

Monopolisation of knowledge, social inequality and egalitarianism

An evolutionary perspective

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And everywhere we face this all-pervading power of mystery – an inherently malign power, mostly hostile to us.

Ivan Bunin, *At the Well of Days*

Abstract: It is argued in this article that we should search not for the origin or roots of social inequality, but rather for factors that might have caused a specific form or type of social inequality to develop and for mechanisms which might have shaped specific structural features of hierarchical systems. also examined are the factors underlying the development of egalitarian social systems. Egalitarianism is as much a product of specific evolutionary processes as is the development of the various forms of social inequality. different mechanisms of structuring hierarchical systems may act in parallel in the same society, or could be specific to particular cultures in particular periods. the foundations of hierarchical systems may lie in the sphere of material production, but also in other social realms, including the control of beliefs. the monopolisation of special knowledge and occupations (frequently connected with ideology) by certain social groups can be a powerful force that shaped and still shapes social inequality. the spirit of competition and emulation in warfare, occultism, artistic performance and other spiritual endeavours might also promote the development of institutionalised and excessive status inequality. Supporting evidence for non-economic drivers of inequality is drawn from the ethnographic record of indigenous australian and Fuegian hunter-gatherers. It is argued that a society which had powerful mechanisms preventing accumulation of wealth by individuals or groups was able, nevertheless, to build up effective mechanisms of social differentiation. to create such mechanisms, it is unnecessary for a society to have followed a path towards the development of the production of a food surplus or economic intensification. the phenomena under consideration could exist without any paraphernalia that would leave archaeological signatures, although some data from European Upper Paleolithic sites might be interpreted as the indirect evidence of similar forms of inequality. the archaeological record also provides evidence of small-scale societies that show ‘some degree of inequality but lack many of the other traits associated with complexity’ (ames 2010a:16–19). the discussion concludes with a set of nine propositions that are intended to stimulate debate and raise awareness of alternative pathways to inequality and equality.

Keywords: social evolution, inequality, egalitarianism, hunters and gatherers, monopolisation of knowledge

1. Preliminary notes

The article represents some results of long-term work by the author aimed at understanding the commonalities and diversities in the social systems of a number of hunter-gatherer peoples. I have drawn on data from hunter-gatherer societies with immediate return systems (in Woodburn’s terms), focusing on Australian Aboriginal

systems in the traditional context,¹ and interpret these data using theories and assumptions which are outlined below.

It is a well-known fact that Western anthropologists have largely refrained from addressing the problems of social evolution for several decades, ever since the neo-evolutionism of the 1950s–1970s until quite recently. Many even avoided using the term ‘evolution’, preferring to employ notions such as ‘transformation’, ‘transition’, or ‘change’. Discussing evolution was tantamount to taking a dogmatic view of human history (Bondarenko, Korotaev, Kradin 2011:3, with reference to Yoffee 2005; Pauketat 2007).² The situation has changed dramatically with a revival of interest in social evolution and the term is once again common in anthropological discourse. This historical shift is seen clearly in the comparison of the titles of sessions and papers from the two most recent meetings of the Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS 10 2013, CHAGS 11 2015, with those at CHAGS 6 1990).³

In Soviet and Russian social anthropology (or rather ethnology and history) the interest in social evolution and the term itself have never gone out of style, Perestroika, however, made scholarly approaches much more flexible. The databases were extended in large measure, and a number of scholars such as Bondarenko, Grinin, Khazankov, Korotaev and Kradin have tried for already several decades to elaborate what some of them describe as a ‘new wave of evolutionism’ (Bondarenko, Korotaev, Kradin 2011:3). Their findings were published in several joint collections (both in Russian and in English) co-authored by Claessen, Carneiro, Fitzhugh, de Munck, Wason and others. In 2002, a new English-language semi-annual journal, *Social evolution and history*, was founded in Moscow, providing a venue for many thought-provoking discussions.⁴

In the article ‘Problems, paradoxes, and prospects of evolutionism’, published in Russian in one of the joint collections, Claessen (2000:14) wrote,

@@@... in the nineteenth century there were found a great number of societies that had not reached the state-level of development ... they were contemporaries but they had been reckoned to completely different levels of evolution. Moreover, there was not the least indication that these societies were degenerated or showed stagnation; they were vital, lively and eager to continue. They apparently followed *different lines* of evolution. Interestingly, neither Service, nor Sahlins, nor Fried, nor Carneiro, drew this obvious conclusion from the data.⁵ ~

¹ Over the last decade I have taken several opportunities to visit the Aborigines in places where certain features of precolonial culture have survived, and was privileged to conduct field studies among them.

² Testart (1988:13) noticed almost the same in a slightly different way: ‘the past, a field of study that has never seemed dishonourable to any discipline other than social anthropology’.

³ See References: CHAGS 6 1990; CHAGS 10 2013; CHAGS 11 2015.

⁴ Available online at www.socionauki.ru.

⁵ Quoted from the English version of the article used for the translation into Russian (emphasis in the original).

Surprisingly, Claessen, and the other authors in the vanguard volume *The alternative ways towards civilization*,⁶ did not follow through with their reasoning and stopped short in coming to a further and a more obvious conclusion. Claessen presented his own evolutionary model as the opposite of the previous sequences (classical evolutionism of the nineteenth century and neo-evolutionism of the twentieth), with his statement,

@@@... a start is made at the beginning of human society, and not (as was usually done) at the highest level of development... The ensuing dynamics led in the course of time to the development of *different evolutionary streams* often connected with specific regions, in which the development of culture and thus of the sociopolitical organization followed *different courses*. (2000:14–15)⁷ ~

However, in the first citation, as well as on the following pages of the same article, we read about *state* and tribal *levels* of social organisation, about more and less *developed* societies and about *limited developments* of *some evolutionary streams*⁸ ('this holds for example for the hunter and gatherer bands, representing the last members of the first evolutionary stream' 2000:15; see also Claessen 2010, 2011).⁹ Logic, however, demands us to ask, *Levels* and *limited developments* with regard to what? Such expressions definitely imply the existence of a hierarchy of stratum and a destination. It must be 'state' for Claessen and 'civilization' for the other authors of the volume and it is difficult to refrain from restating the popular Soviet slogan¹⁰ and of saying ironically, 'Our goal is state!', or 'Our goal is civilization!' In other words, it appears that the 'courses of evolution' are different but the direction is the same, and those who did not reach the stage of civilisation or state remained somewhere half-way or even in the beginning of their 'evolutionary streams'. How then does this position differ from classic evolutionism or the Marxist concept of socioeconomic formations?

Meanwhile, there is no evidence to show that the evolutionary paths which, for example, the Australian Aboriginal societies developed before European colonisation led them in the same direction as the European population's move from the Upper Paleolithic to the early Middle Ages. The issue is not that they advanced slowly but that they proceeded in a different direction. The same could be said about the other hunter-gatherer societies which existed till recent times. As Silberbauer writes about the Bushmen of Kalahari, 'they changed their cultures innumerable times in countless ways. But their foraging strategy persisted' (2006:64).

⁶ The volume was also published in English, but under the bit more cautious title, *Alternatives of social evolution* (2000). Second edn, 2011.

