Two Metaphors and a Myth

Stephen A. Kowalewski
University of Georgia

Students will thank Robert Carneiro for this most concise explication of the core of his model. Population pressure caused conquest warfare, which in turn led to larger political units. This is not just as simple as A, B, C – it is indeed A > B > C.

Ideas may be known by their central metaphors. I think the article has two key metaphors. The main one is the pot of water on the stove. The water is society, the pot is circumscription, the heat causes pressure, and the people are molecules. The metaphor is kitchen physics, or social physics.

Social physics does not invoke any 'tangled bank' metaphor of evolutionary biology. It conjures up no watchmaker's 'intricate sociological mechanisms' as do ethnologists such as Malinowski or Netting. It has no need for computer geeks to program a 'complex adaptive system', as in recent ecological modeling. You can do this yourself at home – all you need is a stove, a pot, and some water.

The second important metaphor is not so explicit (Carneiro himself talks about the pot on the stove), yet it is the assumed framework, the skeleton beneath the ideas. This metaphor is the ladder of cultural evolution. Societies are higher or lower on the ladder. Just a few rungs or stages lead upward – everywhere – to where we are now. Combining the two metaphors, societies move up the ladder if population pressure causes conquest warfare. I do think it is more than a detail that 'population pressure' may be undetectable.

Now for the myth. This is the myth of the autonomous village or the politically autonomous village. This is ground level, before the first rung on the ladder of cultural evolution. Like Hobbes' 'state of nature', the autonomous village is posited as the original condition. The state of nature and the autonomous village are not themselves the subjects of their stories; they are not the things that

Social Evolution & History, Vol. 11 No. 2, September 2012 63–66

the theories try to explain. They merely set the stage. The autonomous village is the starting point required to make the story a good one, just as the war of each against all was the idea Hobbes had for convincing his readers that the state was both necessary and good.

Villages, of course, were never really autonomous. Villages were usually too small to be autonomous. Early Neolithic villages were interacting sets, not single, autonomous events. Their members were entangled in social relations in a larger geography. Villages did not coincide with the community or the society, which were larger entities. Sometimes, villages and village membership were too ephemeral to have been the individual's (or society's) main focus of attention. Sometimes, larger village aggregations were the result of warfare – not the prior condition. For example, to the extent that villages of the late prehistoric North American Plains were autonomous, that was a temporary and strategically precarious consequence of hostilities, not the previous condition, in which communities had been more dispersed and much larger geographically (see also Birch 2012, for the Huron).

Archaeologists will surely agree with the article's first paragraph – in the last half century much more about the past is known (but much more – by far – is still unknown). In his *Rise of Anthropological Theory*, Marvin Harris (1968) cited archaeologists and archaeological interpretations, but only as illustrations of concepts and ideas that had been arrived at by the method of comparative ethnology, that is, by using contemporary information to reconstruct the past. At the time regional archaeological sequences were few, problematic because of unrepresentativeness, and difficult to interpret, especially for non-specialists.

In the last four decades archaeologists have pieced together detailed regional sequences for many parts of the world. What has been learned? This is not the place to cite everything relevant to the case at hand, but a list of major findings and example studies could include these: 1) Relatively sedentary hunter-gatherers are underrepresented in the ethnographic record but this was a common and durable adaptation in many parts of the world (Arnold 1996). 2) Hunter-gatherer groups often had regional aggregation centers indicative of regional social affairs (Saunders *et al.* 1994). 3) Neolithic villages often occur in local clusters, in which the whole community was more stable than any single village (Varien 1999).

4) People created new social forms, sometimes quite spectacular (Chaco, Cahokia, Jenne-jeno), and some were akin to evolutionary experiments that ended and were never repeated (McIntosh 2005). 5) In South America chiefdoms were more common in pre-Columbian times than they were in the ethnographic present, and they are well documented in many other places (DeBoer 1996; Drennan and Peterson 2005; Junker 1998). 6) Chiefdoms typically cycle, that is, individual chiefdoms may last only a few generations, but the form persists in the macroregion for many centuries (Hally 2006). 7) Complexity is not just hierarchical, vertical, and centralized – horizontal linkages, multiple institutions, and collective power arrangements were common in human history (Feinman *et al.* 2000). 8) Warfare may in a sense be ubiquitous but its intensity and consequences certainly varied over time and space. In Oaxaca, the first time of widespread fortification was about 300 BC, almost a millennium after the establishment of multiple local communities of central and satellite villages (Kowalewski *et al.* 2009). It is the pattern and variation in such data that ought to be the subject of theory-building.

REFERENCES

Arnold, J.
1996. The Archaeology of Complex Hunter-Gatherers. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 3: 77–126.

Birch, J.
2012 [in press]. Coalescent Communities: Settlement Aggregation and Social Integration in Iroquoian Ontario. *American Antiquity.*

DeBoer, W. R.
1996. *Traces behind the Esmeraldas Shore: Prehistory of the Santiago-Cayapas Region, Ecuador.* Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Drennan, R. D., and Peterson, C. E.
2005. Early Chiefdom Communities Compared: The Settlement Pattern Record for Chifeng, the Alto Magdalena, and the Valley of Oaxaca. In Blanton, R. E. (ed.), *Settlement, Subsistence, and Social Complexity: Essays Honoring the Legacy of Jeffrey R. Parsons* (pp. 119–154). Los Angeles, CA: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California.

Feinman, G. M., Lightfoot, K. G., and Upham, S.
2000. Political Hierarchies and Organizational Strategies in the Puebloan Southwest. *American Antiquity* 65: 449–470.

Hally, D. J.

2006. The Nature of Mississippian Regional Systems. In Pluckhahn, T. J., and Ethridge, R. (eds.), *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of the Southeastern Indians* (pp. 26–42). Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Harris, M.

1968. *Rise of Anthropological Theory*: *A History of Theories of Culture.* New York: Crowell.

Junker, L. L.

1998. Integrating History and Archaeology in the Study of Contact Period Philippine Chiefdoms. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 2: 291–320.

Kowalewski, S. A., Balkansky, A. K., Stiver Walsh, L. R., Pluckhahn, T. J., Chamblee, J. F., Pérez Rodríguez, V., Heredia Espinoza, V. Y., and Smith, C. A.

2009. *Origins of the Ñuu: Archaeology in the Mixteca Alta, Mexico.* Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

McIntosh, R. J.

2005. *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saunders, J. W., Allen, T., and Saucier, R. T.

1994. Four Archaic Mound Complexes in Northeast Louisiana. *Southeastern Archaeology* 13: 134–153.

Varien, M. D.

1999. *Sedentism and Mobility in a Social Landscape: Mesa Verde and Beyond.* Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.