideal individual was both wealthy and industrious. In the first grey haze of dawn he arose to begin his day's work, never ceasing activity until late at night. Early rising and the ability to go without sleep were great virtues. It was extremely complimentary to say “he doesn't know how to sleep...”

Wealthy men (and it should be noted in both cases, these societies were decidedly patriarchal) were typically seen as providers for poorer dependents, improvident folk and foolish drifters, owing to their own (and their wives') personal self-discipline and labor.

Californian spirituality in turn appears almost a perfect inversion of the spectacle and illusions of the Northwest Coast, characterized by a archetypically Protestant emphasis on interiority. Among the Yurok, for example, work properly performed becomes a way of connecting with a true reality—of which objects of wealth like dentalia and hummingbird scalps were mere manifestations. As a contemporary ethnographer explains:

As he “accumulates” himself and becomes more clean, the person in training sees himself as more and more “real” and thus the world as more and more “beautiful”: a real place in experience rather than merely a setting for a “story,” for intellectual knowledge...

In 1865, Captain Spott, for instance, trained for many weeks as he helped the medicine man prepare for the First Salmon ceremony at the mouth of the Klamath River... “the old [medicine] man sent [Captain Spott] to bring down sweat-house wood. On the way he cried with nearly every step because now he was seeing with his own eyes how it was done” ... Tears, crying, are of crucial importance in Yurok spiritual training as manifestations of personal yearning, sincerity, humility, and openness. Through having these feelings a person attracts the “pity” of the spirituals, whether personified or conceptualized as a general presence. (Buckley 2002:117; cf. Kroeber 1925: 40,107).

Critically, one must discover and pursue one's own, 'real' purpose. “When someone else's purpose in life is to interfere with you,” Buckley's informants told him, “he must be stopped, lest you become his slave, his 'pet.' (ibid:88)

Conclusion

One begins to suspect – or at least, this is our contention – that the absence of certain forms of hierarchy in Californian societies, especially among groups of northern derivation, was not so much a matter of cultural “loss” as self-conscious rejection: a schizmo-genetic reflex against the governing principles of neighboring societies. The reason the Wogie story can be called a “smoking gun” in this respect is not so much because the Chetko themselves told the story, but that their

neighbours were all familiar with it as well (remember that “Wageh” became the regional term for Euro-American settlers.) This meant that

1. Californians were aware of, and in at least periodic contact with, the peoples of the Northwest Coast
2. they saw northerners as warlike and disposed to exploit the labour of defeated peoples
3. they recognized the exploitation of war captives as an ongoing possibility in their own society, as well, but rejected it
4. they did so on the grounds that exploiting captives would lead to results diametrically opposed to key social values (the victors would become fat and lazy)

We don't know how common such cautionary tales were, because they are not the kind of stories early observers were likely to have recorded (we only know this one because the author had a theory the Wogies might have been shipwrecked Japanese.) But there are indications in the archaeological record that the historical contours of that schizmo-genetic process run deep, reaching back centuries, perhaps even millennia prior to European contact (e.g. Ames 2008; Angelbeck and Grier 2012; Ritchie et al. 2016). Clarifying the sequence remains a matter for future investigation, with a focus on the canoe-borne maritime networks that for millennia formed the main axis of social and demographic change on the Pacific Coast, between first human arrivals (Erlandson et al. 2015) and the wrenching transformations of the Russian fur trade, which eventually forced aboriginal trade inland (Lightfoot 2003).

Whatever new kinds of history this enterprise generates are likely to have broad ramifications, not least because the ethnographic record of Pacific North America has long served, in archaeology and anthropology, as ‘an exemplary case for examining how hunter-gatherers thrived in temperate environments prior to the advent of agriculture’ (Lightfoot 1993, 168). What such a statement might mean is entirely dependent on what we take to be the ethnographic record of Pacific North America, and what we mean of course by ‘thriving’. If, for example, we focus on feasting practices largely to the exclusion of aboriginal slavery and servile institutions – as most deep time comparisons seem to – then what we are really comparing is just detached shards of a larger cultural whole: ‘Fressen, ohne die Moral’, to paraphrase Brecht. But “archaeologizing” the near-present in this way seems a poor method for approaching an already fragmented record of the distant past.