⁷ Emphasis in the original. 'The direction of evolution is open', the same author stated in a recent publication (2014:4).

⁸ Italics hereafter are mine.

⁹ In Claessen's 2014 publication we read of a society that given the 'lack of a favorable ideology ... will *remain on the initial level*' (2014:31).

¹⁰ The words 'Our goal is Communism' could be seen everywhere in the Soviet Union (mostly before 1982).

If we strictly follow Claessen's paradigm, according to which the starting point for any evolutionary models should be seen only in the cradle of human history, and also the ideas of Korotaev, Kradin and Lynsha, according to whom humanity from the very beginning of its history had an 'unlimited number of evolutionary alternatives' (2000:47), then it is necessary to accept that various human societies could advance in different ways, leading not only towards civilisation but also in other directions. This means that ancient human societies had opportunities to not proceed towards civilisation and even to move away from developing productive economies. If we use this line of reasoning, we would not be able to refer to the *limited developments* of hunter-gatherer societies or any others, as nobody had determined and allocated a destination to them.

This is the starting assumption. I am also attracted to the thoughts of a number of scholars which, though they put it in different ways, try to argue that evolutionary choices in concrete historical circumstances were made by societies themselves (Korotaev et al 2000:47, with reference to Wittfogel 1957:12, 17–19, 420; see also Daimond 2005). Of course, one could perceive these words as a sort of personification of societies, implying, what is more, consistency of aims on their part (as if they could have clear aims for a long-range outlook), which is unrealistic and is not meant. However, it seems to be absolutely obvious that reasonably acting and determined individuals, associated in groups, did make historical choices for short-range perspectives and did so deliberately, generation after generation, and that they definitely understood what they were doing, 'experimenting consciously with different social strategies in different contexts', 'being aware of multiple social possibilities' as well as of possible results and consequences of their 'social strategies' (Wengrow and Graeber 2015:603).

The other important point is that while none of the modern hunter-gather cultures might give us the data for straightforward theoretical reconstruction of prehistoric forms of social life, these societies which comply with basic material as well as spiritual human needs show us what forms of social life are possible *in principle* under the conditions of a foraging mode of subsistence. In addition, the social systems of those hunters and gatherers who have preserved their foraging strategies till recent times demonstrate a range of structural elements also seen in a range of other societies that differ with regard to the subsistence mode and economic conditions – from horticulture with natural exchange to modern industries with global market trade. Those structural correspondences are not universal or even regular, but their existence is intimately connected with socio-psychological phenomena, which transcend the boundaries of cultures, epochs, continents and civilisations. That is why the investigation of social organisation of contemporary or recently extant hunters and gatherers may help us not only to modify or update our conceptions of the early evolution of social life, but also may yield useful insights which could contribute to our understanding of our own

cultures and the social relations in which we all participate.¹¹ The following accounts and discussions of inequality are as a result drawn from not just the ethnographies of hunter-gatherers, but also more widely, including contemporary and recent Russian society.

2. Some examples of inequality

In 1897 in the *Australasian Anthropological Journal* a curious article titled ‘Traveling teeth – an aboriginal custom’ was published by Robert Brothers. He wrote about a number of Aboriginal men of ‘high degree’ among the indigenous people of the South Coast of New South Wales. Those men were called *Myell-Wallins*, which meant something like ‘men of no harm’. A special process was employed to formally assign such a status to a man. If the people of a community had decided that someone (a ‘clever native doctor’, a talented artist, poet, or orator, or creator of new songs) was worthy of the title, they would send a messenger to the other communities carrying the distinguished man’s tooth (knocked out at the initiation rite) and a lock of his hair (cut off on the same occasion). The communities who received those items in turn would pass them over to other communities, and in this way those memorabilia would travel across vast spaces among a great number of people making the owner extremely famous and respectable. Many years would pass before those items would come back to the owner. Normally, teeth and hair of an initiated man were kept in secret places so that they could not be used by an evil sorcerer to harm the person concerned. However, the ‘men of no harm’ were out of such a danger. They also could safely travel through all the communities involved in the system. ‘At some time’, a *Myell-Wallin* ‘became a tyrant’ and used his influence over numerous communities (Brothers 1897:8–9).

Howitt (1904:297–299) wrote (using the reports of the two white informants – Gason and Semon) about the man called Jalina-piramurana, the ‘principal headmen’ (*pinnarru-pinnarru*), the ceremonial leader of the Dieri people in the 1860s, a man of ‘persuasive eloquence’, a brave fighting man and a powerful medicine-man. It was he who decided when and where the ‘tribal’ ceremonies were to be held, ‘decided disputes’, and even ‘had the power of giving away young women, not related to him, in marriage’. Even the elder men did not ‘presume’ to interfere with his will. ‘He was greatly feared by his own and the neighboring tribes.’ Howitt himself observed a number of similar cases in the ‘tribes’ to the north and north-east of the Dieri.

¹¹ Perhaps this in a way calls up (or has something in common with?) Harvard psychologists’ Henrich’s, Heine’s and Norenzayan’s (2010) point that much of the data experimental psychologists use to generalise about human behaviour and evolution is drawn from a very small subset of human societies, namely well-educated students in Western universities. Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan are advocates for cross-cultural psycho-social research based on diverse evidence which should include, among others, the data obtained in small-scale foragers’ societies. They also argue that ‘Recognizing the full extent of human diversity does not mean giving up on the quest to understand human nature.’

Bearing in mind Brothers's and Howitt's accounts of differences in social status in Aboriginal society, the author observes that in today's Russia there are no people around her whom she would greatly fear (except for street hooligans) and that nobody can openly force a young girl to marry someone whom she does not want to marry. At the same time, there are clear inequalities when compatriot Roman Abramovich can buy London's football club, Chelsea, and the lonely old lady, also the author's compatriot, never buys white bread, but only black (rye) bread and does not allow others to treat her to a sweet loaf, because she does not want to get accustomed to such a good thing.

In one of the remote Aboriginal communities of north-west Queensland in 2005, I met the woman whom they treated as the local 'queen'. The people, especially women, were fearful of her (for unknown reasons) and they used to hang on her every word. On the other hand, like many others in the community, at times she had nothing to eat for her breakfast (or for dinner, or for supper). Once, she asked the author for a piece of soap and was given one. On the next day she again asked for a piece of soap. She used the first one only once, and then gave it to someone else, and the soap started to change hands.

So, how can we compare various forms and types of social inequality and how can we measure them? How can we speak about more or less developed or elaborate or complex systems of social inequality? Perhaps there are no dimensions for such phenomena. We can only search for the spectacular manifestations of them, and mostly we search for manifestations, clearly connected to the sphere of material possessions, or material wealth, or money, because that is familiar to us, very common and comprehensible.

3. Not 'the origin' of inequality but factors that might have caused diverse forms of inequality

As Ames wrote,

@@@archaeologists generally assume that egalitarianism is the default human social organization in small-scale societies, and they take the absence of evidence for permanent inequality as evidence for egalitarianism. Thus, the archaeology of egalitarianism is based on negative evidence. Evidence for inequality is primarily material wealth, and there is little or no evidence of economic differentiation before 24,000 years ago. (2010b: 35; and see Bowles et al 2010:7) ~

If the date of 24,000 years ago refers to the Sungir burials (an Upper Paleolithic site near Vladimir town, Russia),¹² then all those rich mammoth ivory ornaments which had been found in the three graves there do not necessarily demonstrate economic inequality. They only show that for some reason a lot of people had worked hard to

¹² According to recent radiocarbon estimates, the age of Sungir burials is at least 28,000 BP (Trinkaus et al 2015:221–231).

produce those things; we cannot know that those grave goods represented personal possessions of the people buried there. We cannot even be sure that the people buried there had some special status in the community, as has been argued (cf. Wengrow and Graeber 2015:605). Maybe the inhabitants of Sungir used to bury everybody in the same way. No other burials have been found there and so there is no comparative information from this settlement. As a result, we should not regard the data from Sungir as evidence of inherited inequality, although we agree with Wengrow and Graeber who state that Sungir burials as well as certain other ‘rich’ burials at Upper Paleolithic sites in Europe (Dolní Věstonice in Moravia, Abri Pataud in Dordogne, or Grimaldi in Liguria) ‘reveal the existence of elaborate and creative ritual practices, for which little evidence exists in earlier periods of human prehistory’ (ibid).

Because there is very little archaeological evidence of economic differentiation among Upper Palaeolithic and later hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic, we still see the titles of books and articles about social inequality which include such words as ‘origin’, ‘beginning’, ‘creation’, or ‘emergence’ (eg, Smith 2007; Price and Feinman 2010; Honick and Orians 2012; Flannery and Marcus 2012). Those words themselves as well as the term ‘transegalitarian societies’ (Clarke and Blake 1989; Hayden 2001, 2014) imply that it is taken for granted that during some period in human evolution inequality did not exist. Yet, ever since Hobbes or even long before him various philosophers and historians have *a priori* regarded inequality as inherent in human nature. Contemporary sociobiology and human ethology support this assumption, and some archaeologists are inclined to accept it as a starting point in examining past social dynamics (eg, Kelly 1995:330; 2013; Ames 2010a; Hayden 2014:chapter 1).

Perhaps we should search not for the origin or creation of social inequality, but rather for factors that might have caused a specific form or type of social inequality to develop and for mechanisms which might have shaped specific structural features of hierarchical social systems. We should also inquire into the reasons underlying the development of egalitarian social systems (Cashdan 1980; Boehm 1993, 1999, 2012; Wiessner 1996; Trigger 2003; Ames 2010a; Kelly 2013). Egalitarianism is no less a product of specific evolutionary processes than is the elaboration of various forms of social inequality.

Different mechanisms of structuring hierarchical systems may act in parallel in the same society or could be specific to particular cultures in particular periods, and could have foundations in the sphere of material production as well as outside this sphere. For example, in some Melanesian societies one may find simultaneously: (1) delayed-return as a characteristic feature of the subsistence mode, one which, according to Woodburn (1980, 1982), inevitably brings about institutions of status hierarchy and structured inequality in property relations; (2) the activity of ‘aggrandizers’ (big men in this case), stimulating the development of the same institutions (eg, Clarke and Blake 1994; Hayden 1995, 2001, 2014); and (3) complicated ceremonial practices, also producing ranking of status or authority positions (eg, Owens and Hayden 1997; Wason and Baldia 2000; Hayden and Villeneuve 2005). While the society of the Chukchi

reindeer herders conforms only to the delayed-return model and the ‘accumulation of wealth’ model (eg, Bogoraz 1991:19–23), some Australian hunter-gatherer societies only support the ceremonial status differentiation model (eg, Warner 1958; Keen 1997). The latter is especially interesting from the theoretical standpoint as it demonstrates, in the purest and least complicated form, one of the main types of institutionalised social conditions of inequality that is found worldwide.

4. Monopolisation of knowledge as a mechanism structuring inequality

It is a commonplace that Australian Aboriginal societies have quite diverse cultures. Nevertheless, it seems to be obvious that with respect to a number of features, social systems of Australian hunters and gatherers could be characterised together, as a whole, though in reality they constituted a sort of continuum between, say, the Yolngu, whose culture represented the phenomena under consideration in strongly pronounced forms, and the Pintupi, in whose culture those phenomena existed in less pronounced forms.

In economic terms, most Aboriginal groups preserving precolonial lifestyles conformed to Woodburn’s model of immediate-return systems (1980, 1982, 1988a, 1988b).¹³ There was no institutionalised inequality in either material possessions or material wealth among them, and all of them followed the norms of ‘demand sharing’ and ‘minimization of efforts’ in their economical behaviour (Peterson 1993, 2002). They always used to ‘act according to the *satisficing* principle’ whereby, as Svizzero and Tisdell put it, ‘he/she does not try to maximise his/her utility but he/she tries to reach a pre-determined level of satisfaction. Once this threshold is reached, any additional work becomes useless’ (2015:18).¹⁴ These behavioural patterns tend to be quite persistent (eg, Peterson 2013), and I have often observed them in aboriginal settlements such as Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, and Milingimbi in Cape York and Arnhem Land, where people, despite having lost many ritual and sociopolitical traditions, do not try to obtain more food, be it from the forest, the river, the department stores, or ‘take-aways’, than they need at the concurrent moment. Nor do they take care of personal belongings, or accumulate them, or show interest in them.

At the same time, most of the Australian Aborigines had in precolonial contexts a system of social organisation which was definitely non-egalitarian, though it is not

¹³ There are archaeological data that allow some scholars to assume that in separate areas of South-East Australia the processes of the so-called intensification of economic activity took place in certain periods of Aboriginal history (eg, Lourandos 1997). As Smith (1999:327) wrote, ‘It seems Australian hunter-gatherer societies moved toward a different social and economic mode in some parts of the continent in the postglacial period but it was not a unilinear process nor was it continuous or uniform across the continent.’ Nor was something of this kind, as far as I know, observed by ethnographers among traditionally oriented Aborigines.

¹⁴ Using the term ‘*satisficing* principle’, Svizzero and Tisdell refer to Simon 1947.

so widely accepted in the literature. But unlike the authors of some neo-evolutionist studies (Fried 1967; Service 1975) as well as the subsequent writers, especially those anthropologists who study Australian Aboriginal cultures in Australia, I use the term 'egalitarian society' in its direct sense: a society in which all the people have equal access to all material and spiritual values of their culture and have equal personal freedom and equal opportunities for decision-making. Respectively, the societies to which this definition does not apply are referred to as 'non-egalitarian'. Concerning this, I am absolutely united with Gardner who writes, 'it astonishes me to read that ... the such-and-such people "are egalitarian, except, of course, in regard to age and sex". What enormous exceptions! It is hard to imagine how the term egalitarian came to be used for people in systems having such asymmetrical statuses and such unequal privileges' (2006:33).

Among the Australian Aborigines considerable differences in social status existed between men and women, and if the norms and customs which regulated gender relations in these societies are compared with those practised by the Mbuti, the Hadza, the Batek, or the Paliyar, it is immediately apparent what real equality of gender status, rights and obligations means. There was also considerable difference among Australian Aborigines in social status between men making up the group of 'elders' on the one hand and all the remaining men on the other. Among the elders, there were men of special individual status: ritual leaders, custodians, or guardians of sacred objects and totemic centres, sorcerers and 'native doctors', and some others.