Almost a century ago, Marcel Mauss (1929) warned us that trying to map the diffusion of culture elements was something of a fool's errand; human beings are always aware of other social and cultural possibilities; “civilizations”—the world he would apply to Kroeber's “culture areas”—were defined, rather, by cultural rejection, the foreign institutions they did *not* take up. When speaking of the west coast of North America—that is, of societies that appear to have self-consciously rejected farming as a mode of subsistence—this seems particularly apropos. All we are really suggesting is to take what we already know to be true one step further.

What emerges, we suggest, from a more rounded comparison of California and the Northwest Coast is the principle that modes of subsistence – even those which seem, on first inspection, to be most deeply rooted in pragmatic requirements and ecological circumstances – contain a dimension of political history. The process of schizmogogenesis, resulting in the formation of two major West coast ‘culture areas’, cannot be adequately explained in terms of environmental adaptation, any more than it can be reduced to distinctions of language or ethnicity.

There are not trivial issues. They bear on fundamental questions about what human societies are basically about. The existence of institutions like slavery provide a genuine challenge to ecological models: after all if societies take the form they do because everyone is pursuing “rational” maximization strategies, that would suggest that anyone in a position to reduce their neighbours to a life of degradation and drudgery so as to increase their protein intake would not hesitate to do so. Nothing we know from history suggests this to be the case. However, to say they do so because of some predetermined cultural grid is not much better—and anyway makes no sense in this context, where there were speakers of Athabascan and Penutian on both sides of the divide, who were in most important respects indistinguishable from their neighbors and in no way resembled their linguistic cousins on the other side of the shatter zone.

One could perhaps make an ecological case that the societies of the Northwest Coast were likely to have ended up with something along the lines of the court societies they did develop: accumulating a front-loaded storable surplus made good ecological sense, and once this path is taken, it's only a matter of time before some “bad apples” try to seize their neighbors' stockpiles, with predictable results.¹ California in contrast was quite another matter. It offered one of the richest natural environments on earth, and a wide range of subsistence possibilities. What happened there appears, instead, to be the outcome of a self-conscious project of political divergence, taking place among extended networks of decentralized communities, and pursued from the “bottom-up”: through modes of household and village organization, through legal and fiscal strategies, and through the mutual differentiation of ritual and ethical norms.

In accounting for the diversity of forager societies, where ancient or modern, political processes of this kind are rarely if ever evoked (cf. Wengrow and Graeber 2015). Indeed, it remains a default assumption of most evolutionary studies that institutional change in pre-industrial societies remained closely anchored to intensification in the methods of food production, especially the initial adoption of farming and subsequent refinements in agrarian economies (e.g. Alden-Smith et al. 2010). In this established paradigm, the development of aboriginal economy and society on the west coast of North America can only be conceptualized as a puzzling case of ‘limited’ or ‘retarded’ evolution (Richerson and Boyd 2001, 217); or as a truncated experiment in ‘paleo-political ecology’, real politics being supposedly reserved for the activities of agrarian societies and ‘modern-day elites’ (Hayden 2014, 6).

1☐ We note that this would be the case even if, as now seems likely, the societies known to ethnology are devolved versions of even more elaborate court societies of the past.

The case of aboriginal slavery, and its alternatives, on the Pacific Coast serves, we propose, as an important corrective to such views. It reminds us that terms such as ‘emergent’ or ‘incipient’, when applied to forms of inequality, are by their very nature fictions, the effect of which is to simply isolate the institutional development of these societies from mainstream trajectories of political evolution. All humanly constructed forms of inequality are equally real for those who live them; and thus equally open to challenge and reversal. There are no evolutionary false starts in this regard, no ‘archaic peoples’, nor any dormant seedbeds of political change, awaiting the magical hand of agriculture that brings them to fruition. It is this lingering illusion that still prevents us from exploring the evolutionary pathways that lead from the hunting retinue to the elite cultures of agrarian civilizations; from ‘original affluent societies’ to modern leisured classes; and from small-scale ‘capturing societies’ to the establishment of large-scale tributary states.

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