One of the debated issues is whether the Australian Aborigines had secular formal leaders in traditional situations. Contrary to some writers' attempts to disprove this, it appears that at least in some parts of the country heads of local groups or camps (or of some other units) did exist. Besides, as Strehlow and the Berndts have argued, religious leaders often enjoyed considerable authority beyond the ritual sphere, and there was no clear-cut distinction between secular and religious affairs or between secular and religious *authority* in the Aboriginal culture. According to Keen's description of traditional Yolngu societies, 'control of religious knowledge had been a key element in the political economy of marriage, country, and ceremony. There was a direct link between religious prerogatives and power' (1997:300; also see Keen 2004:393).

Australian Aborigines definitely had a system of regular and formalised positions of authority which can only be described as a hierarchy. A crucial element of this system was the initiation rite whereby special secret/sacred knowledge was imparted to individuals. Only men who had passed at least the primary stages of the initiation rites and had absorbed some esoteric knowledge concerned with religious cults gained authority over women and adolescents. The elders were men who had passed all or nearly all stages of the initiation rites. However, certain aspects of religious knowledge were reserved for particular types of religious leaders. 'Professional' magicians, sorcerers and 'native doctors' also acquired special esoteric information during the special initiation rites (eg, Elkin 1978).

All those structural status differences were *marked symbolically*. The higher ranks were allowed special *names* or a sort of title and to wear special decorations or ornaments (very often on the *head* or around the *waist*). As well, some ineradicable marks or scars on the *body* were common.

In some sense, the initiation rites divided the people in aboriginal societies into several status categories. All ideological legacy, too, was divided into several sections, some of which were accessible to everybody, while others were reserved for those belonging to specific status categories. The secrecy of esoteric knowledge was guarded by numerous elaborate taboos, the violation of which incurred severe punishments, and also by means of a special method which could be termed *prescribed or sanctioned misinformation*. Many years ago Beckett described this phenomenon as ‘noble lies’ (1977: xi.). Those who had passed the initiation rites and had gained some knowledge of secret affairs deliberately conveyed to outsiders false ideas about the esoteric sections of their culture (eg, Peterson 2013:167–169). This deception, in contrast to ordinary lies, was regarded as necessary and considered to be proper since it was viewed as a *prerequisite* of success in magic rites and totemic cult rituals. Being prescribed and sanctioned by religion, deception was a means of maintaining and enhancing the social supremacy of those who practised it and, in some situations, even a means of psychological compulsion since the uninitiated had to obey the initiated, at least in a number of special situations.¹⁵

It may be concluded that a classless society without private property, one which did not even produce any material surplus and had powerful mechanisms preventing accumulation of material wealth by individuals or groups, was able, nevertheless, to build up rather effective mechanisms of social differentiation in ways similar to those existing in so-called civilised societies, where specific social groups monopolise certain sections of information and especially prestigious occupations. Apparently, to create such mechanisms it is unnecessary for a society to have followed a path towards the development of a productive economy with surpluses in food or material wealth. *The monopolisation of special knowledge and occupations per se* was a powerful force that generated social inequality.

In a nomadic foraging society, social inequality can hardly assume more complex and developed forms than it did among Australian Aborigines. Perhaps, this was due neither to the lack of sophisticated foraging techniques nor to the absence of material surplus, but simply to the low population density and to small group size. These were the likely reasons why the mechanisms of status differentiation described above affected mostly gender relationships among the Australian Aborigines.

¹⁵ All these phenomena are discussed in detail by the author in two of her books published in Russian (Апремова 1987, 2009). The book of 2009 has an extensive *summary* in English. The book represents a cross-cultural study of the social systems of a number of hunter-gatherer societies – African and Asian as well as Australian ones. In both books, dealing with the Australian data, the author refers to numerous cases of individual or collective behaviour, which Boehm calls ‘reverse dominance hierarchy’ (1993, 1999).

It is very important to emphasise that the phenomena under consideration could and very often did exist without any paraphernalia that would leave evidence in the archaeological record, although some data from European Upper Paleolithic sites, for example the Franco-Cantabrian caves, might be interpreted as indirect evidence of similar forms of inequality (eg, Bender 1989; Owens and Hayden 1997; Hayden and Villeneuve 2005). Other archaeological records also exist ‘revealing small-scale societies who seem to exhibit some degree of inequality but lack many of the other traits associated with complexity’ (Ames 2010a:16–19; and see Kelly 2013).

5. Archaic syndrome?

In Russian ethnological literature, parallels have been drawn repeatedly between the so-called ‘primeval hierarchical systems’, on the one hand, and spontaneous hierarchical internal structures of the so-called extreme groups, on the other. By the term ‘extreme groups’ they mean closed social formations, very often organised violently or compulsively. The most common examples are male associations in prisons or work camps and typical army subdivisions of the Soviet Union and in modern Russia. As the examples of ‘primeval systems’, various secret male societies were cited such as those of West Africa and Melanesia or age classes of East African pastoralists. As a rule, such comparisons were limited to the external or exterior aspects of the phenomena and particularly to the semantic similarities, which sometimes were very striking.

For example, ‘extreme groups’¹⁶ of the modern Russian Army – carefully studied by Bannikov (2002) – represent self-replicating and rigidly stratified associations. A sort of initiation rite, often accompanied by various painful tests or ordeals, is the obligatory condition of passage from the low strata to the higher ones. Members of a particular stratum have a sort of title, such as ‘young’ – those belonging to one of the low strata – or ‘grand fathers’ – those belonging to one of the higher strata. Status differences are marked symbolically. The head and the waist are the crucial points of differentiation: how to wear the garrison cap; how to turn the star on the cap; how to wear the soldier’s belt; how to manipulate with the belt shield, and so on. All these things are regulated and ritualised in detail. Such norms are extremely numerous and many are of the kind unsuitable for description in public.

Russian ethnologists often tend to discuss various similarities and even coincidences between modern (definitely created anew, independently, relatively recently) and traditional forms of ritualised behaviour in terms of the so-called archaic syndrome, which definitely implies something mysterious or reappearing like a phoenix from the ashes of immemorial times. According to such an approach, the conditions or the reasons for the reappearance or renewal of this ‘archaic syndrome’ are connected with a situation of deep cultural and socio-economic crisis which Russia experienced recently and is still experiencing. Some authors even wrote about the similarities between ‘subcultures’ of

¹⁶ In another publication Bannikov (2000) used the term ‘outlying groups’.

the inhabitants of Soviet/Russian prisons or work camps and the cultures of ‘savages’ studied by ethnographers (eg, Samoiylov 1990:96–108).

The issue of the expression of these extreme forms of behaviour is probably more complicated than a simple response to these kinds of stress. Perhaps a crisis situation proclaims itself only in those ugly, cruel, perverted morals and manners which accompany spontaneous hierarchical structures in the army or in penitentiary institutions. Neither the idea of the ‘archaisation of mentality’ nor the notion of ‘archetypes’ really help us to understand the phenomena under consideration. Structures of this type have been formed and still emerge, again and again, in various situations and times, in different parts of the world, in quite diverse circumstances, including economic, political, cultural and ideological conditions. We can find these phenomena in the ethnographic descriptions of several other cultures of nomadic hunters and gatherers such as the Ona and the Yagan of Terra del Fuego (Gusinde 1975; Lothrop 1928; Bridges 1948; Cooper 1946, et al) in the secret male society, ‘Duk-Duk’ (Banks Islands) at the beginning of the twentieth century; in a typical mediaeval Russian monastery or Catholic European monastic orders; in the Russian aristocratic Masonic lodge at the beginning of nineteenth century; in modern English privileged male schools; in numerous powerful criminal organisations; in small bands of Moscow street hooligans; and in the former Soviet Communist Party, especially in its Central Committee, which became famous throughout the rest of society for its countless secrets and constant dissemination of misinformation.

Searching for the explanation of the essence of such a phenomenon Kabo wrote, ‘I think that structures common for all human beings lie in the basis’ of it – ‘the same structures both in space and in time. Exactly these structures produce in different human groups and in different times certain universal phenomena of social relations and spiritual life – phenomena, which bring together modern and ancient cultures’ (1990:111).

This approach seems to be much more profound than the idea of the archaic syndrome. A single ‘but’, however, exists. Certainly, hierarchical systems of this type tend to recur in time and space due to some common socio-psychological factors. But those socio-psychological factors produce hierarchic social structures not everywhere and not always.

Bannikov repeatedly quotes soldiers’ curious utterances which show their belief that in irregular dominant relations within the Russian army only their perverted forms are wrong, but the amateur division into ‘junior’ and ‘senior’ itself is correct, useful and necessary to people (as well as relations of subordination within this system). The author, however, allows herself to respond somewhat humorously: perhaps such a division is useful and necessary not to people generally, but only to men. Apart from African female secret societies and widely spread female monasteries and religious orders which are likely to be a direct imitation of male ones (cf. Abernethy 2007:129), the author cannot recall any female organisations of a closed, secret corporate character with inner hierarchies, rites of initiation, monopolisation of information and sanctioned

misinformation. Of course, to be confident in this observation one needs dedicated research, and those who have made the effort have found little evidence to challenge my experience (eg, Tiger and Fowler 2007). It is evident that the overwhelming majority of organisations of such types develop either in entirely male groups or in those where males are prevalent. In his provoking and in a sense sensational book *Men in groups*, Tiger tried to find proof that structures of such types, developing during male activity, respond to some deep psychological need of males – males, *united* (voluntarily or violently, no matter) into *groups* (cf. Tiger 2004; first and second edn, 1969, 1978). Maybe he was right. However, it is very important to emphasise that even among such men groups, be they ‘extreme’ or ‘non-extreme’, these structures are not ubiquitous nor is their development inevitable.

Dostoyevsky (1862) in *The house of the dead* did not describe anything comparable in terms of extreme hierarchical structures. Kabo, who had been imprisoned in Stalin’s times, had not experienced anything of that kind. Many other Gulag prisoners also did not report the existence of self-replicating hierarchical structures. As one of the compilers of *The history of pre-revolutionary Russia in life-journals and memoirs* (Zayonchakovsky 1976–1989, vols 1–4), I have read numerous reports from Russian exiles and political prisoners of nineteenth–twentieth century transition and found no evidence of self-replicating hierarchical structures.

To return to hunter-gatherers, it is well known that those societies which I call egalitarian (like the Baka, the Mbuti, the Zu/’hoansi, the G/wi, the G//ana, the Nharo, the Batek and the Paliyar) lacked such phenomena and they were absent in a number of non-egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies. I found nothing of the kind in the ethnographies on the Nganasan, the Ket, the Yukagir, the Ulch, the Nanayi, the Nivkh and several other Siberian hunters and fishers, though some of them manifested more or less pronounced forms of economic inequality. There are also cultures which lack hierarchical closed corporations, lack monopolisation of socially important information and lack sanctioned misinformation, and which are *not hunter-gatherer cultures*. Powerful and prestigious closed corporations, which monopolise certain social knowledge, may or may not develop in societies with the same subsistence or production mode (or belong to the same socio-economic formation). However, such corporations may exist in societies of vastly different types, specifically those differing with regard to subsistence mode and economic levels, whatever typology is used: among foragers or among shifting agriculturists as well as in modern industrialised societies divided into classes, or in those which attempted to eradicate classes and private property, as happened in the Soviet Union.

If we set ourselves the task to understand why in some occasions such structures develop and in some others they do not, we will probably succeed in a number of cases. But for different cases different explanations will be worked out. For example, presumably, at the time of Dostoyevsky, penal servitude was not so strictly separated from the whole society as Soviet prisons/work-camps and Soviet/Russian army units were and are. There were no rigid restraints which such structures needed. In Stalin’s

camps such separation took place, but this powerful regime did not tolerate the development of self-replicating organisation among prisoners. There is one observation to be made of higher importance: even if we remain in the framework of one culture we will not be able to make conceptual judgments which would explain all the cases in existence or absence of such phenomena in seemingly analogous circumstances. So what generalisations can be made?

However, one general consideration arises from Tiger's research: if he was right arguing that these corporations were more often created by males (and correlated with low status of females) it was because they largely result from male activities motivated by some intrinsic male psychological needs. And if he was right when he searched for the roots of those needs in the ethology of primates, then we might assume that where this phenomenon is absent it reflects deliberate, persistent, systematic efforts directed at its suppression. That would be the suppression of an inherent component of human nature to produce regular and formalised secrecy, as well as formal division into strata accompanied by the relations of subordination between them. Those efforts might be undertaken either by the people themselves (including males), as it was in the case of the Palyar and other egalitarian foragers,¹⁷ or by some external forces, as it is in the case of contemporary Russia, where certain state institutions and a number of public organisations (the Union of Soldiers' Mothers, for example) struggle against the irregular dominant relations within the army, and occasionally they do succeed.

Perhaps it is not accidental that participants of various democratic movements striving for equality often aim, along with other goals, at eliminating any regular and institutionalised secrecy. This was the case in Russia when during the Perestroika 'glasnost' (publicity, openness,) was the most popular slogan, and many people really strived for openness of any socially important information.

The aspiration for social equality seems to be one of the most ancient achievements of human culture. It appears very early in written sources coming from different parts of the world, and probably had emerged long before literacy had been created and spread. Not many societies or special separate communities within broad social arrangements have proved that social equality is really possible to gain. Some small-scale hunter-gatherer societies managed to do that, and because of their egalitarianism they have developed very stable and peaceful social systems lacking the disposition for self-destruction. These truly egalitarian societies were the result of conscious and persistent efforts of over many generations. In other words, they were the product of historical choices. As Gardner writes 'Readers who have browsed in the social philosophy of earlier centuries may, at this point, remember Lao Tzu's 'primal virtue',

¹⁷ Conscious use of so-called levelling strategies in those societies has been described in many ethnographies and discussed in theoretical publications, especially in those devoted to the investigation of development and elaboration of inequality in human social life. It is impossible to list them all, so we can only refer to some of them selectively (Bieseke 1999:208; Boehm 1993, 1999, 2012; Cashdan 1980; Gardner 1966, 2002, 2012; Endicott 1981, 1988; Lee 1979:245–248; Marshall 1976:194–195; Silberbauer 1982; Tanaka and Sugawara 1999:198; Turnbull 1965; Wiessner 1996; Woodburn 1979, 1980, 1982).

William Godwin's prescription for 'political justice' or Herbert Spencer's 'first principle'. Each of these thinkers advanced as his central idea, the notion that people should live virtuously, avoid disrespect, coercion, or domination in social relations. Can one *really* live that way? Actually, Paliyans showed the author that one can' (2006:33).

6. Why some hunter-gatherer societies were egalitarian and some were not

Of great importance to this discussion is the fact that the egalitarianism of some African and Asian hunter-gatherer societies, on the one hand, and non-egalitarianism of indigenous Australians on the other, is in some complex way correlated with a number of other considerable differences between these two groups of societies.

Numerous ethnographies of non-egalitarian Australian societies have demonstrated the relative severity of sanctions following the violation of 'native law' (especially if connected with sacra) as well as injury caused to a person or a kin group (obligatory retaliation) (eg, Spencer and Gillen 1899; Warner 1958; Strehlow 1965, 1970). Also observed were relatively high levels of institutionalised aggression in the form of culturally shaped warfare (eg, Berndt and Berndt 1977; Elkin 1979; McKnight 2005). Families and kin groups also showed relatively fast bonding and mutual dependence (eg, Maddock 1972; Berndt and Berndt 1977; Elkin 1979; McKnight 2005). The last phenomenon could be conventionally called thickness or solidity of social milieu.

In contrast, among egalitarian societies sanctions following various breaches of social norms were mostly of a moral kind; special elaborated mechanisms of eliminating aggression existed (those were very interestingly analysed in Russian by Khazankov [2002]); and their social milieu could be called relatively fluid or flimsy: a high level of personal autonomy ('individualism' or 'atomism') and relatively weak bonds between the people in residential groups were recorded by observers (eg, Gardner 1966; Guenther 2006:79; Morris 1982; Norström 2003:227–228).

Why then did different systems of social relations exist in foraging societies which practised the same or very similar subsistence strategies? Why has a hierarchy of institutionalised authority developed in some hunter-gatherer societies rather than in others? Why have the so-called social levelling mechanisms been created in some societies but not in others? None of these questions appears to have been resolved notwithstanding a number of special discussions.

First, it is necessary to note that as far as this author is aware not many scholars have paid attention to these clear differences between the Australian societies and those which are called egalitarian in this account, as well as to the data on some other non-egalitarian hunters and gatherers with immediatereturn systems, for example, the Ona and the Yagan of Terra del Fuego as they were described in early accounts of the second part of nineteenth century. According to those descriptions, the Fuegians

had a number of cultural peculiarities, especially in the ritual sphere, that strikingly resembled those recorded in Australia (Gusinde 1975; Lothrop 1928; Bridges 1948).

Discussions dedicated to egalitarianism, as well as to the other cultural traits of the egalitarian societies listed above, tend to focus primarily on the Hadza and on various groups of Kalahari Bushmen who are perceived in their social relations as representing a generic form of egalitarianism. Some scholars think that contemporary or recent ‘simple’ foragers have brought their egalitarian relations and peacefulness from extreme antiquity to the present and that these societies represent a once universal form of social relations (eg, Boehm 1993, 1999, 2012; Flannery and Marcus 2012). Others, to the contrary, assume that egalitarianism, as it is presented by Lee, Cashdan, Weissner, Woodburn and many others, is absolutely a derived phenomenon; a kind of evolutionary deviation resulting from adapting to unfavourable habitats characterised by scarce resources and harsh climates or to unfavourable social settings with hostile and more powerful neighbours all around, so-called encapsulation – or to both simultaneously.

Thus, Sassaman, expressing his ‘skepticism’ ‘over the evolutionary status of Kalahari foragers’ and following Wilmsen,¹⁸ Denbow and some others, asserts that ‘primitive’ societies of the ethnographic present are best understood as ‘components, not antecedents, of complex societies’ (2004:229, 237). Not wishing to return to Kalahari debates, which, fortunately, have stayed in the past, it is worth reminding ourselves that the arguments of the opponents of Wilmsen and Denbow were founded on reliable data, including archaeological evidence (eg, Sadr 1997).

The other example is Russian researcher Khazankov (2002) who searched for the causes of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism in the peculiarities of the natural environment, and he did pay a good deal of attention to the Australian Aborigines in the course of cross-cultural comparisons. His argument was that those people who lived in the deserts, in conditions of lack of water and other recourses, needed to maintain peaceful relations, and the best way to obtain peace was to eliminate any differences in social statuses, to exclude any competition from everyday life. Aborigines mostly lived in relatively favourable environments, and they could allow themselves social inequality and warfare while Kalahari and some other hunters and gatherers of desert or semi-desert areas could not (Khazankov refers also to some groups of Shoshone Indians who lived in the desert regions of North America). However, one might object that some non-egalitarian and non-peaceful Aboriginal groups lived in very harsh environments in western and central Australian deserts,¹⁹ and some egalitarian foragers lived in relatively good natural environments (forests, savanna), as in the case of the Baka, the Batek, the Hadza and the Paliyar.

¹⁸ See Black 2010. This title of Black’s article, ‘The book filled with lies’, is an obvious allusion to the title of Wilmsen’s book *The land filled with flies* (1989).

¹⁹ Khazankov considered the Aboriginal groups of the desert parts of Australia to be peaceful and egalitarian, but in fact they were not. This statement is easy to support by the evidence from the publications of Strehlow, Berndt and Berndt, Myers and others.

On the whole, it looks like the most original and the most profound approach to these problems has been proposed by Woodburn (1980, 1982, 1988a, 1988b) who has undertaken a thorough study of the subject, using, among other things, much data on Australian Aboriginal societies. His ideas were elaborated more than 30 years ago, and they continue to be influential and relevant to the issue. He discussed the problem in terms of his general distinction between societies with immediate-return economic systems and those with delayed-return ones. From a theoretical standpoint, this typology is highly noteworthy in that it denies any direct correlation between the subsistence mode, on the one hand, and the economic system or the social system as a whole, on the other. Thereby it challenges oversimplified theories of human evolution, it rejects also any direct correlation between subsistence mode and ecological environment, as well as it rejects encapsulation as a factor capable to explain all the cases of ethnographically described egalitarianism. As Barnard stated, Woodburn's model 'rejects technology as a major factor and downplays the role of environment'. Instead, the model sets up ideology as 'the causative principle' (1983:205). Partly guided by this approach, I offer some further considerations on the role of ideology.

Without doubt both the egalitarianism of African and Asian hunters and gatherers and the non-egalitarianism of Australian Aborigines are caused by complex combinations of factors. It appears, however, that one of the crucial factors is the *degree of intensity of social life*, in particular collective rituals and inter-community contacts. In none of the egalitarian societies mentioned above were these spheres of activity as elaborate as in the traditional societies of the Australian Aborigines in the northern, eastern and south-eastern parts of the continent. Long-sophisticated religious ceremonies often formed elaborate cycles. There were traditional *corrobories* (communal dances) with numerous participants from various communities, a network of inter-group ceremonial exchange which extended over vast areas of the continent, and comparatively frequent warfare among neighbouring groups who on such occasions formed special parties of warriors (eg, revenge expeditions). All this required close social ties, clear-cut structural principles of group composition, and certain organisational efforts as well. Wherever people were divided into active and passive participants, and wherever leaders and organisers of collective social activities came to the fore, rules or norms of subordination were formed. These in turn progressively affected social life in all its spheres, including in the economy.

To paraphrase Berndt and Berndt (1977:519), it is especially significant what people do outside the sphere of necessity. Among the Aborigines, the overwhelming proportion of activity spent outside the sphere of necessity was taken up with their religious cults and other spiritual occupations. We often underestimate what a powerful factor the so-called non-utilitarian activity is for the entire social development. Engagement in these activities appears to be one of the main psychological requirements of human beings. It is not, as a rule, demanded by the real needs of current life but, in the end, leads people out to new levels of cultural achievements (Asmolov 1986).

Intense ideological activities and elaborate collective rites not merely provided the Aborigines with opportunities to develop and accumulate their rich ideological heritage, but also provided the means for the creation of hierarchical relationships and mechanisms of social differentiation.

Important factors that enhanced intense social life and collective religious practices in particular among Australian Aborigines included a relatively favourable ecological situation in many parts of the country, and the availability of vast areas of land where members of various groups could come into contact and form viable alliances. This combination of factors was lacking in other huntergatherer societies mentioned above. However, it is hardly possible to reduce all the variations in the intensity of social life among hunters and gatherers under consideration to ecological, social, or cultural factors (the last include isolation or lack thereof). Apparently all these factors, no matter whether we consider them separately or jointly, fail to account for the differences observed.

Different peoples create different cultures not only because they live in different environments (natural and cultural) and have different historical backgrounds, but also for other complex and poorly understood reasons partly related to the largely uninvestigated sphere of psychological phenomena. Metaphorically speaking, each culture, like each man or each woman, is unique, and this uniqueness is the outcome of a host of factors, some of which are possibly undefinable in scientific terms (though cf. Henrich et al 2010).

7. What about prehistory?

I agree with those scholars who assume that none of the forager cultures analysed or mentioned above provides a background for a valid reconstruction of the remote past (eg, Sassaman 2004, Smith et al 2010:20), but still we cannot proceed in our preconceptions about human social evolution without referring to these cultures, and I allow myself to offer some assumptions concerning prehistoric hunter-gatherers – assumptions which are based on the data discussed above.

In 1999 Boehm wrote, ‘before twelve thousand years ago, humans basically were egalitarian [reference to Knauff 1991]. They lived in what might be called societies of equals, with minimal political centralization and no social classes. Everyone participated in group decisions, and outside the family there were no dominators’ (1999:3–4; and see also 1993, 2012).²⁰

²⁰ It looks like Boehm’s position in this issue did not change till present, though he, as some other scholars, thinks that the ‘egalitarian mode of behaviour’ was not inherited by humans from their animal ancestors, but was created anew because of adaptive necessities, and that such behaviour was universally spread among hunters and gatherers during particular periods or at particular stages of prehistory (see also Flannery and Marcus 2012). Boehm searched for the proofs for his hypothesis not only in ethnographies of egalitarian foragers, but also more widely in societies of quite diverse types

The ethnographic data on Australian Aborigines, and not only on them alone, induce us to doubt Boehm's hypothesis. That does not mean, however, that the 'Australian model' could be proposed as the starting point (or some universal evolutionary stage) of the further elaboration of social structures, as a whole, and of various forms of inequality and political systems, in particular, in the course of human history. The Australian data only show us what forms of social life are possible *in principle* under the conditions of a foraging mode of subsistence lacking any manifestations of intensification of economic activity and other traits of culture which could be interpreted as signs of developing complexity.²¹

The same should be stated with respect to the 'egalitarian model'. We cannot overthrow the forms of the egalitarian relations of the Paliyar, or the Baka, the Mbuti, the Zu/'hoansi, the G/wi, the G//ana, the Nharo and the Batek into the deep past of Europe or any other part of the world, the more so because their cultures differed from each other in many respects, but we must admit that Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic hunters could develop egalitarian social systems, and we must assume that they really did develop such systems in various periods and in different areas on the earth. We also are to assume that egalitarian and non-egalitarian systems in quite diverse cultural contexts, different natural environments and various geographical locations of Oecumene were coming and going an innumerable number of times throughout many millennia of prehistory.

I am very much attracted by Wengrow's and Graeber's call on the scholars dealing with human prehistory not to limit their perception of early human societies within the frames of such oversimplified binary oppositions between whether our early ancestors

@@@... were simple and egalitarian or complex and stratified? ... These questions blind us to what really makes us human, which is our capacity – as moral and social beings – to negotiate between such alternatives ... we do not have to choose between an egalitarian or hierarchical start to the human story. (2015:613) ~

It would be tempting to agree with them, but there are several caveats. First, there were many starts in human history, not one. The crucial evolutionary changes, such as the beginnings of agriculture in a number of geographical centres, for example, or even shifts to so-called complexity among 'simple' hunters and gatherers in various parts of the world needed special deeply rooted and very steady predispositions in social systems. Those predispositions could be a combination of unique demographic and social factors that developed in a particular socio-psychological climate specific to a place and time. We may not have in our limited ethnographic record the parallels for the variety of the pathways to complexity taken in the past.

– he sought forms of behaviour by means of which people used to restrain despotic leaders and other dominant individuals or groups ('reverse dominance hierarchy' – 1993, 1999). His way of reasoning seems to be very vulnerable to critics, but here, however, is not the place to discuss it.

²¹ The notion of *complexity* is much debated among social anthropologists and archaeologists (see, for example, Sassaman 2004:231–236; Boehm and Flack 2010; Hayden 2014). These debates are not directly relevant to this current discussion, which is dedicated to quite different problems.

The other important objection deals with the idea of flexibility and the assertion that in reality we often cannot draw a clear distinction between egalitarian and non-egalitarian systems. Such a position is illustrated by the ethnographic examples from a number of hunter-gatherer, herding and horticultural societies which in different periods of their economic cycles in different seasons or simply in different temporally experienced circumstances practised different modes of behaviour, different styles of relations and different forms of political approaches to decision-making – oscillating between egalitarian and non-egalitarian ones (Wengrow and Graeber 2015:603–604, and others).

It looks like in all stratified societies, or more broadly in societies with institutionalised inequality, in some periods and in some circumstances, or in some temporally created associations, or in some special social milieux, people use (and used) various modes of behaviour and various rules which are intended to eliminate competition and to put all the persons or groups concerned in equal positions. All of us know and have experienced how various tools of social levelling work. Wengrow and Graeber are right in arguing that those tools should have been invented, elaborated, and consciously used early in the evolution of humanity. But if the same people in different circumstances or in different times are (were) involved in relations characterised by formalised hierarchy, they definitely belong (belonged) to a non-egalitarian society.

Those societies which are considered to be egalitarian here have managed to avoid inequality at various times and circumstances. To achieve that they needed the persistent, long-term efforts of many determined people over generations, and they had to choose many times during their history between those achieved egalitarian ways of life and an inherent nature to produce formalised inequality. That determination would also apply when faced with adjacent societies with alien social systems. In making such choices they doomed themselves to stay in small-scale associations (perhaps unconsciously) and to reject (perhaps consciously)²² many attractive and exciting endeavours as well as attempts to obtain more material wealth and comfort. Perhaps this is why we know of very few egalitarian societies in the ethnographic record. They may also never have been numerous at any phase of human prehistory. The properties of being internally stable and lacking the disposition for self-destruction may have made them paradoxically vulnerable to outsiders whose social systems were quite different.

Those researchers, who worked amongst hunters and gatherers in the field, repeatedly reported that many of them aspired to be autonomous, avoided contact with outsiders, and worked out special strategies to achieve this. They usually lived in re-

²² For example, Silberbauer wrote, ‘G/wi informants and I often discussed the choices before them; those who lived permanently in Central Kalahari Reserve always expressed their preference for their way of living ... They had opportunities to go to cattle-posts or ranches.

Some did so, either permanently or temporarily. For the latter, and for those who remained in their territories, their customary social, political and economic arrangements that constituted an independent way of life were more attractive and rewarding than were the alternatives that a ranch and cattle-post offered’ (2006:64).

mote localities and sometimes in very disadvantageous natural environments, because they were consciously hiding themselves in such places rather than because they were pushed there by others (eg, Woodburn 1979, 1980, 1982; Gardner 2006; Silberbauer 2006; Hitchcock and Babchuk 2007). They were lucky to find such places, while probably many prehistoric egalitarian societies were not.

The last but not least challenge is that if we are interested in how people had come to complexity we have to choose between an egalitarian or hierarchical start. The start should have been for certain a non-egalitarian one, and the forms of inequality should have been principally dissimilar to those which were observed ethnographically among non-egalitarian hunter-gatherers (such as the Australian Aborigines). As Testart (1988:13) put it very elegantly referring to ethnographically studied hunter-gatherers, they ‘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’. In particular, the forms of inequality connected with the monopolisation of information, which existed among the Australian Aborigines as discussed above, do not per se create predispositions for complexity. Not only in egalitarian huntergatherer societies, but also in the Australian Aboriginal ones, powerful social mechanisms existed preventing intensification of economic activity (satisficing principle), the accumulation of wealth by individuals or groups and development of material disparity. What needed to happen within ancient hunter-gatherers to break such mechanisms? Or were there quite different systems in existence which lacked such mechanisms?

Rowley-Conwy argued: ‘There is no archaeological evidence that huntergatherers display an inherent trend from simple to complex ... Numerous examples reveal complexity coming and going frequently as a result of adaptive necessities ... There was ... *nothing* about the Natufian that made agriculture inevitable’ (2001:53, 62–64; my emphasis). But, maybe still, there was *something* about the Natufian (and their ancestors) that helped them to shift to complexity and that set them greatly apart from the hunters and gatherers who have survived until relatively recent times.

8. Conclusions

Nine points and suppositions have been discussed and these are summarised in the hope that they will stimulate awareness of our preconceptions about human social evolution and challenge the current orthodoxy of an essentially egalitarian past:

1. Instead of searching for the origin or creation of social inequality, it is more reasonable to search for factors that might have caused a specific form or type of social inequality and for mechanisms which might have shaped specific structural features of hierarchical social systems, and also to inquire into the reasons underlying the development of egalitarian social systems.

2. Different mechanisms of structuring of hierarchical systems could act in parallel in the same society or could be specific to particular cultures in particular periods, could have foundations in the sphere of material production as well as outside this sphere. The data on some hunter-gatherer peoples, the indigenous Australians in particular, show how social inequality could have been rooted in the spheres of activity predominantly pertaining to ideology.
3. Australian Aborigines had a system of regular and formalised authority positions which can only be described as a hierarchy. A crucial element of this system was the initiation rite whereby special secret/sacred knowledge was imparted to individuals and groups. The initiation rites divided people into several status categories. All ideological legacy, too, was divided into several sections, some of which were accessible to everybody, while others were reserved for those belonging to specific status categories. The secrecy of esoteric knowledge was guarded by means of a special method which is termed *prescribed misinformation* – deliberate deception that, in contrast to ordinary lies, was regarded as necessary since it was viewed as a *prerequisite* of success in magic rites and totemic cult rituals. It was also a means of maintaining and enhancing the social supremacy of its practitioners.
4. Among the Mbuti, the Baka, the Hadza, the Zu/'hoansi, the G/wi, the G//ana, as well as some Asian groups such as the Batek and the Paliyar, relationships between the local community members were egalitarian; that is, no groups or individuals were, at least formally, superior to others. Even the informal variation in individual prestige or personal influence, a feature seemingly intrinsic to any social unit, tended to be levelled by community attitudes. This, in turn, was associated with a lack of competition in social life and, in fact, elsewhere.
5. The egalitarianism of African and Asian hunter-gatherers and the non-egalitarianism of Australian Aborigines were products of complex combinations of factors. It appears, however, that one of the crucial factors was the *degree of intensity of social life*, in particular collective rituals and inter-community contacts. In none of the egalitarian societies were these spheres of activity as elaborate as they were in the traditional societies of Australia.
6. Social inequality generated by monopolisation of special knowledge and occupations as well as by prescribed misinformation could and very often did exist without any material paraphernalia that would leave archaeological signatures, although the evidence of elaborate ritual practices and complicated religious ideas which is represented at some Upper Paleolithic sites might be the indirect indication of similar forms of inequality.
7. The Australian data show us what forms of social life are possible *in principle* under the conditions of a foraging mode of subsistence lacking any manifestations

of intensification of economic activity. The same should be stated with respect to the egalitarian model. We should assume that egalitarian and non-egalitarian systems in quite diverse cultural contexts, different natural environments and various geographical locations were fluid entities over the *longue durée* of prehistory.

8. The achievement of social equality may have been possible only as a result of persistent, long-term efforts of many generations of determined people, and those people had to choose many times during the history of egalitarian societies between achieved egalitarian ways of life and inherent tendencies of human nature to produce formalised inequality, as well as between their own ways of life and the alien ones imposed upon them by adjacent societies. In making such choices they constrained themselves to stay within small-scale associations and to reject other ways of living, including attempts to obtain more material wealth and comfort. The rarity of egalitarian societies studied ethnographically may reflect the difficulties of maintaining such a demanding social system. We can also assume that egalitarian societies were not numerous at any time in human prehistory.
9. The social systems of those hunter-gatherers who preserved their foraging strategies until recent times contain structural elements that are found more widely in other forms of societies. Those structural correspondences are not universal or even regular, but their existence is intimately connected with socio-psychological phenomena which transcend the boundaries of cultures, epochs, continents, or civilisations. These are exemplified today by powerful and prestigious closed corporations which monopolise certain socially important knowledge.

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